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# THE NEW YORKER



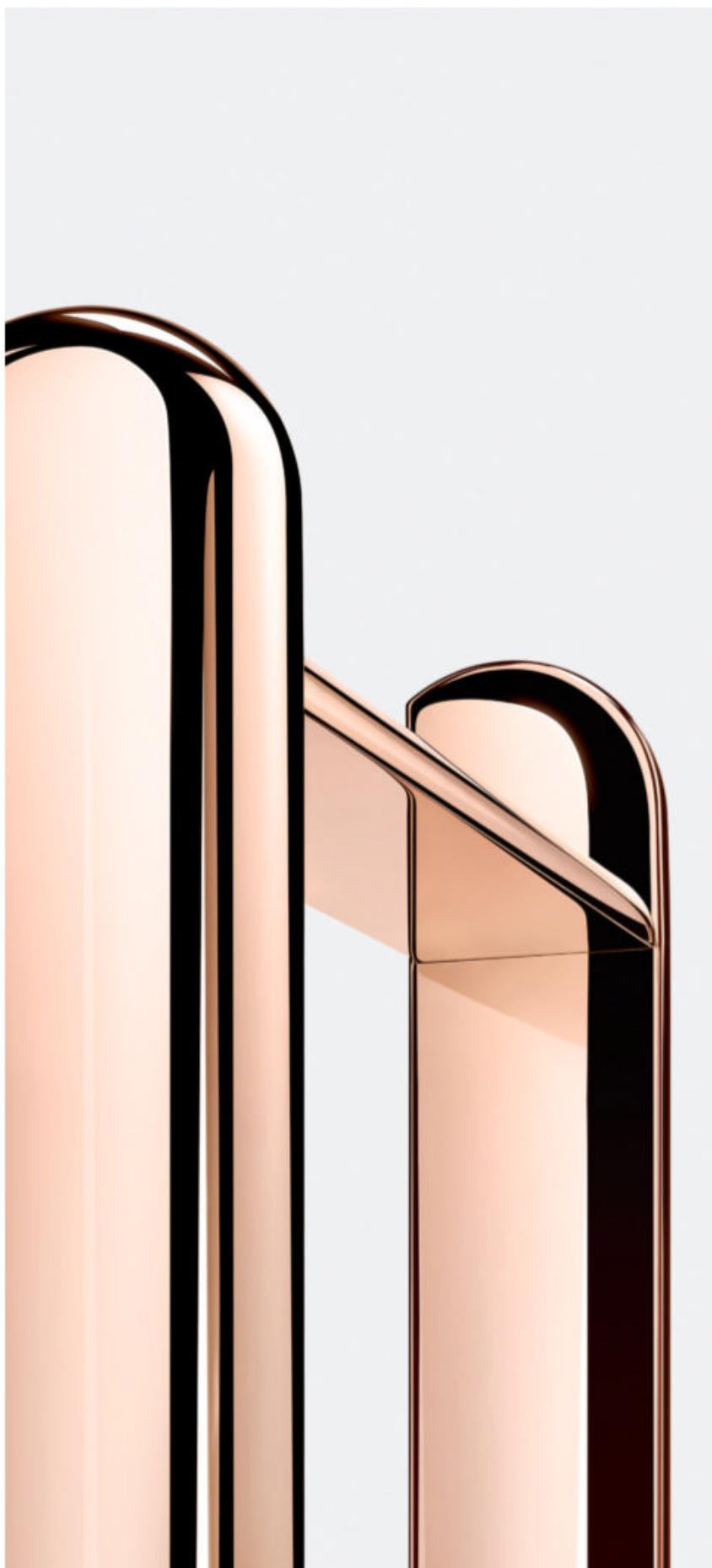
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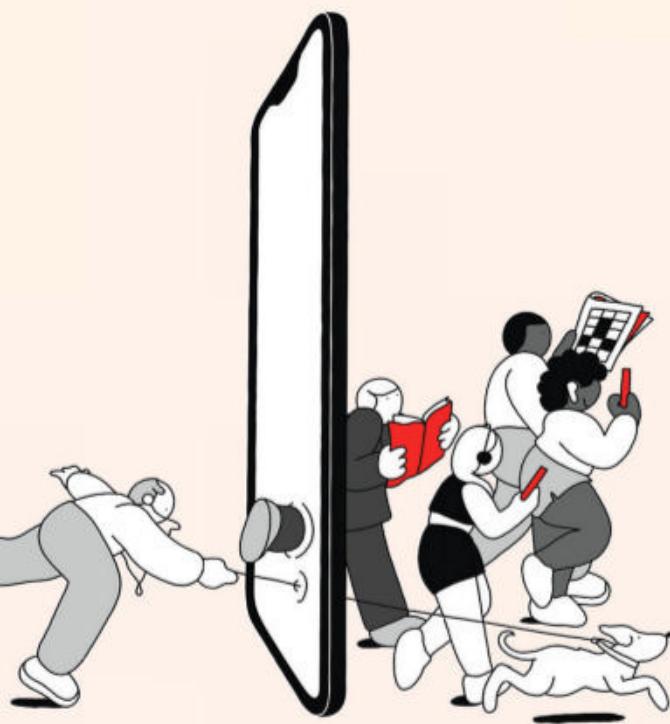
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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Alex Ross** ("Vanishing Act," p. 60) has been the magazine's music critic since 1996. His books include "The Rest Is Noise" and "Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music."

**Esther Freud** (*Fiction*, p. 72) recently published a new novel, "I Couldn't Love You More."

**Dhruv Khullar** ("The Damage Done," p. 37), a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, is a practicing physician and an assistant professor at Weill Cornell Medical College.

**Hala Alyan** (*Poem*, p. 67), a clinical psychologist, is the author of four poetry collections and two novels. Her latest book is "The Arsonists' City."

**Patrick Berry** (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*) has been constructing puzzles since 1993. He lives in Athens, Georgia.

**Malika Favre** (*Cover*) is an illustrator based in London and Barcelona. She contributed her first cover to the magazine in 2016.

**Rebecca Mead** ("Height of Glamour," p. 44), a staff writer since 1997, is the author of "My Life in Middlemarch." Her memoir "Home/Land" is forthcoming in 2022.

**John Seabrook** ("Zero-Proof Therapy," p. 30) has written four books, including "The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory."

**Jorie Graham** (*Poem*, p. 76) teaches at Harvard. Her latest collection of poems is "Runaway."

**Haruki Murakami** (*Showcase*, p. 58) has published fourteen novels in English. His new book, "Murakami T: The T-Shirts I Love," translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel, will be out in November.

**Emily Flake** (*Sketchpad*, p. 27), a *New Yorker* cartoonist, is the author of, most recently, "That Was Awkward: The Art and Etiquette of the Awkward Hug."

**Julian Lucas** (*A Critic at Large*, p. 79) is a writer and a critic based in Brooklyn.

### THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



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*The New Yorker* announces the longlists for the 2021 National Book Awards.



#### ON RELIGION

A climate scientist and evangelical Christian's ideas for discussing the climate crisis in a divided country.

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# THE MAIL

## WHO WAS LAFAYETTE?

Adam Gopnik, in his essay about the legacy of the Marquis de Lafayette, points out that Americans rarely understand why Lafayette does not enjoy the exalted reputation in France that he does in America (Books, August 23rd). As Gopnik mentions, supporters of the French Revolution blamed Lafayette for not preventing the royal family's flight from France, in June, 1791. He was responsible, as the commander of the Paris militia, for security at the palace. When the King's disappearance became known, Lafayette colluded in saying that he had been kidnapped, an explanation that quickly fell apart when the King's denunciation of the Revolution was published. Soon afterward, protesters gathered to rally behind a petition objecting to the restoration of the King to the throne, and the National Guard was ordered to disperse them. The ensuing massacre of the Champ de Mars, in which some fifty demonstrators were killed, turned popular opinion decisively against the Lafayette.

His intentions may have been honorable over all, but he lacked political judgment. He did not understand that a commitment to the Revolutionary cause was ultimately incompatible with loyalty to a monarch who could not reconcile himself to the demands for freedom and for a constitutional government. In America, Lafayette was a symbol of foreign support for independence; in Revolutionary France, his actions made him suspect to all sides.

*Jeremy Popkin  
Professor of History  
University of Kentucky  
Lexington, Ky.*

"He was just a terrific friend to all good causes." So Gopnik concludes his compelling review of two new biographies of Lafayette. Among the good causes that Lafayette embraced—albeit one unknown to most—was the inclusion of the Jews of France in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the

Citizen, which proclaims that all "men are born and remain free and equal in rights." Within weeks of a vote, in December, 1789, that extended the Declaration to recognize Protestants as full citizens, delegates representing the Sephardic Jews of France met with Lafayette. He received them, they reported, "with expressions of the greatest kindness." A little more than a month later, by a parliamentary vote of 374–224, France welcomed its Sephardic Jews (though not yet the Ashkenazim) as full citizens—the first time in history that Jews were granted such rights.

I believe that Lafayette would have informed George Washington, an intimate friend, of his role in facilitating the citizenship of Sephardic Jews in France. And I suspect, too, that when Washington wrote his famous letter to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, in August, 1790, affirming their inclusion as citizens, he was inspired at least in part by Lafayette.

*Frances Malino  
Professor Emerita of Jewish Studies  
Wellesley College  
Brookline, Mass.*

## YOU'RE OUT!

After reading Zach Helfand's piece about the use of robot umpires in baseball, I was persuaded that any given call is not about precision: it's a dialogue that depends on the context of a game, the psychology of hitting, and the purpose of a pitch ("Kill the Umpire," August 30th). More than any other sport, baseball is a game of failure, and umpires fail, too. If they were phased out, I'd miss the idiosyncratic choreography of their calls—and the secretly delicious outrage of being wronged.

*Brian P. H. Green  
Thunder Bay, Ont.*

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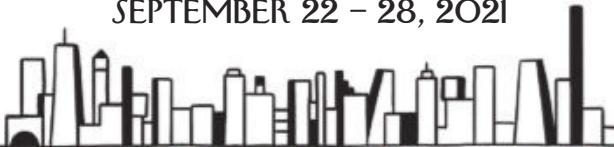
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues remain closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming; as ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

SEPTEMBER 22 – 28, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



When Charles M. Blow (left) was working on his memoir, “**Fire Shut Up in My Bones**,” he immersed himself in songs from his North Louisiana childhood—hill-country blues, gospel, folk—and they became, he says, “a soundtrack for the writing.” It wasn’t strange, then, to hear that Terence Blanchard set Blow’s story to music. “If you were interpreting that today, what would it sound like?” Blow says. “That is what Terence did.” The adaptation, starring Will Liverman (right), opens the Metropolitan Opera’s fall season, on Sept. 27.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MALIKE SIDIBE

## AT THE MUSEUMS



At the age of fifty-seven, **Philip Guston** trashed his status as the most sensitive stylist of Abstract Expressionism and unclenched raucous pictorial confessions of fear and loathing that dumbfounded the art world when first shown, in 1970. The artist as much as announced that he had nothing going for him except a way with a brush, which he then exalted from a subbasement of the soul. Stricken with such regrets as having, in 1935, disguised his identity as the son of impoverished Jewish immigrants by changing his name from Goldstein, Guston presented himself, in abject self-portraits, as a sad sack beset by bad habits and bad thoughts, and painted cartoonish Ku Klux Klan figures smoking cigars, tootling around in open cars, and generally making fools of themselves. (Art people were shocked, in 2020, when the latter images led to the postponement of a Guston exhibition by four major museums. I shared the reaction until I thought about it.) Through Oct. 30, Hauser & Wirth exhibits eighteen of these stunning late works (including "Pittore," from 1973, pictured above), whose visceral color, prehensile line, and brushwork—the most insinuative of any modern painter—were all indirectly nourished by Guston's passionate reverence for Renaissance masters. This body of work has outlasted, in authenticity and quality, that of every other American painter since.—Peter Schjeldahl

## ART

### Ellsworth Ausby

In 1972, this Afrofuturist abstract painter—who died in Brooklyn in 2011—wrote of his desire to “mirror the dynamo of our antecedent heritage despite the temerarious and presumptuous canons of the established art world.” Those poetic words introduce the artist’s current show, at the Eric Firestone gallery, echoing the blazing refinement, the style, and the priorities of the vivid works on view, made between 1969 and 1979. Ausby introduced the forms and the palette of traditional African art into both the geometric sensibility of American hard-edge painting and, later, the post-minimalist sensuality of the Pattern and Decoration movement. The earliest pieces here, including the exhilarating “Moving It,” from 1970,

suggest enlarged swatches of kente cloth. In subsequent multipart compositions—such as “Shabazz,” from 1974, with its rich hues and pointed barbell silhouette—Ausby liberated the canvas from its stretchers to stunning effect. These works seem to float, kitelike, on the white walls, giving fresh meaning to the exhibition’s title, which is borrowed from a Sun Ra song: “Somewhere in Space.”—Johanna Fateman ([ericfirestonegallery.com](http://ericfirestonegallery.com))

### Emma Webster

Thirteen new paintings in this Los Angeles-based artist’s current show, at the Alexander Berggruen gallery, are windows onto a high-key, ultra-verdant world—a sublime, supernatural realm that combines the thaumaturgic light of the Hudson River School with the watchful marshes and sinuous undergrowth in Disney’s “Maleficent.” It’s an

imaginative approach to the centuries-old genre of landscape, one that the artist shares with other Fauvist-inspired contemporary painters, including Shara Hughes and Matthew Wong. But the strange, engulfing sense of depth in Webster’s luscious canvases also hints at the 3-D seduction of virtual-reality adventures, as suggested by such works as the vertical “Golden Hour,” in which a purple river winds into the horizon. (The show’s title, “Green Iscariot,” adds an enigmatic layer with its invocation of betrayal.) Perhaps these passionately rendered paintings, which conjure up lashing winds (“World in Flux”) and wildfires (“Weather System”), reflect once familiar vistas that have been rendered otherworldly, made hostile by the climate crisis.—J.F. ([alexanderberggruen.com](http://alexanderberggruen.com))

## MUSIC

### Arturo O’Farrill & the Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble

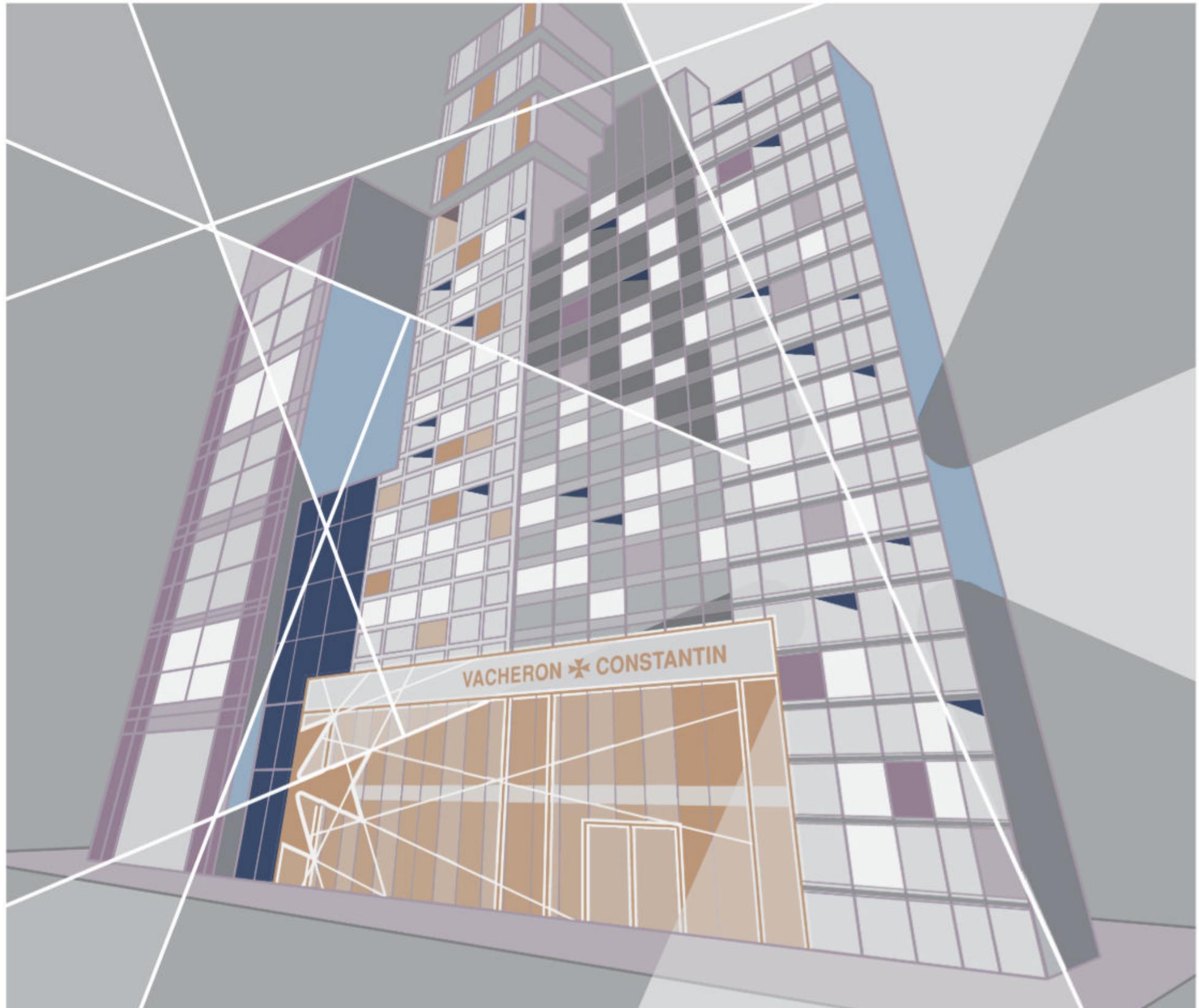
**JAZZ** Arturo O’Farrill’s commitment to a fertile meld of Caribbean musical culture and Stateside jazz endures, no matter the size of his bands; his latest is the ten-piece Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble. Sundays currently find the relentlessly inventive pianist and composer back at Birdland, a club that found room for his propulsive outfits throughout the two-thousands. Attention should be paid to the group’s latest recording, “... dreaming in lions . . . ,” a scrupulously designed project uniting two extended dance suites that make vital use of three Latin percussionists, with frisky contributions from the leader, his son Adam on trumpet, and the gifted trombone and euphonium player Rafi Malkiel.—Steve Futterman (Sept. 26.)

### Conrad Tao and Charmaine Lee

**CLASSICAL** Earlier this year, the Kaufman Music Center reached concert-starved New Yorkers with “Musical Storefronts,” an initiative that featured pop-up recitals behind plate-glass windows, to the delight of passersby. Now, as the city’s musical venues cautiously reopen for business, the center continues its outreach initiatives with “Just in Time,” a series of free performances hosted on the Merkin Hall stage. The latest involves the pianist Conrad Tao and the vocalist Charmaine Lee, two iconoclastic virtuoso composer-performers whose past collaborations have proved unpredictable, whimsical, and consistently gratifying. R.S.V.P. via the center’s Web site.—Steve Smith (Sept. 27 at 7:30; [kaufmanmusiccenter.org](http://kaufmanmusiccenter.org).)

### Sarah Jarosz

**FOLK** Sarah Jarosz emerged as a teen wunderkind—a dazzler on the mandolin, in possession of a voice that could soothe a charging tiger. Now a grizzled veteran at thirty, the musician recently issued a pair of distinct but complementary albums, “World on the Ground” and “Blue Heron Suite.” The projects were made in New York, her home base until a 2020 move to Nashville, but both records seem embedded in the singer’s native Texas. Recorded a few years back but released in May, “Blue Heron Suite” is emotional and raw, with guitars ominously



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circling Jarosz's voice. Her work on it led to the more formal "World on the Ground," the focus of her Webster Hall show. Throughout the record, Jarosz presents careful character studies that suggest the skeletons of short stories about small-town inhabitants—in true singer-songwriter fashion, they're a largely unsatisfied lot.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Sept. 27.)*

## Low: "Hey What"

**EXPERIMENTAL** The music that the partners Alan Sparhawk and Mimi Parker make as Low has always been somewhat unbalanced. In the nineties, the band was dubbed slowcore for the music's simplicity and lack of pace—a droning form of rock that was ragged around the edges and ran counter to the rock prevalent at the time, grunge especially. After decades of tinkering, Sparhawk and Parker reimagined the band, in 2018, on the album "Double Negative," manipulating their unhurried sound into a seismic mass—a dense, beautiful mess of harsh digital distortion and warped, unearthly vocal harmonies. Low's striking new album, "Hey What," delves even deeper into disruption, centering voice more while finding inventive ways to infringe on its sonic and structural integrity. The disorient-

ing, gorgeous album feels like overloading a V.R. simulation and reaching its outer rim as it crashes.—*Sheldon Pearce*

## Saint Etienne: "I've Been Trying to Tell You"

**INDIE POP** Since forming thirty years ago, the British trio Saint Etienne has purveyed finely honed pop songwriting and crafted hypnotic dance grooves, but not always at once. The balance tips decisively to the latter on the band's tenth album, "I've Been Trying to Tell You." It's an airy set, determinedly escapist, built from samples from the late nineties—a weirdly apt locus, given the spurt of cultural nostalgia emerging for that era. What it really evokes, though, is that decade's start, when pie-eyed futurism felt far less money-driven.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

## "La Voix Humaine"

**OPERA** In Francis Poulenc's "La Voix Humaine," when a woman answers her home phone, the audience hears only her side of a conversation with her former lover. To make an impact, a performance of the monodrama, which débuted in 1959, should offer fly-on-the-wall access to

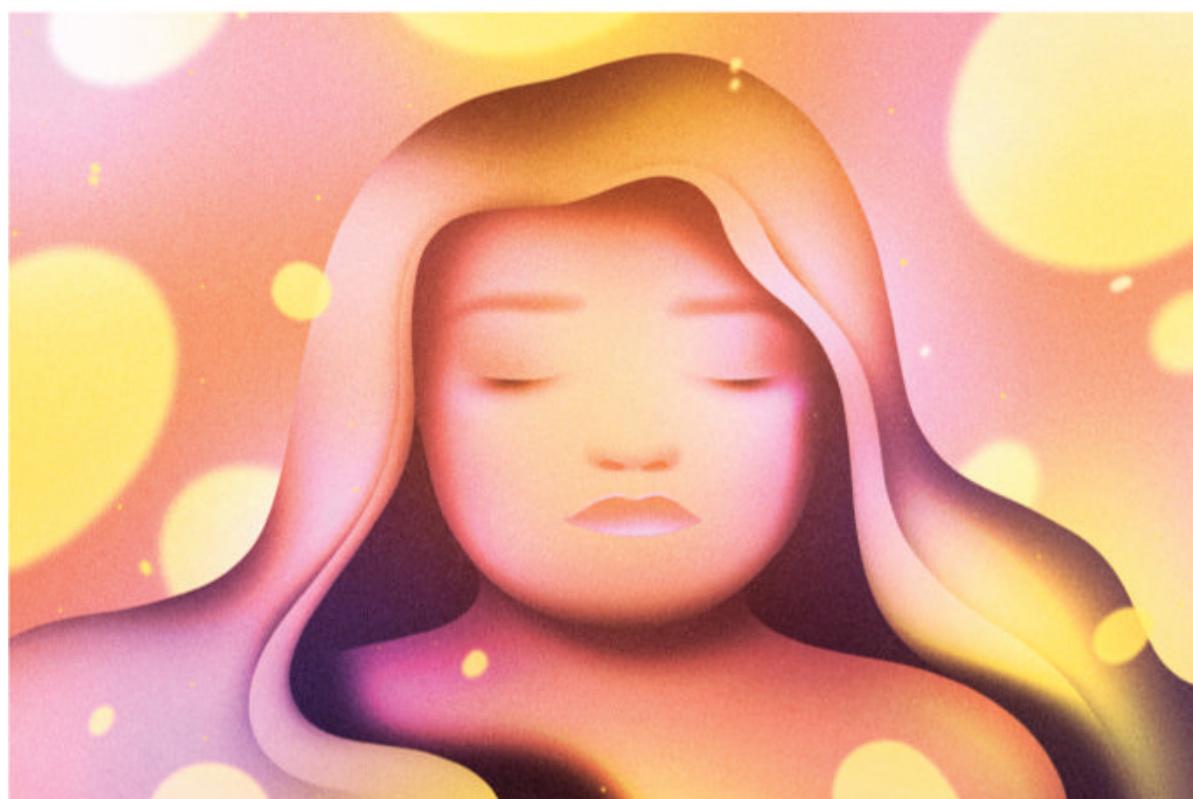
its heroine's anxiety, frustration, and sense of woundedness. The director James Darrah shot his new film version at Elkins Estate, a set of Gilded Age mansions in Cheltenham Township, Pennsylvania, with the dramatically attuned soprano Patricia Racette as Elle. The film is available to stream on the Opera Philadelphia Channel's Web site, and on its smartphone and smart-TV apps.—*Oussama Zahr (Available Sept. 24; operaphila.org.)*

## DANCE

### New York City Ballet

On Sept. 21, New York City Ballet's fall season opens with a program whose concluding work, Balanchine's joyous "Symphony in C," is the balletic equivalent of fireworks. The rest of the week offers two alternating programs. In one, Jerome Robbins's nineteen-eighties tribute to New York Minimalism, "Glass Pieces," is combined with the colorful "Pulcinella Variations," one of Justin Peck's finest works. The other pairs Alexei Ratmansky's first piece for the company, "Russian Seasons"—a work both dramatic and playful—with a new piece for the soon-to-retire Maria Kowroski, by Mauro Bigonzetti. Proof of vaccination and masks are required, and the ballets will be separated by pauses rather than intermissions. The season runs through Oct. 17.—*Marina Harss (nycballet.com)*

## SOUL



In 2016, as Yebba was on the verge of a viral breakthrough on YouTube, the Arkansas singer-songwriter lost her mother, Dawn, to suicide. Yebba's new album, named both for her mom and as a symbol of a new beginning, probes the hurt of feeling left behind and the release of finding a way forward through music. Subdued yet soulful, the project blends indie folk, inviting R. & B., and light jazz into a tonic. Inspired by D'Angelo's neo-soul classic "Voodoo," Yebba and the producer Mark Ronson sought assistance from many of that album's key players, and they recorded in the same Electric Lady studio, creating continuity. The result of hundreds of takes and years of crafting, "Dawn" sounds smooth and untethered, its music restful and reassuring. As her elegant, smoky voice floats off into the recesses of smoldering production—on such songs as "October Sky"—Yebba performs poignant tributes to her mother's memory.—*Sheldon Pearce*

## Erasing Borders

As it was in 2020, the Indo-American Arts Council's festival of Indian dance is all virtual this year, offering a slate of free recorded performances and films, Sept. 22-26. The online format encourages not just the usual variety of styles—Mohiniyattam one night and kathak or Odissi the next—but also a range of settings. In "The Adventures of a Naughty Bee," Sonali Skandan does a bharata-natyam insect imitation around New York. Farther afield, a documentary on the folk form Kalbeliya follows performers across Rajasthan, and Preethi Athreya's contemporary work takes place on inundated salt flats in Tamil Nadu.—*Brian Seibert (iaac.us/erasing-borders-dance-festival-2021)*

## Flock

This fall, for the first time in decades, the 92nd Street Y is presenting dance in its Kaufman Concert Hall. Flock, the choreographic duo of Alice Klock and Florian Lochner, kicks the series off, on Sept. 23, with "Familiar," a duet about trust, connection, and beginning again. A recording of the performance is also available to stream, Sept. 24-26.—*B.S. (92y.org)*

## Mark Morris Dance Group

It has been too long since the world has seen a new dance by Mark Morris made not for the screen but for the tangible 3-D world. Thankfully, that drought comes to an end this Saturday, with two performances at Brooklyn Bridge Park, at 2 and at 4. Morris's newest dance is set to sections from Handel's "Water Music," composed in 1717 as an accompaniment for a celebratory cruise down the River Thames. The king rode in one barge, the orchestra in the other. This time, everyone gets to listen while lolling in the park,

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## CONTEMPORARY DANCE



**"Deep Blue Sea,"** by Bill T. Jones, was conceived for the vastness of the Park Avenue Armory's Drill Hall. Drawing on "Moby-Dick" and the life of M.L.K., designed by the architect Elizabeth Diller, and building from a single, lonely figure (Jones himself, in a rare appearance) to a flood of a hundred bodies, it is a work of oceanic ambition. Originally, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company was scheduled to débüt the piece in April, 2020. Unlike Jones's "Afterwardsness," which was made and performed at the Armory during the pandemic, "Deep Blue Sea" reflects a time before COVID, with masses of people in physical contact. How will such a work play now, Sept. 28 to Oct. 9?—*Brian Seibert*

the lapping waves of New York Harbor in the distance. (Uncharacteristically for Morris, the music for this piece is recorded.) The program also includes "Words" and "Quad." Let's hope it doesn't rain.—*M.H.* (*Sept. 25; mmdg.org*)

### Ragamala Dance Company

Indian classical dance has increasingly become an art of the diaspora, with practitioners based in every corner of the world. This exponential growth has only added to the vitality of these ancient dance forms, as choreographers imagine new stories to join the already rich repertory. Ragamala Dance, based in Minneapolis, is a shining example of this expansion. The evening-length "Fires of Varanasi" (at the Joyce, Sept. 22–26)—created by the mother-daughter team of Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy, who perform along with an ensemble of nine dancers—uses the language of bharata natyam to explore the cycle of life and death as understood in Hinduism, and as experienced by immigrants.—*M.H.* (*joyce.org*)

## THE THEATRE

### The Last of the Love Letters

This new play by Ngozi Anyanwu ("The Homecoming Queen") is made up of two

monologues, each addressed to a mysterious "you." Anyanwu herself performs the first, shorter entry—a fairly straightforward sendoff in which a woman considers who she became in her former relationship, what was gained and lost. When the playwright exits and Daniel J. Watts (who originated the role of Ike Turner in "Tina: The Tina Turner Musical" on Broadway) steps onto the stage, Patricia McGregor's production, at the Atlantic Theatre Company, effectively moves into dystopian territory—menacing soundscapes, harsh lighting, a masked keeper (Xavier Scott Evans) who could be a nurse or a guard. Watts's unnamed character reminisces, somewhere between ache and delirium, about someone, or perhaps something. Watts is a vivid, loose-limbed performer—at one point he staggers about like a broken doll, as if his character's bones had just dissolved, along with his mind. The text, alas, does not match Watts's virtuosity.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli* (*Through Sept. 26.*)

### The Story Box

Pre-pandemic, the trendiest bit of stagecraft in New York City theatres was a stage-floor turntable. Now it's headphones—a handy tool for simulating intimacy while maintaining physical distance. In this iteration of headphone theatre, directed by Kristin Marting and staged outdoors, in a different

borough every weekend, Suzi Takahashi explores the history of anti-Asian racism in America. The piece toggles between the forcible relocation of Japanese Americans to concentration camps during the Second World War and the hate crimes of the past two years, with a through line of family memoir. There are a lot of moving parts—including photo albums for audience members to flip through as the show proceeds, letters to open, and a *kamishibai* storytelling kit—but, if you're able to follow it all, there's also a lot to think about.—*Rollo Romig* (*here.org*; *through Oct. 9.*)

### What Happened?: The Michaels Abroad

As the latest and, apparently, last installment of Richard Nelson's twelve-play "Rhinebeck Panorama" cycle, about the Apple, Gabriel, and Michael families, "What Happened?: The Michaels Abroad" is noteworthy as a fragment of an ambitious portrait of a certain American bourgeoisie, but it's not very compelling on its own. The characters, first encountered in the 2019 play bearing their family name, find themselves in France, discussing the material, emotional, and artistic legacy of their deceased matriarch, Rose, while preparing and eating dinner in real time, in the intimate confines of Hunter College's Frederick Loewe Theatre. As in most of the project's plays, the dialogue relies on the sharing of memories and anecdotes, which means that the characters are mostly vessels for the past, oddly disengaged from present issues. Luckily, Maryann Plunkett, as Rose's discombobulated, grieving widow, is very much in the moment; her performance approaches the sublime while remaining of utmost simplicity.—*E.V.* (*Through Oct. 8.*)

## MOVIES

### Chameleon Street

The title of this 1989 independent film, which was written and directed by Wendell B. Harris, Jr., who also stars, refers to a real-life character, William Douglas Street, a Black man from Detroit who, in the nineteen-seventies, pulled off an extraordinary series of impersonations (for instance, while pretending to be a doctor, he performed, according to Harris, thirty-six successful hysterectomies), for which he was ultimately imprisoned. Harris plays the part for comedy and for anger, portraying Street as a sardonic victim of racism who, having grown up conforming to the expectations of others, becomes adept at fitting into any role that's thrust upon him—or that, defying the expectations of stereotypes, he chooses. As a director, Harris is something of a chameleon himself, infusing his scathingly observant and incisive vision with disruptive narrative techniques borrowed from Frank Tashlin, the French New Wave, and sitcoms. He endows Street's character with a vast cultural range, stretching from Orson Welles and Jean Cocteau to pop music and TV. The result is a disarming, disturbing, elusive, and profound meditation on personal identity and social barriers. Shockingly, Harris hasn't yet made

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another film.—Richard Brody (*Screening Sept. 26 and Sept. 30 at the New York Film Festival and streaming on Amazon.*)

## Cry Macho

Within the hearty adventure and the romantic warmth of Clint Eastwood's ambling new drama, set in 1979, lies an iron will, hard-won wisdom, and galling regrets. Eastwood directs and stars as Mike Milo, a former rodeo champion hobbled by injuries and ravaged by personal tragedy, who repays a moral debt to a Texan rancher named Howard Polk (Dwight Yoakam). Mike travels to Mexico City to find Howard's thirteen-year-old son, Rafo (Eduardo Minett), to extract him from the clutches of Howard's ex-wife (Fernanda Urrejola), and to bring him back to Howard. Winning Rafo's confidence proves hard; eluding the police and facing down gunmen proves harder; but the mission is sweetened by Mike's encounter with a widowed cantina owner named Marta (Natalia Traven)

and his avuncular bonding with Rafo. For all Mike's daring, he's at the mercy of old age and unable to go it alone—the title refers to Rafo's fighting rooster, Macho, who serves as a comedic deus ex machina to do what Mike, because of the physical and emotional burdens of his own burned-out machismo, can't.—R.B. (*In theatrical release and streaming on HBO Max.*)

## From Mayerling to Sarajevo

In 1940, as the Second World War began, the director Max Ophüls, a German Jew who had fled to France, filmed, with a romantic champagne froth, this bitterly ironic drama of how the First World War got started—specifically, how the progressive Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne, ended up in Sarajevo on that fateful day in 1914. In Ophüls's telling, the course of history was changed by Franz Ferdinand's liberal plan to turn the Holy Roman Empire into the United States of Austria—and by his breath-

less affair with, and eventual marriage to, a minor Czech aristocrat named Sophie Chotek. Ophüls contrasts the authentic grandeur of inner nobility with the crushing formalities of the royal court. In his vision, the passion that binds Franz Ferdinand and Sophie together gives rise to glorious gestures—whether of defiance or of self-sacrifice—that soar above the petty protocol of imperial spectacle. The director's lavish eye for the pomp of power is untinged with nostalgia; his vision of the era begins with a phony press release and ends in disaster.—R.B. (*Streaming via French Institute Alliance Française.*)

## Never Rarely Sometimes Always

Eliza Hittman's third feature, from 2020, tells a spare story in compelling detail: Autumn Callahan (Sidney Flanigan), a seventeen-year-old high-school student in a small Pennsylvania town, learns that she's pregnant. Unable to get an abortion in that state without parental consent, she travels to New York, with her cousin Skylar (Talia Ryder), for the procedure. Hittman, who also wrote the script, stays intimately close to Autumn, spotlighting her cramped life at home and in school, her independent-minded ferocity, and her physical sufferings (including attempts at ending the pregnancy herself). But, above all, this is a drama of social fabric—of the impact of policy and prejudice on the daily thicket of administrative details, the nerve-jangling tension that women endure from ambient sexual aggression, and the oppressive air of surveillance and terror sparked by the war against abortion. The young women's journey to New York—and their encounter with a Philadelphia hipster (Théodore Pellerin)—offers an anguished apprenticeship in the wider world's network of money and power.—R.B. (*Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.*)

## Take This Waltz

Sarah Polley's 2012 film stars Michelle Williams as Margot, who lives in Toronto with her husband, Lou (Seth Rogen). Both are writers; he produces books of chicken recipes, a small but crispy field of human endeavor, and she produces almost nothing. Nonetheless, their home is an upmarket haven of warm colors and delicious smells, which Polley conveys with such heady expertise that some viewers may experience involuntary drooling. Needless to say, other lives cut in. Lou has a sister (Sarah Silverman) with a drinking problem, and Margot meets a neighbor, Daniel (Luke Kirby), who drives a rickshaw and sweet-talks her into half-reluctant desires. That sweetness is well caught, and Polley has few peers in the devout attention that she pays to body language and the tales it can tell. Her dialogue, by contrast, lets her down, often dragging into the open what the camera can show in a glance. The movie's highlight, somewhat unexpectedly, consists of two heartbreakingly scenes set to "Video Killed the Radio Star," by the Buggles. Is nothing beyond redemption?—Anthony Lane (*Reviewed in our issue of 7/9/12.*) (*Streaming on Tubi, Pluto, and other services.*)

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## ON THE BIG SCREEN



The New York Film Festival, which runs Sept. 24-Oct. 10, at Lincoln Center, presents American premières of notable international films, as well as a series of major restorations and revivals, including the late Hungarian director Miklós Jancsó's **"The Round-Up,"** a 1966 historical drama that played at the festival that year. Set around 1870, the film is centered on a military prison camp where officers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire are holding a horde of surviving rebels of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution and younger nationalist guerrilla fighters. The imperious overlords continually terrorize inmates, then promise mercy to extract confessions and denunciations. Jancsó unfolds the ruthless spectacle of tyranny with a combination of meticulous detail and grand choreography, displaying mass assemblages and head-to-head confrontations with fanatical precision. He blends the abstractions of power with intimate portraiture of perpetrators and victims alike. Though the story is an evident allusion to the Nazi invasion of Hungary, it also echoes the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolt of 1956; Jancsó's intricate staging of the micro-events of despotism leaves a margin of ironic ambiguity within which he boldly defied censorship.—Richard Brody



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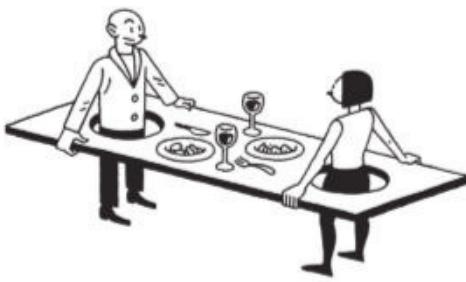
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## TABLES FOR TWO

### CheLi 19 St. Marks Place

In China, Jiangnan, a region south of the Yangtze River, is known as the Land of Fish and Rice, and for good reason. The coastal plains—which encompass the modern capital of Shanghai and the ancient cities of Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Shaoxing—abound with fertile soil irrigated by rivers and streams teeming with life. So irresistible is the splendor of Jiangnan's natural bounty that Emperor Qianlong, of the Qing dynasty, sojourned there six times, wherein his hosts vied to dazzle him with sumptuous feasts that tested the ingenuity and the mastery of local chefs. According to popular lore, a surprising number of Jiangnan dishes were born of the Emperor's storied southern tours.

Inside CheLi, a new Jiangnan restaurant in the East Village—whose name is a pun on “here” and “within Zhejiang” (a province in Jiangnan)—bamboo beams, paper lanterns, and roof tiles conjure the kind of romanticized village life that may now live only on silk-scroll paintings. CheLi is run by DaShan, a restaurant group that also owns the neighboring

Szechuan Mountain House, with whom CheLi shares both an entrance and a gastronomic rubric roughly characterized as rarefied regional Chinese. On a recent Wednesday, a painting of the red-robed Emperor Renzong gazed impassively at the packed, boisterous dining room, seemingly aware that ambience and artistry are as important to enchanting monarchs of the Middle Kingdom as they are to attracting diners in New York City.

From the appetizer menu, begin with the Wine-Soaked Atlantic Blue Crab, framed by parsley, dried salted plum, pickled ginger, and a slice of lemon. Do not be alarmed by the bewildering array of largely ornamental condiments. The crab has already been soused in the most important ingredient—Shaoxing wine. It cleanses the salty-sweet flesh of any “fishiness” and helps the crab express its *ben wei*, or “natural essence.”

Next, move on to the Smoked Fish, which is not smoked at all but deep-fried, then steeped in a tawny gravy. The dish is traditionally served cold, but the CheLi chef Wang Lin Qun's version is pleasantly warm, allowing the pellucid skin to caramelize into an ambrosial crunch. At New Year banquets in Shanghai, where the smoked fish is a requisite, the only dish with enough swagger to steal its thunder is the braised pork belly, a timeless classic that performs its own magic trick. How do prosaic-seeming ingredients—rice wine, sugar, soy sauce—tease out such sublime tenderness and bounce? Wang deepens the mystery by pairing the springy meat with quivery quail

eggs, achieving an improbable harmony.

Rice at many Chinese restaurants can be mushy and forgettable, but here, in a sea-urchin dish, it's soaked in *pu'er* tea. This makes the rice so unexpectedly fragrant that it allows for the nutty sweetness of added sesame seeds to unspool without being swallowed by the savory umami of the sea urchin.

Owing, perhaps, to overwhelming demand, CheLi's service can be erratic. One evening, dessert—delicious sticky-rice cakes with a peanut-and-brown-sugar filling—arrived before one of the mains. On another night, when a diner asked for recommendations, a young server responded, “Everything is standardized, look at the menu.” With this encouragement, the diner felt she couldn't go wrong. Because Qianlong's Favorite Eel had sold out, she chose Qianlong's Favorite Fish Head, which turned out to have belonged to an enormous grass carp. A platter larger than any human head arrived. The meat was pliant and custard-like, steamed to the texture of trembly silk. But it was the broth that was otherworldly, sweet and spicy, complex and vibrant. “It's problematically addictive is what it is,” the diner said, before attempting to pick the platter up off the table to drink the broth. She did not succeed, but she did manage to spoon some of the fish-head soup into her bowl of rice, from which she contentedly slurped. She liked to think it was exactly what Emperor Qianlong would have done. (*Dishes \$6-\$65.*)

—Jiayang Fan

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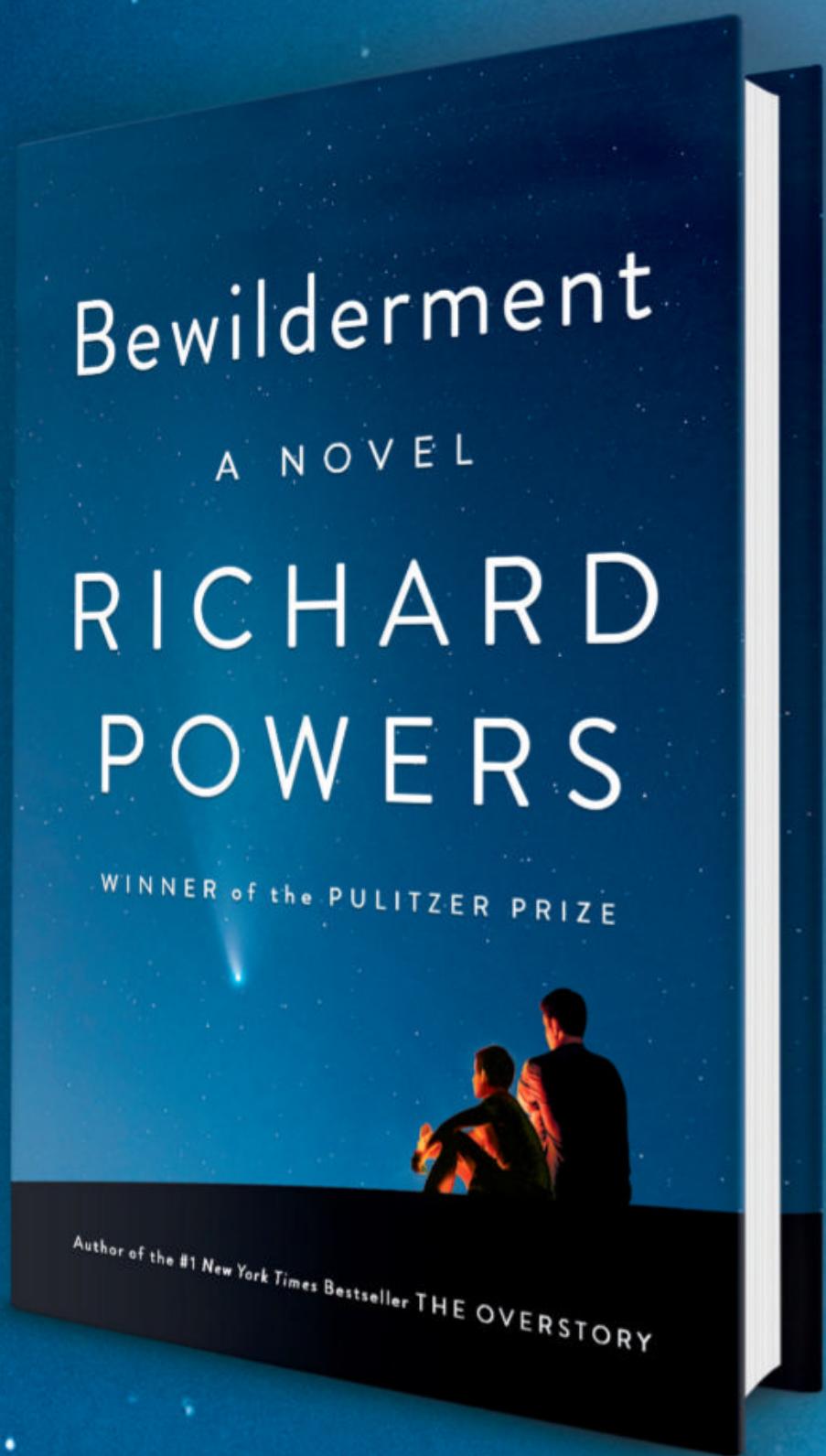
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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT A NECESSARY RIGHT

One of the more dubious assumptions undergirding the latest assault on reproductive rights in this country is the idea that abortion is a kind of niche procedure for which there isn't much need, and for which there will be even less need in some unspecified future. Defending the new Texas law that bans abortion after about six weeks, making no exception for pregnancies that are the result of rape, Governor Greg Abbott explained that this restriction won't be a problem, because he plans to "eliminate rape" in the state. In the next few months, the Supreme Court will consider the constitutionality of a Mississippi law that bars most abortions after fifteen weeks. That case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, is widely viewed as an opportunity for the Justices, if they so choose, to overturn the nearly fifty-year-old precedent set by *Roe v. Wade*.

Mississippi's brief to uphold its law offers, among other rationales, the assertion that women's lives are so much freer, more equal, and more replete with birth-control options now than they were in 1973, when *Roe* legalized the right to abortion nationwide, that we can let that right go by the wayside. "Modern options regarding and views about childbearing have dulled concerns on which *Roe* rested," state officials claim—namely, that unwanted pregnancies were hard on women and on their prospects in life. But the Mississippi brief says that everything is different now: laws addressing pregnancy discrim-

ination and offering family leave "facilitate the ability of women to pursue both career success and a rich family life." They add that, although "abortion may once have been thought critical as an alternative to contraception," this is no longer the case, since birth control is more available and reliable.

The errors of fact and judgment in this patronizing argument are staggering. The United States, alone among industrialized nations, does not mandate paid family leave. The major advances in women's access to careers and to the public sphere have occurred since the early nineteen-seventies, when abortion was legalized, and it's quite likely that the two developments had something to do with each other. Furthermore, even in an egalitarian society with reliable access to contraception and to child care for all, people will still want, and should

be able to exercise, agency over the intimate, life-transforming decisions of when, or whether, to have children. Many people will still feel a need to end pregnancies for reasons—health risks and crises, destructive or failed relationships, personal economic hardship, the needs of other children—that have little to do with prevailing social conditions.

It's true that the most recent data show that rates of unintended pregnancy and abortion have declined since the early two-thousands, but both remain common. Nearly one in four women will have had an abortion by the time she is forty-five, according to an analysis by the Guttmacher Institute. The procedure that anti-abortion lawyers want to portray as an unnecessary and outmoded privilege (and a shameful one) is a form of medical care that hundreds of thousands of people turn to each year, low-income people in particular. (Half of all abortions are obtained by people living below the federal poverty line.) Not everybody can afford or obtain reliable birth control. And, despite Abbott's absurd claim, there will always be people who become pregnant through coerced unprotected sex.

Consistently preventing pregnancy during the reproductive life span isn't so easy, and that span has been getting longer. The lawyer and bioethics professor Katie Watson has estimated that a fertile woman who has sex with a man regularly throughout her reproductive years will have to dodge up to twenty-nine pregnancies if she wants to have just two children and avoid an abortion. That's a lot of contraceptive efficacy to rely on. Moreover, plenty of evidence shows that



restrictions on abortion do not end the practice. The need remains, and women find a way to meet it, though this sometimes requires ingenuity, along with legal and physical risk-taking. People in exigent circumstances shouldn't have to contend with such challenges.

All these facts of life are important to acknowledge, because anti-abortion lawyers are intent on erasing them. Mississippi claims that no "legitimate reliance interests call for retaining Roe and Casey," the 1992 Supreme Court ruling that upheld a constitutional right to abortion while allowing states to impose limits before the stage of fetal viability. The state also says that Justices needn't worry about stare decisis—the principle that would encourage them to respect legal precedent—or about the impact on people's lives if Roe is tossed out. Abortion-law jurisprudence, the petitioners write, has always been "fractured and unsettled," and the "Court is not in a po-

sition to gauge" how reliant society is on abortion. But, as the lawyers representing the lead respondent—the only remaining abortion clinic in Mississippi—point out, the Court has heard multiple abortion cases since Roe and, while it has allowed states to chip away at the constitutional right to abortion, it has also clearly upheld the core finding.

The Court that will consider the Mississippi law—the first major abortion case since Amy Coney Barrett replaced Ruth Bader Ginsburg—is composed of three liberals and six conservatives, three of them appointed by Donald Trump. Barrett, as a law professor at Notre Dame, signed a petition denouncing abortion. Clarence Thomas has openly declared his disdain for Roe. The best hope for retaining abortion rights might be if Chief Justice John Roberts and at least one other conservative decide that overturning Roe is too much of a blow to settled doctrine, or that it would make

the Court look too nakedly political. Roberts has shown a penchant for this kind of thinking; the others, less so. (Last week, Barrett, while speaking at the McConnell Center, at the University of Louisville—named for the Republican senator who rushed through her confirmation—maintained that the Court is never partisan.)

Stare decisis is meant to protect not just institutions but also citizens who have come to depend on certain rights. Access to abortion, for all the dug-in objections to it, is one such right, and most Americans want to retain it. As Justices Anthony Kennedy, Sandra Day O'Connor, and David Souter wrote for the plurality in *Casey*, "The ability of women to participate in the economic and social life of the Nation has been facilitated by their ability to control their reproductive lives." That was true in 1992; it is no less true in 2021.

—Margaret Talbot

## PREHISTORY DEPT. BABY SOPRANO



There are arguably few routes less glamorous than that which snakes westward from the Lincoln Tunnel to the New Jersey Turnpike and on to Newark. (Carbon-monoxide vibes!) Unless you're a fan of "The Sopranos," in which case that gray path takes on a mythic quality. "We should be playing the song," the actor Alessandro Nivola said on a recent morning, as his car sped past the industrial chimneys of North Jersey, just as Tony Soprano's does in the opening credits of the show. Nivola began to sing the first bars of the theme—a morning, a gun—unshowily but with conviction.

Nivola, who is forty-nine, was wearing jeans and a gray button-down, and a heavy silver I.D. bracelet. Next month, he will star in the movie "The Many Saints of Newark," a "Sopranos" prequel, co-written by the show's creator, David Chase, and directed by Alan Taylor. In the crime drama, which is set against the backdrop of the 1967

Newark race riots, Nivola plays Dickie Moltisanti, father to Christopher (a baby in the movie), and mentor to the young Tony (played by Michael Gandolfini, the son of the late James Gandolfini, who starred in the series as the psychologically tortured Mafia boss). Although Nivola is part Italian, his background is not Moltisanti-esque. "My grandfather, who was a sculptor, was originally from Sardinia, and he moved to New York in the forties," Nivola said. "Him and my grandmother lived a kind of bohemian existence in Greenwich Village, which is where my dad was born, and it wasn't exactly the mean streets of the outer boroughs." Nivola's father tried to hide his heritage: "In boarding school, he changed his name from Pietro to Pete." He went on, "But, by the time I was born, he'd rediscovered his Italianness, and I was saddled with the most Italian name in history."

To prepare for the role of Dickie, a mafioso whose charisma conceals a jumble of violent and tender urges, Nivola spent months with a dialect coach. ("Almost everyone can at this point do the 'Goodfellas' imitation, you know"—his voice slid briefly into *gabagool* territory—"and I wanted to get much more specific than that.")

He also worked with a trainer. ("It's never mentioned in the movie, but I figured, like a lot of those guys, Dickie might have been a boxer as a kid, and I changed my body quite a lot, to look more imposing.") He immersed himself in the culture, reading books about Newark and exploring local landmarks. Now he wanted to revisit one, the Museum of the Old First Ward, a modest space housed on the grounds of St. Lucy's Church.

On his phone, Nivola pulled up



Alessandro Nivola



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*Victoria Roberts*

*"It's meatless Monday. You don't have to hunt, but I must gather."*

an image, taken on his previous visit, of a stained-glass window donated to St. Lucy's by Richie (the Boot) Boiardo, the mid-century Mob boss whose crime family, David Chase once said, loosely inspired "The Sopranos." "Originally, the Boot lived in Newark," Nivola said. "Later, he moved to this amazing estate out in Livingston, after he mysteriously came into a lot of money." A church secretary, having heard about Nivola's new movie, approached. "They filmed a scene from the show at my house—where Uncle Junior is losing it, and he comes, in his pajamas, to a neighbor's door to ask for ice cream," she told him. "My son was really excited—they gave him a director's chair."

Bob Cascella, a retired probation officer who has been entrusted with curating the museum, wasn't far behind. "Are you the son?" he asked.

"No, I play Dickie Moltisanti," Nivola said.

"The father came here once," Cascella went on, undeterred. "I said to him, 'Hi, Tony!' And he laughed. I guess he was doing research." He ushered Nivola into the basement, where every inch of wall was covered with photo displays. "I call them 'concepts,'" Cascella said. "I'm not trained. I don't

know, but that's what I call them." He began his First Ward spiel: wedding ceremonies ("I tell people, 'You don't need to be married in St. Lucy's to get on this wall, you just need to have one of the couple be from the Ward!)'), social clubs, feast days, doo-wop groups ("Here's Pesci in one of them. He really paid his dues. Did you know he was a hair stylist?"). At a display featuring pictures of Boiardo, Cascella paused. "I grew up with people like on 'The Sopranos,' and they weren't looked down on by any means," he said. "Most of the guys, they don't bother anybody. They live on the same block, they're going around. My mother used to bet with one guy, a bookie—he used to take numbers from her! If you get money from them and you don't pay it back, what do you expect? It's business!" Cascella laughed, and Nivola joined, a little faintly. "Now, the killers, guys who are real nuts, that's a different thing. Like what's-his-name on the show. Ralphie? The one who killed his pregnant girlfriend." (A harrowing plot point from Season 3.) "Now that was a *nut*. But most of the kids in this neighborhood, they could have been like Tony. Or they could have been like me."

—Naomi Fry

László Jakab Orsós lives in Brooklyn Heights, where busy men on bicycles will deliver just about anything: Thai food, craft cocktails, firewood, cocaine, deli sandwiches. Orsós, a cultural curator at the Brooklyn Public Library, recently took on some part-time work as a delivery guy, dispatching poetry and political speeches throughout Brooklyn. "We're sneaking into people's minds!" he said the other day, as an Emily Dickinson poem blared from a Bluetooth speaker mounted on his bicycle. "My heart sings!"

Orsós, who is fifty-seven, grew up in Gellénháza, a model village in western Hungary, which was developed by an oil company. He first visited New York in his twenties, to learn English while painting apartments in the East Village: "My stepbrothers were here studying history and philosophy, driving cabs, and I was reading 'Great Expectations,' in the pocket edition, at jobs, underlining all the words, so I had my vocabulary." After six months, he moved to Budapest, where he spent two decades as a screenwriter, a college professor, and a restaurant critic. "At forty, you start reassessing your life," he said. "Why did I leave Hungary? The boredom. I just wanted to see how I would operate in a bigger setting."

He did well. First, as a diplomat, later heading up Salman Rushdie's international literary festival, all the while riding a one-speed steel-framed orange bicycle, with cantilever brakes, upright handlebars, and a plush saddle, which he bought the week he moved to New York. "I don't wear a helmet," he said. "I've tried so many helmets, and I've promised *so many* of my friends and lovers, 'I will wear a helmet, yes!' But I can't. I just feel totally constrained. Like my head is wrapped." Orsós laughed. "I don't own a tie, either. And it's not a revolutionary statement. I just can't—I



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feel like I'm going to die in a minute! It suffocates me."

Recently, Orsós pedalled past the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library in suède desert chukkas, a patterned V-neck, and a heavy pink overshirt; no tie, no helmet. "Last year, I had this idea, late at night, biking home," he said. "What if the library building could start whispering? How amazing would it be if the building could just start speaking?" This spring, he pulled it off: ten library branches across Brooklyn began to broadcast recordings of their holdings (poems by the U.S. Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo; speeches by Malcolm X; excerpts from Defoe's "A Journal of the Plague Year") on outdoor speakers, for passersby to enjoy and ignore and remember and forget.

"Libraries in Europe are totally different concepts—they're closed off from life," Orsós said. "In America, libraries are cultural platforms. We don't have chandeliers, we don't have marble desks. We have shitty tables, rickety chairs, fluorescent lights, people murmuring gibberish and walking around with thousands of handwritten pages—the manuscript they've scribbled down in the course of their life. But that's what makes it!" A library is more than a building, he explained. It's a mind-set, it's the exchange of ideas: "The library comes with us wherever we go!"

In Boerum Hill, Elizabeth Bishop and Brenda Shaughnessy echoed through the brownstone-lined streets, from Orsós's bike speaker. Maya Angelou's voice bellowed, "Be a rainbow in somebody else's cloud." A woman with a red tote bag, a straw hat, and two iced coffees paused under a magnolia tree, listening. "Be a blessing to somebody!" Angelou read. The woman's Labrador eyed a squirrel. Nearby, a man wearing a raincoat barked into his cell phone.

"Normally, it's loud, thrumming, honking—a totally different syncopation," the woman said. "It was a totally different mood all of sudden."

Orsós rode on. At a stoplight, another cyclist, with a speaker blasting dubstep, pulled up. The riders exchanged knowing glances; Frank O'Hara and Skrillex caterwauled together in the warm air. A few minutes later, Orsós pedalled past a sidewalk café, E. E. Cummings's "i carry your heart with me" trailing behind him: "(here is the root of the

root and the bud of the bud / and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows / higher than soul can hope or mind can hide) / and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart."

A blond woman wearing a black turtleneck looked up from her iPad; an older couple sharing a club sandwich did not. A baby in a stroller almost cried.

Nearby, at a crosswalk in Cobble Hill, listeners strained to hear a Sonia Sanchez poem over the sound of an idling bus. "It's not an avenue project, it's a side-street project," Orsós said. "I really believe in the metaphysical component—that, even when people are not knowing what's going on, it's happening, it's finding a way into their bodies." A man wearing wireless Bose headphones walked past Orsós, indifferent to the streaming verse. "Robots are not our audience!" Orsós said. "I call them robots," he explained. "The people with the headphones. And I'm *really* afraid of them. They're not human. It's weird."

—Adam Iscoe

## NEW START FACE-OFF



Leslie Jones shuffled into the "glam room" of her Beverly Hills house, wearing a bathrobe and Ugg slippers. Awaiting her was a hair stylist, in orange glasses and a KN95, and a makeup



Leslie Jones

artist, who was on the phone, asking a colleague which products to use. Jones sat down at a mirror surrounded by light bulbs. A Bob Marley ashtray rested on a cart of nail-polish bottles, opposite a wig closet. "I need to roll one," Jones said.

"I set up this room because, even before the pandemic, me and my hairdresser and makeup artists were always in a hotel room or somebody's living room or something, getting ready," she went on. "For Black people, that's how we've always gotten our hair done—in the kitchen. My mom would make the kitchen table her shop, and I was, like, 'Mom, the kitchen smells like burned hair.'"

"Are we going to work at the same time?" asked the hair stylist. The makeup artist's shoes had the words "pray" and "wait" on them.

"Y'all new, so let me tell you how this goes," Jones said. Her regular team was off. "This is different from getting ready for 'S.N.L.,' where somebody behind you is getting dressed like a full frog."

Jones, who left "Saturday Night Live" two years ago, was prepping for a day hosting the reboot of the game show "Supermarket Sweep"—a timed race through a grocery store—which first aired in the sixties. Teams of two tear through the aisles, filling up their carts, and answer trivia questions about consumer goods.

Jones was a fan of the program in its eighties incarnation. "Watching the show was very relaxing to me because I could answer the questions," she said. "When you watch 'Jeopardy,' you can't answer none of that shit. But you ask somebody names of toilet paper—fuck it, I'll name all that shit." She heard about a casting call for contestants back then, and decided to try out. She was working at Roscoe's House of Chicken and Waffles, and she recruited a co-worker as her teammate. "On the weekend, I would take her to the grocery store," she said. "I trained her." But they never made it on the show. Jones went on, "Everybody likes the show now, because it brings back shopping. Especially with the pandemic, it's, like, 'Are we ever going to have a Black Friday again? A swap meet?'"

"We call this the Hawk," she said, peering at the updo the hair stylist was building.

Jones explained that, after she became well known, she couldn't shop for groceries anymore. "I miss it so fucking much," she said. "Whenever I get a chance to go in a grocery store, which is not often, it's like you took me to a club." She described being in a Whole Foods and noticing somebody staring at her. "I'm from Compton, so the first thing I think is, What the fuck! I ain't stealing nothing!" she said. "And then I go, 'Oh, shit! I'm Leslie Jones.'"

(She mused on other grocery stores. Erewhon: "Their hot bar is bomb, but it's a whole bunch of motherfucking men with hair buns buying vitamins.")

Her stylist appeared in the doorway and asked Jones what she wanted to wear to the studio. For the hosting gig, they'd perfected a look of sports coats and sneakers. "I've been doing a Monty Hall type thing," Jones said, referring to the longtime host of "Let's Make a Deal." "I got a different jacket for every show."

She's not fussy about clothes. "I don't give a fuck about what I look like. I like to get the joke told," she said. "That's one thing they didn't realize at 'S.N.L.' until too late. That I'm not just a goofball. That I can actually do other emotions and be fucking still funny." She went on, "Lucille Ball was beautiful. She didn't give a fuck about being beautiful. She went the length that she needed to go to get the fucking joke across." Jones said that, if she had to, she'd fall back on her bachelor's degree in criminal justice: "I'll be a good damn detective."

She explained why hosting a game show appealed to her more than impersonating a politician on "S.N.L." did. "I smoke too much weed to be other people," she said. "I don't remember that shit. But I do remember who I am."

In 2016, after she appeared in the all-female "Ghostbusters" reboot, she was viciously harassed on Twitter, and the company's C.E.O., Jack Dorsey, invited her in to talk about Internet hate. "Now I want to talk to Jeff Bezos," she said. "But with him I will be, like, 'I need to know where your brain is.'"

She examined her face and hair in the mirror: "Y'all really did a good job for something I'm just going to sweat off."

—Antonia Hitchens

SKETCHPAD BY EMILY FLAKE

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A POSSIBILITY.



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WITHOUT ME!  
NOTHING!



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HOAGIE PROTESTS  
NOMINATION SNUB

I JUST  
LIKE TO  
KEEP YOU  
ALL ON  
YOUR  
TOES.



BILLY PORTER SHOWS  
UP IN CARGO SHORTS

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TED LASSO'S MUSTACHE  
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AMERICAN CHRONICLES

## ZERO-PROOF THERAPY

*Can an ex-drinker return to the bar if non-alcoholic beer is on tap?*

BY JOHN SEABROOK

Just inside the Athletic Brewing Company's headquarters, in Stratford, Connecticut, there is a long wooden bar with a selection of non-alcoholic craft beers on tap. When I visited the brewery and public taproom on a sunny afternoon in June, during our fleeting summer of freedom before the emergence of the Delta variant, I could smell the hops—the flowers that give beer its sour-sweet fruit flavor—while I was still outside.

Behind the bar, Bill Shufelt, a thirty-eight-year-old former hedge-fund trader, who co-founded Athletic in 2017, drew me a pint of Two Trellises, one of the company's seasonal N.A. brews—a hazy

I.P.A. that he and the other co-founder, John Walker, Athletic's forty-one-year-old head brewer, were test-batching. I had not raised a pint drawn from a keg since I quit drinking alcohol, exactly one thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight days earlier. The glass seemed to fit my palm like a key.

For the North American non-alcoholic-beer drinker, who was until recently shut out of the craft-beer revolution of the past twenty years, these are hoppy times. Back in 2016, you'd be lucky to find an O'Doul's—the non-alcoholic swill brewed by Anheuser-Busch—in the far back corner of the deli beer fridge.

*Today, N.A. craft brewers are making biscuity stouts and hops-forward I.P.A.s.*

Five years later, the Total Wine & More chain of superstores carries biscuity stouts and hops-forward I.P.A.s from more than a dozen N.A. craft brewers across the continent, including Athletic, Partake, Bravus, Surreal, WellBeing, and Brooklyn's Special Effects. Although the N.A.-beer market in the U.S. is still tiny, at around two hundred and seventy million dollars, compared with Europe's multibillion-dollar industry, it has grown by a third in the past year. American disdain for the liquid called "near-beer"—a derisive tag that is a hangover from Prohibition days, when non-alcoholic beer, defined by the 1919 Volstead Act as beer containing up to 0.5 per cent alcohol by volume (A.B.V.), was the only beer Americans could legally drink—appears to be finally lifting. (That 1919 definition of non-alcoholic beer remains the standard today.)

I swirled the beer and admired the lacery of foam, as the bubbles slid slowly down the side of the glass. I took a deep whiff—the Cascade hops, from the Pacific Northwest, had notes of pineapple and hay. I brought the glass up to my lips, and took a long swallow. A tingle of good cheer seemed to spread through my hand up my right arm and into my chest.

The beer, though near, was delicious.

It felt good to be conducting an interview in a bar again. As a reporter, I had relied on interviews over drinks as a way of loosening a subject's tongue. But alcohol only works as a disinhibitory lubricant if all parties are drinking.

Abstinence turns out to mean a lot more than giving up alcohol. It means forgoing a whole range of social and professional activities that you associate with drinking, because the place, or the people, or the occasion—after-work drinks at six, say—can trigger a craving for alcohol, according to the same process that caused Pavlov's dog to salivate in anticipation of food when it heard a buzzer associated with chow time. Although the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous never mentions Ivan Pavlov, B. F. Skinner, or the science of behavioral conditioning, its anecdotal accounts of triggering events and relapses, collected by Bill Wilson and his circle of a hundred former drinkers, are remarkably consistent with conditioning

experiments performed on rats in cages.

So, no more interviews in bars. No bars at all. No dinner parties where adults are drinking, and no children's parties, either—they make ideal day-drinking affairs. I could manage a meal in a restaurant, but if anyone proposed a toast I felt as if I were inviting bad luck to the table by raising my glass of water. No professional events involving alcohol, namely book parties, where you could once find me by the bar. Even watching sports on TV was a visual and auditory minefield of ads featuring foaming beer manes and streams of whiskey splashing on the rocks. Maintaining abstinence in an alcohol-soaked society can feel like serving a medieval sentence of banishment, and many heavy drinkers fear the cure more than the sickness.

Above all else, I missed the cocktail hour, the Waspie rite my parents observed every night, and one that I had inherited. Without that tradition, my day felt wounded.

How long do cravings last? The answers are as variable as the drinkers. An abstaining young person might master the urge to drink within a matter of months, but if you drank for forty years, as I did, the Pavlovian groove is deeper. After I'd gone three years without alcohol, my cravings seemed to have been extinguished, but I waited five years—the length of time that some cancer doctors use to declare a patient cured—before I tried to return to the rituals of social drinking, without the alcohol.

Still, when I mentioned my upcoming visit to Athletic's taproom to a friend, a psychiatrist who is a twenty-year veteran of A.A.'s twelve-step program, which he credits with saving his life, he replied, "Non-alcoholic beer is for non-alcoholics," a line I had heard in "the rooms." It was like playing Russian roulette with your sobriety, even if the bullet in the chamber was a blank. He also reminded me, as people in recovery say, "If you hang around the barbershop long enough, you're going to get a haircut."

**D**uring my alcohol-free years, I had sampled some of the better N.A. brews available in the United States, including lagers such as Beck's Non-Alcoholic, St. Pauli N.A., Clausthaler

"Original" Non-Alcoholic, and Heineken 0.0, which was featured at this year's U.S. Open tennis tournament. If the bottle was really cold, the first swig was nice, but returns diminished steeply with each subsequent swallow.

That changed in 2019, when two brews from Athletic, Run Wild and Upside Dawn, showed up at my local Whole Foods, in Brooklyn. The former is a malty, amber-colored I.P.A., and the latter a fruity, golden ale. Though lacking the depth and complexity of an alcoholic craft beer, Run Wild offers a breadth of flavors that partly makes up for alcohol's absence, along with the mouthfeel of real beer: frisky, foamy, pillow-y. I wanted to know how Athletic had figured this out.

Shufelt drew pints of Two Trellises for himself and Walker and pulled up a stool near mine. He said that on graduating from Middlebury College, in 2005, he had gone to work for a financial firm in Jersey City, and then for a hedge fund in Stamford, not far from Darien, where he grew up. "Everyone I knew was in finance, so I went into finance," he said.

After a few years of trading health-care stocks, Shufelt started to wonder if he was drinking too much. "I was going on work dinners three or four nights a week, with multiple glasses of wine, and then drinks with family on weekends," he said. As he approached thirty, the hangovers seemed to get worse. "I was sick of having down days and not being at my best."

In September, 2013, he took a month-long pause from alcohol. "And I felt amazing. I slept for eight hours straight. I used to wake up at 3 A.M. stressed about the day." He felt so good, he said, that he just never went back to drinking.

But now Shufelt had a different problem: what to drink at social occasions and business dinners. "If you're at a fancy Italian restaurant and you pair the food with a Diet Coke, it just murders the experience. Plus you feel like a six-year-old."

One evening in 2015, Shufelt was walking to a local restaurant with his wife, Jackie, a writer, complaining about the lack of non-alcoholic options on the menu. Meanwhile, "there were all these great craft breweries around us," he recalled. Jackie grabbed his arm

and said, "You should start a non-alcoholic brewery!"

He spent two years studying the industry. In the U.S., "there was no belief in non-alcoholics as a business," he told me, gesturing with his glass of Two Trellises. "It had been an eighty-to-one-hundred-million-dollar industry with zero innovation for thirty years."

Most of Big Beer's N.A. products are made by brewing full-strength beer and then heating it to evaporate the ethanol—the psychoactive element in alcoholic beverages—which boils before water. Unfortunately, many of the esters and other flavoring and aroma components evaporate with the ethanol. "That's the way ninety-five per cent of all non-alcoholic beer was made in the U.S.," Shufelt said.

Germans have been making far better N.A. brews since the nineteen-seventies, when a brewery in Berlin began producing Aubi, short for *Autofahrerbier*, so that drivers could drink the national beverage without exceeding Germany's strict legal limit of 0.05 per cent blood-alcohol content. (In the U.S., the legal limit for drivers is 0.08 per cent, except in Utah, where it is 0.05 per cent.)

Shufelt, still at the hedge fund, would get up early to call brewers in Germany. German brewers have traditionally relied on "arrested fermentation," a process that stops the beer from becoming alcoholic in the first place. Roger Barth, a professor emeritus of chemistry at West Chester University, and the author of "The Chemistry of Beer: The Science in the Suds," explained to me that brewers can use special yeasts, and remove them from the "wort"—the mixture of water and maltose that is the mother brew—before the yeasts fully ferment the sugars and the starches. "Timing and temperature control are critical, because the fermentation must run long enough to generate desired flavors but short enough to curtail ethanol production," Barth said. "This is difficult to control."

New methods have been developed to enhance the standard approach to alcohol removal, which is to heat the beer. Some brewers use thermal processes such as vacuum distillation or the employment of centrifugal disks in a

spinning cone; others use membrane-separation processes like dialysis or reverse osmosis in order to remove the alcohol from the beer at milder temperatures while retaining as much of the flavor and aroma as possible. For 0.0 beer, the brewer extends certain steps in the process to remove most of the remaining 0.5 per cent alcohol, but not all of it. “No way you are going to get a product with no detectable alcohol by any method,” Barth said.

Jackie, seeing how passionate her husband had become about his side project, told him, “You’ve got to quit your job.” Shufelt recalled her saying, “If you could do this, the impact on people trying to cut back on drinking could be huge.” And he’d grown disenchanted with his finance career. “No matter how much money we made for our clients, it was never enough,” he explained. He resigned on the second day of 2017, and began looking for an experienced brewer to join him in building a non-alcoholic brewery.

“I had a list of brewers, and every morning I’d get ten rejections,” he said. “People were nice about it. They’d say there’s no market for non-alcoholic, and the equipment is hugely expensive. I got about two hundred rejections. By the time I got to John, I had taken ‘non-alcoholic’ out of the job description.”

John Walker was the head brewer at the Second Street Brewery, in Santa Fe, a craft brewery that had won significant awards, including a silver in the World Beer Cup for one of its imperial I.P.A.s. He, too, was from Connecticut, and wanted to move back East with his family. He saw Shufelt’s ad on Pro Brewer, an online brewers’ forum. “It said something about the opportunity to work in ‘the most innovative craft segment,’” he recalled. After they spoke on the phone, Walker said, “and Bill came clean about his plans for a non-alcoholic beer, I was ready with a quick no.” Shufelt begged him to consider the proposal over the weekend. “Part of his pitch was creating something that tasted good when no one else had made the effort,” Walker continued, “and that was super-

intriguing. Also, as a young father, I was thinking of the positive impact this could make.”

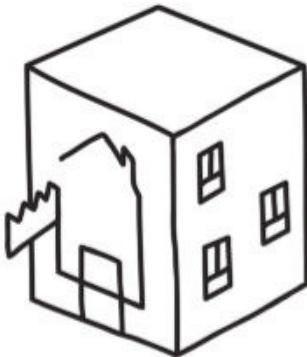
It took them nine months to come up with Athletic’s proprietary de-alcoholizing process, which combines and modifies elements of established methods. “It wasn’t just one step—it ended up being over ten different differentiations in the brewing process,”

Walker said. “Changing one degree of temperature here, two there, adding ten more minutes to a step.” Once they had an effective process, they began tinkering with the recipe, making a hundred three-gallon batches. They also worked with a food-safety consultant to determine how to sterilize the equipment and pasteurize the beer. “When you remove alcohol as a preservative,” Shufelt said, “you open the door to E. coli, salmonella, and other kinds of bacteria. And it only takes one cell to get into a can and the can will explode.”

When the beer finally started to taste good, they bottled samples to take around to regional distributors. Their big break came when Shufelt met with the Whole Foods regional buyer in New Jersey. “He was our first believer,” Shufelt said.

The company has grown rapidly, in part because some of Shufelt’s former colleagues in finance are investors in Athletic. Shufelt and Walker opened a large brewery in San Diego in June, 2020, and plan to open an even larger one in Connecticut in 2022. They want Athletic to be the Sam Adams of N.A. craft beer: a national, category-defining brand.

As I talked with Shufelt and Walker, I realized that I was feeling a bit buzzed. My face felt hot, and my pulse was elevated. It wasn’t the beer—my glass of Two Trellises contained hardly more alcohol than an overripe banana, and my body was metabolizing the ethanol within minutes of my ingesting it. The buzz that I was feeling was a kind of placebo effect, produced by aroma and taste but also by the dimly lit taproom, the stools, the bar, and us in a close circle, talking and drinking.



In the early nineteen-seventies, G. Alan Marlatt, a clinical psychologist then at the University of Wisconsin, published the first account of his now famous “balanced placebo design” experiments, which demonstrated the influence that expectations and setting can have on alcohol’s psychotropic effects. He and his students recruited non-recovering alcoholics and social drinkers from the Madison area and divided these people, who were told that they were taking part in taste tests, into four groups. Those in group one received a mixed drink (the researchers used decarbonated tonic and vodka, in a five-to-one ratio) and were told that the drink contained alcohol. Those in group two were also told that they were getting alcohol, but they got a tonic-only placebo. Those in the third group were told that they were getting tonic, and they did. The participants in the fourth group got alcohol, but were informed that it was tonic.

The results were startling. One man in the group that expected alcohol but received tonic began acting intoxicated and tried to make a date with one of the lab assistants, and several men in the group that expected tonic but received alcohol experienced tremors—a symptom of withdrawal—even though they’d downed multiple vodkas.

Shortly after the experiment, Marlatt moved to the University of Washington, where he created the Behavioral Alcohol Research Laboratory—the BARLAB—within the psych department, to continue the study. The lab, which was described for me recently by a former graduate student of Marlatt’s, Kim Fromme, now a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, had a bar with bottles and glassware behind it, stools, music, and mood lighting. It was also outfitted with hidden microphones and cameras, and a two-way mirror that allowed the researchers to observe the drinkers covertly.

Fromme’s students continue to use balanced-placebo-design methods to study the role that alcohol plays—and doesn’t play—in sexual arousal, domestic violence, and disinhibited behavior. (Most researchers, however, no longer study a group that expects tonic but receives alcohol, because few of

the participants are fooled.) “Does alcohol really make you more aggressive, or do you think, I’ve been drinking, so I can be disinhibited?” Fromme said. “Does alcohol make people more flirtatious, or do they believe that drinking gives them permission to be more flirtatious? It’s all about what you expect to happen.”

Fromme added that her bar lab had improved on Marlatt’s placebo. The researchers now serve subjects drinks made of cranberry juice, Diet Cherry 7UP, Rose’s Lime Juice, and decarbonated tonic, some spiked with vodka, others not. She also rubs alcohol on the glasses to add the smell. “You can’t tell the difference,” she said.

I asked if she had ever used real beer and a non-alcoholic beer placebo in the lab. She had not, she said, because the alcohol content in beer is much lower than in vodka: “Vodka gets people to 0.08 faster.”

**M**y pint with the Athletic founders did indeed trigger me, but only to sample other non-alcoholic craft beers. Many are made by West Coast brewers that lack Athletic’s distribution. But non-alcoholic beer is easier to ship across state lines than its alcoholic counterpart, and it is taxed at the rate applied to soft drinks, which somewhat offsets the added cost of de-alcoholizing and pasteurizing it. You also don’t have to be twenty-one to buy N.A. beer in most states.

Within days, our doorbell was a-jingle with beer deliveries: cases of Surreal’s Chandelier Red I.P.A. (burnt toast and caramel), WellBeing’s Intentional I.P.A. (peach and pineapple), and BrewDog’s Hazy AF (clover, thistle, mowed lawn). All these beers are delicious, and some are flavorful to the point of funkiness, with billowy heads of foam and the fizz of added carbonation. But Run Wild remained my go-to.

One day when I was away from home, I asked my wife, Lisa, to look out for a case of BrewDog’s Nanny State and one of Bravus’s Blood Orange I.P.A.

“Is this getting a little weird?” she said. Lisa doesn’t have a drinking problem, but twenty-five years with someone who does has made her a reluctant expert.

Was it? Every inch of available space in the kitchen was filling up with cases of beer. I seemed to be enacting the fantasy that I’d had toward the end of my drinking career: packing the house so full of alcohol that I’d never have to leave. (By then, I was hiding the booze in the cellar.) There was an obsessive-compulsive aspect to my sampling of N.A. beers that went far beyond the call of curiosity, and it reminded Lisa of the bad old days.

I asked George Koob, the director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, which is part of the National Institutes of Health, and Nora Volkow, the director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, about my raging non-alcoholism. “When you extinguish a learned habit, it doesn’t disappear,” Koob said. “All you’re doing is replacing that habit with a different habit.” Volkow compared my behavior to a binge. “It’s an automatic compulsive behavior,” she said. (Volkow is Leon Trotsky’s great-granddaughter and was raised in Mexico City, in the house

where her great-grandfather was assassinated, in 1940.) “If I know I can fall into a binge, as I do with chocolate-chip cookies, how do I avoid it? Very simple. I avoid putting chocolate-chip cookies in front of me. But that requires executive control of my frontal cortex. Drinking causes your executive system to erode, and generates a loss of control in some people.”

But so what if my executive system couldn’t resist non-alcoholic beer? Abstinence had made me fond of the refreshing, low-calorie, any-time-of-day beverage people in medieval times called “small beer.” (Back then, it was brewed with the leftovers of regular beer, and adults and children are said to have sometimes drunk it instead of water, which was more likely to be contaminated.) I could easily put away a six-pack of N.A. beer in the course of a day and never feel bloated or tired, and because it replaced sweet drinks and soda in my diet I lost weight. I drank it at lunch and dinner, while working and driving, and after exercise, because

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if it was good enough for Germany's successful 2018 Olympic skiers, who drank N.A. beer as a training beverage, it was good enough for me. (Budweiser Zero, which is Anheuser-Busch's new and somewhat improved N.A. beer, has enlisted Dwyane Wade, the retired N.B.A. star, as a spokesperson, in the hope of promoting the brew as a sports drink in the U.S.)

Ted Fleming founded Partake Brewing, an N.A. brewery based in Calgary, after a diagnosis of Crohn's disease forced him to give up alcohol. He told me, "Beer has salts, minerals, polyphenols, and anti-inflammatories," adding that it has almost none of the sugar that's in Gatorade. To make the point that N.A. beer is healthier than most of the sweetened juices that parents give their children, Ted posted a picture of his preteen daughter drinking a Partake beer on social media. (He took it down after it provoked outrage.)

Best of all, at a Fourth of July party at our house, I was able to drink my Run Wilds while the guests drank their craft beers. The laughter seemed louder, the smiles seemed brighter, and my companions were none the wiser that I was drinking a placebo—a necessary condition for the psychological effects to work. Still, I was reminded of how I used to conceal alcohol. Now I was concealing non-alcohol.

In truth, I was never a big beer drinker. At 6 P.M. Martini or a seasonal whiskey-on-the-rocks, then wine with dinner: that was my nightly habit for decades, echoing my parents. But their ritual never changed, whereas mine shifted imperceptibly from a single cocktail to two, then three, and sometimes four, and that glass of red with dinner became a bottle and a half. Along the way, my drinking went from social to sneaky—from Falstaff to Iago.

Could I restore the old customs to my evenings, using non-alcoholic wine and liquor placebos instead of alcohol? When I ran my concept, "zero-proof therapy," by George Koob, he pronounced it "very dangerous." To Lisa, it sounded like an argument made by Wile E. Prevaricator, once and future alcoholic—a clever way to introduce and rationalize the idea of my returning to real drinking.

Non-alcoholic red wines make dreadful placebos. No wine drinker, used to drinking wines that range from eleven to fifteen per cent A.B.V., would confuse the non-alcoholic Cabernets made by Fre and Ariel, two widely distributed U.S. brands, for the nectar of the gods. Most N.A. wines are fully fermented and then de-alcoholized like beer, employing spinning cones and reverse osmosis to separate the alcohol from the juice. But a vineyard can't add a lot of other flavors to make up for the absence of alcohol. You're left with twenty-dollar grape juice that tastes like a kids' drink. And one reason young people drink alcohol in the first place, even though the initial sips are nauseating, is to demonstrate that they aren't children anymore. The proof is in the proof.

"Whenever you remove alcohol from wine, you are ripping the backbone out of that creature," Matthew Jukes, a British wine writer turned N.A. entrepreneur, told me. "Alcohol brings you mouthfeel and texture and glycerol, all of which create that slippery element we love when we drink wine." After sampling non-alcoholic wines from around the world, and finding them consistently awful, Jukes decided to make Jukes Cordialities, a wine alternative modelled on a centuries-old drink called a haymaker's punch, in which inedible bits of fruits and vegetables are steeped in apple-cider vin-

that use carbonation to trick up the mouthfeel and cut the sweetness; the bubbles release carbonic-acid molecules. Lisa and I managed to finish a bottle of bubbly Chardonnay produced by Noughty, of Great Britain, as well as a sparkling rosé from Sapiens, a New York-based startup that was founded by Tolu Obikunle, a twenty-six-year-old Columbia graduate, who wanted to be able to have a drink with her colleagues at professional events without violating her Nigerian family's Seventh-Day Adventist tradition of not consuming alcohol. I also heard good things about a non-alcoholic Riesling from Leitz, a vineyard in Germany, but in spite of a worldwide search by Drink Dispatch, one of the online wine-and-spirits purveyors that became popular during the pandemic, I couldn't find a bottle.

Even so, I was encouraged. I was in control. Zero-proof therapy was working. Maybe.

Kim Fromme, Alan Marlatt's former student, put me in touch with Roberto Cofresí, who studied for his Ph.D. at U.T. Austin and is now a researcher at the University of Missouri. Cofresí, a thirty-year-old from Puerto Rico, is seeking to apply what scientists know about the neurobiology of conditioned behaviors like alcohol and drug abuse, which is based on decades of experiments performed on rats in cages, to experiments on people, which are rarer and much harder to design.

Cofresí told me that, if we could learn enough about the neurobiology of conditioned responses to alcohol in the human brain, "we could come up with a way of disrupting or dampening that phenomenon." That could mean developing a drug that reduces cravings and relapses—one more accurately targeted than the opiate blocker Naloxone, which is currently prescribed to both opioid and alcohol abusers, but must be taken regularly and has unpleasant side effects.

Cofresí described a common alcohol-conditioning experiment using rats. First, the rats are trained to associate a light with the availability of alcohol, which they obtain by pressing a lever. This goes on for two weeks. Then, after they are conditioned, you stop the al-



egar. To this base, Jukes adds ingredients that follow the tasting notes of the wine he is emulating. One of his concoctions, Jukes 6, seeks to approximate the Big Cabs I used to drink: notes of blackberry, black currant, and cracked pepper, and beetroot for the deep ruby color. Mixed with cold soda water, a Jukes cordial at least tastes like an adult drink.

The only remotely drinkable N.A. wines I found were whites and rosés

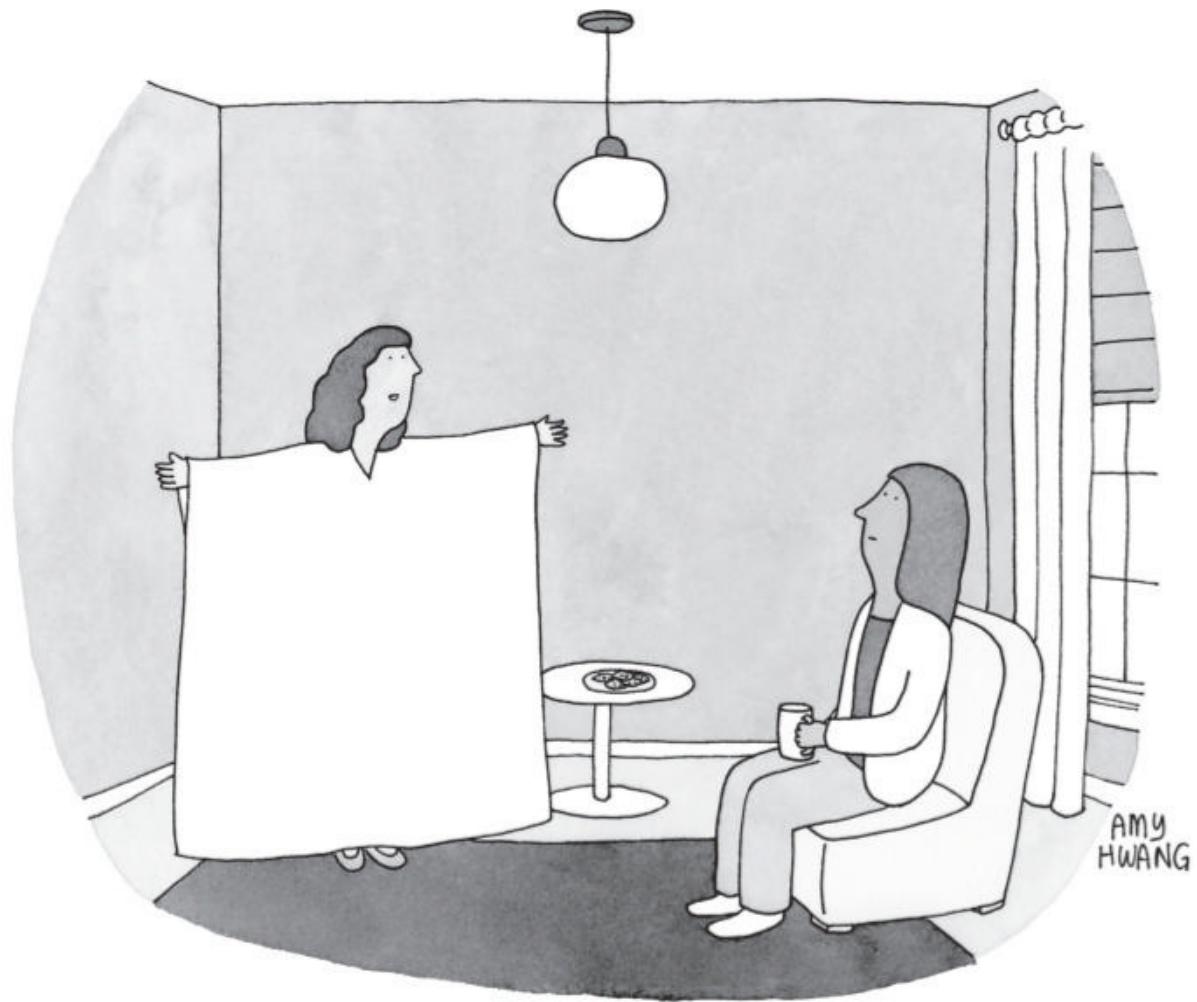
cohol and the light, until the rats are no longer interested in pressing the lever. This goes on for another two weeks. You then show them the light alone to see if they press the lever again. “And it’s very clearly demonstrated in the animal literature that when you do this they will press the lever,” he said. “A lot.” He went on, “It is just crazy to me that, with so little over-all exposure to the drug, they would have such persistent memory.”

I asked how long that memory lasts.

“It can last for many months,” he said. “If you cease administering the substances, rats will show memory for what happened in that cage months later. They still lever-press.” He added, “We think that these models are informative of what’s going on when a person has a relapse. They map well onto specific high-risk situations.”

Was I in a high-risk situation? It seems like a lot of Americans are compulsively lever-pressing when it comes to alcohol. Recently, a grad student asked George Koob what the greatest disappointment has been in his tenure as the director of N.I.A.A.A. He replied, he told me, “It’s how little Americans know about alcohol.” He continued, “We have a problem with alcohol. It’s bigger than people think, but that requires getting people to understand that alcohol in large amounts is toxic. It’s a fact.”

“Alcohol use disorder” is the umbrella term employed by the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* to describe the condition colloquially known as “alcoholism.” In this edition, which was published in 2013, A.U.D. includes both alcohol abuse and alcohol dependence, which the previous edition, from 1994, treated as distinct disorders. More than fourteen million Americans over the age of twelve fall within the spectrum of A.U.D. The disorder may be mild, moderate, or severe; the N.I.A.A.A.’s Web site offers a list of eleven criteria to help drinkers diagnose themselves. In the past year, for example, have you “more than once wanted to cut down or stop drinking, or tried to, but couldn’t?” Or “continued to drink even though it was causing trouble with your family or friends?” Or “had to drink much more



*“Can you believe I made this dress from an old bedsheet?”*

than you once did to get the effect you want?” Or “given up or cut back on activities that were important or interesting to you, or gave you pleasure, in order to drink?” The presence of two or three criteria amounts to “mild” A.U.D.; four or five is moderate; six or more is severe.

Koob, who is seventy-four, has spent more than forty years studying alcohol abuse, and he sees his career as having two phases: a light side and a dark side. He began by trying to understand the “molecular cascade” of dopamine-triggering signals that alcohol sets off in the brain; back then, his assumption was that people drank to feel good. But, through the decades, he has come to realize that a lot of drinkers, especially people who have been exceeding recommended limits for years, are really attempting to ward off feelings of anxiety, depression, and tension—which can be the beginnings of alcohol withdrawal—by taking the next drink. “I spent half of my career trying to understand how we feel good, and now I tell people I spent the last part trying to understand why people feel bad. There’s a ‘feeling bad’ part

that is often underestimated when it comes to relapses.”

However, he added, “I don’t know of a medical society that doesn’t serve alcohol.” Even the attendees at the Research Society on Alcoholism get two drink chits at the opening reception, he said.

The final test for my zero-proof therapy was alternative liquors, a category that has also grown quickly in recent years. A pioneer was Seedlip, a U.K.-based company that launched in the U.S. in 2018 and sells “non-alcoholic spirits” for thirty-five dollars a bottle to sober-curious millennials who want to make Dry January and Sober October mocktails. As with wine, the non-drinking drinker has two options: liquids meant to taste like non-alcoholic versions of the original, and “third-way” spirits that try to reproduce the effects of alcohol by other means. Among the latter is Three Spirit, a London-based company that offers three products, Livener, Social Elixir, and Nightcap, made with ingredients like lion’s mane, a mushroom with purported mood-boosting properties,

and guayusa and schisandra, plants that contain antioxidants.

Dash Lilley, a former coconut-water entrepreneur who is one of the company's co-founders, took a functional approach to designing the drinks. He told me, "You need to answer the 'why.' Why am I drinking this? Everybody knows why they're drinking alcohol, even if they say it's for other reasons. Alcohol is a fantastic, unparalleled product for helping you lose your inhibitions, gain confidence, make friends, get on the dance floor, and make mistakes."

Ritual, a Chicago-based startup launched in 2019, makes zero-proof liquors in four varieties: Whiskey Alternative, Gin Alternative, Rum Alternative, and Tequila Alternative. Marcus Sakey, a co-founder of Ritual, told me that if he were to make a zero-proof vodka it would instantly become his best-selling product. Vodka is the most popular spirit consumed in the U.S., in large part because it has the lowest tasting profile. So a zero-proof vodka would have to taste like no-taste.

Sakey's story, like that of most N.A. entrepreneurs I spoke to, begins with a decision to drink less. A successful science-fiction novelist (he is the author of the "Brilliance" trilogy), Sakey realized after finishing his ninth book, in 2018, that he was drinking too much, so he took a break. "I missed the liquor, but more than that I missed the ritual," he said. "The way it brings a moment into focus. You make a cocktail, and you sit down with a book and a drink, and it underscores that whole moment."

Ritual's spirits aren't de-alcoholized; there was never any alcohol in them to begin with. The primary challenge for Sakey was not so much to approximate the taste or mouthfeel of strong liquor as to duplicate what he called "the bite": the shock of a liquid that is forty or fifty per cent pure ethanol colliding with your senses of smell and taste, and then with your gut and brain.

A passionate amateur cook, Sakey began by experimenting on his stove with different kinds of hot peppers and spices. "I just started playing with a lot of ingredients that had a strong taste, and some sort of mouthfeel," he

said. "I didn't want just watered-down pepper juice." He took that master sauce to professional flavorists and distillers in Louisville, Kentucky. "We pushed through about five hundred variations per flavor, trying to find the right balance that came as close as we could to the taste, smell, and bite of traditional spirits."

To me, Ritual's products sounded like one hand clapping: a cocktail koan. Nonetheless, when bottles of alternative gin, whiskey, and rum arrived, looking very much like the real thing, I was actually frightened. Even Wile E. Prevaricator shrank from the prospect of opening one. I recalled something George Koob told me: "Smells can trigger things you're not conscious of. They may be interoceptive—they turn things on and off automatically in your gut and your intestines that trigger the physiological state of being acutely withdrawn from alcohol."

Then one day, with the same impulsivity with which I used to "pick up," I grabbed the heavy glass bottle of Ritual's Whiskey Alternative—which the muscle memory in my arm registered as the same weight as the bottle of Gentleman Jack I used to lift—drew the stopper with a faint, moist pop, and inhaled.

That was as far as I got. The nose was remarkably whiskeylike, but there was so much sadness and pain in that smell, and it bit me so acutely—yes, I did feel it in my gut—that I put the bottle down and didn't even try a taste. Who was I kidding? I wanted the rituals back, but not at the expense of my family and my run of alcohol-free days.

Just as I was shutting down my home bar lab, two bottles from Leitz, the German vineyard, arrived via UPS. One was the Eins-Zwei-Zero rosé, and the other the famous Riesling. I put both in the fridge.

That evening, at cocktail hour, we tried the Riesling. I went and got two wineglasses, opened the bottle, and poured the wine. Perhaps it was just the time of day and the lovely sunset after two straight days of rain, but the golden liquid looked particularly attractive as I held it up to the light.

Bringing the wine to my nose, I swirled and smelled. Impressive.

I handed a glass to Lisa. We settled down for the magic hour, just as my parents used to do.

"Cheers!"

I took a tentative sip. My cheeks contracted, almost as if in spasm, and I felt green around the gills. I made a moaning sound to Lisa and shook my head with the liquid still balanced on my tongue, gagging as I forced myself to swallow it.

"Awful!" I cried.

"A bit sweet," Lisa said, after sipping cautiously; she likes her occasional glass of white dry.

No, not too sweet. Something else. What was it? Taking another small sip, I was reminded of the really old white wines in my father's cellar that had gone far beyond their prime and become vinegary, but still had lots of alcohol in them—enough for my purposes, when I happened upon them as a teen-age drinker.

But by the third sip the Leitz was tasting good. I started to get excited. Eureka, I'd found it!

"I actually feel kind of a buzz," I said, and mentioned Marlatt's experiments.

Lisa took another sip and said, "I'm starting to feel a little buzz, too."

We looked at each other. I rushed into the kitchen and fetched the bottle. Nowhere on the label could I see the words *Alkoholfreier Wein*. I gave the bottle to Lisa, who had her glasses on.

"Oh, no," she said, looking up at me. "It says 'Eleven per cent alcohol.'"

That was why it had tasted so much like wine: it *was* wine. Drink Dispatch had dispatched me Leitz's alcoholic Riesling by mistake.

Ethanol was what I had tasted on that first sip, and my body, after five years free of it, had immediately detected the toxin. By the second sip, the molecular cascade had started, and by the third sip the poison was delicious.

My glass was almost empty. My string of alcohol-free days had come to an end. I'd hung around the barbershop too long, and now I'd had my haircut.

I didn't relapse, however; I was shorn only of my day count. As a member of the expects-tonic, receives-alcohol group, I could argue that my slip doesn't matter, because it wasn't intentional. But I'll take my lumps, and start over. ♦



ANNALS OF MEDICINE

## THE DAMAGE DONE

*Where will the battle over long COVID take us?*

BY DHRUV KHULLAR

One morning in March, 2020, Diana Berrent, a photographer and a mother of two from Long Island, woke up with a fever. She had chills, diarrhea, and a heaviness in her chest, and grew concerned. Her daughter was hosting a sleepover; Berrent made her way to the basement and asked the other girls to leave. Then she went into isolation for eighteen days.

Berrent had followed the news of the coronavirus from Wuhan to Lombardy and Tehran. But, she told me recently, “in suburbia, no one expects to be the first person on their block to get the plague.” She tried to get tested, but testing was limited mostly to people

who’d been hospitalized. She eventually received a COVID-19 diagnosis, after an acquaintance connected her to a local congressman who arranged a test. On Facebook, she conducted her own contact tracing. A few days before falling ill, she had photographed an event in a crowded elementary-school gymnasium, and she was convinced that she was Patient Zero. At the time, there were scattered reports of coronavirus cases, but few people admitted to being infected, and her social-media updates went viral. The *New York Post* gave Berrent a daily column in which to chronicle her illness. She started a video blog detailing her symptoms, isolation, and recovery.

*One patient advocate likens the virus to a “time bomb” that can go off later.*

ILLUSTRATION BY EIKO OJALA

In one HGTV-inspired episode, she instructed viewers on “how to set up your perfect isolation room.”

During her quarantine, Berrent learned about convalescent plasma, a blood-transfusion therapy that researchers were testing for COVID patients. She wanted to help. “We were being told as a global community, The best thing you can do is literally to do nothing,” Berrent said. “People were just sewing masks and clapping their hands every night. I thought, I have these antibodies, I might actually be able to save lives.” She signed up for every study she could find; she enrolled as Participant 0001 in Columbia University’s convalescent-plasma trial. Then she said to herself, “If I have this kind of power as an individual—to contribute to science, to save lives—what could we do by mobilizing an army of survivors?”

Berrent started a Facebook group called Survivor Corps, as a sort of “Tinder for plasma,” she said. Within a week, the group had more than ten thousand followers. On its page, Berrent wrote that people infected by the coronavirus were “waiting to be SUPERHEROES.” Later, when monoclonal antibodies were shown to be effective at fighting COVID-19, she began working with the pharmaceutical company Regeneron and the health-care firm Optum to help people arrange home delivery of the treatment.

Survivor Corps now has more than a hundred and seventy-five thousand members—it is the largest grassroots COVID movement in the world. These days, Berrent meets regularly with government officials, leading scientists, patient-advocacy groups, and COVID survivors and their families. Not long ago, she gave presentations to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and a White House coronavirus task force within the same week. She appears on podcasts and panels, and sits on a number of COVID committees at universities and within government, sometimes as the only patient advocate. “I’m now being asked to peer-review medical papers, and I haven’t taken biology since tenth grade,” she said.

Survivor Corps has no physical headquarters. It is, in essence, a huge Facebook group with an associated Web site. People share stories of lost parents and children; they ask for prayers and support; they vent about an unfeeling

health-care system. They describe debilitating symptoms that they attribute to long COVID: problems with their livers, legs, lungs, stomachs, skin, teeth, memories, and moods. They speculate about biological theories and swap medical advice, some of it valid, but some unsupported or proved ineffective. (The group, which is lightly moderated, has rules against “unsubstantiated” medical advice and conspiracy theories.) Occasionally, someone voices skepticism about what people are posting. “I am astonished at what a very close friend just said to me,” one member posted. The friend had accused her of reading “what a bunch of people write” but having “no idea if they’re telling the truth. They just tell you what you want to hear so you can blame all your issues on being sick 9 months ago.”

Advocating for such a vast constituency has pulled Berrent into choppy scientific waters. Historically, patient advocates have often found themselves opposing the researchers with whom they are trying to partner; AIDS activists frequently clashed with scientists, demanding faster research and more treatments, and in May, 1990, hundreds of ACT UP members protested outside the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, which Anthony Fauci had been leading for half a decade. More recently, advocates have worked on behalf of people who say they suffer from chronic-fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, chronic Lyme disease, and other conditions that some researchers consider ill-defined.

There is little doubt among researchers that long COVID exists. But the syndrome is new, and lives for the moment in the realm of theory and anecdote. Amid an always online pandemic, the condition is also the subject of constant conjecture. Doctors, scientists, and patients are sharing their opinions freely, along with everyone else. Berrent, too, is trying to make sense of it all.

The needed research is under way. Medical schools around the country have begun studying long COVID, and hundreds of papers trying to demystify the syndrome have been published. Congress has authorized more than a billion dol-

lars for research on the long-term consequences of coronavirus infection; Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, has announced a long-COVID initiative that will include a large-scale, four-hundred-and-seventy-million-dollar study of the syndrome, designed in part using input from patients and families. “We know some people have had their lives completely upended by the major long-term effects of COVID-19,” Collins said recently.

Still, Berrent argues that research is going too slowly, and that long COVID is being too narrowly defined. Collins has been elected to the National Academy of Sciences and has been awarded the Presidential

Medal of Freedom; nevertheless, on Twitter, Berrent recently took issue with his description of a study on the microscopic processes that may cause persistent breathing problems in long-COVID patients. “This shows a very shallow understanding of #LongCovid,” she wrote. Berrent went on to list conditions—including “Covid onset diabetes” and “seizure disorders”—that she felt Collins was overlooking: “Maybe some of these common symptoms would look more familiar if the @NIH was doing any actual research.” Urged on by her group’s members, Berrent pumps a steady stream of alarming long-COVID stories into her social-media feeds and tweets critically about the system that the C.D.C. uses to tally breakthrough infections. “I feel like I’m trolling the C.D.C. director while also trying to work with her staff,” she told me.

Berrent confronts a problem familiar to patient advocates: there is a tension between what individual patients feel, want, and need and what doctors can offer. But, with the pandemic, the scale of the phenomenon is different. By some estimates, more than a hundred million Americans have been infected by the coronavirus. Many feel abandoned by their leaders, marginalized by their fellow-citizens, and impatient with researchers. Yet it is only through careful study design, methodical data analysis, and the skeptical interpretation of results that we can separate unfounded speculation from scientific fact. Berrent

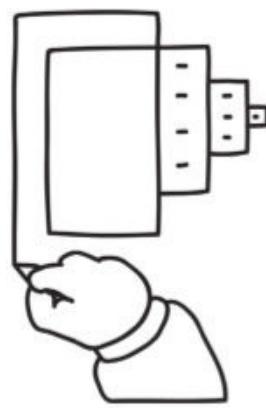
and her constituency want urgent action; science demands caution. Many people, their health transformed by COVID-19, are living in the gap. To whom should they turn?

In July, I met Berrent for coffee on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She had recently moved to Washington, D.C., and was in town visiting her mother. I’d rushed over from a hospital across town where, as an internist, I’d been caring for patients, many with COVID.

Outside a small bakery, we agreed to remove our masks. Berrent, who has bright blue eyes and a quick smile, talked rapidly between bites of hummus and gazpacho, occasionally pausing to show me an e-mail from a scientist with whom she’d started collaborating or a Facebook post from a Survivor Corps member. She spoke passionately about the struggles of long-haulers, the grief of families, and the vitriol of anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers.

Berrent grew up about ten blocks from where we were sitting, and attended Trinity, the illustrious Manhattan private school. During college, at Kenyon, she interned in Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s office, and seemed headed for a career in politics. She joined Bill Clinton’s reëlection campaign and later worked at the State Department, as an aide to Madeleine Albright. She and her husband met as staffers on Al Gore’s 2000 Presidential campaign. Both went on to law school at Cornell; she worked at a law firm but stepped away after her children were born. In 2007, she started a photography business.

Berrent’s political experience served her well when she launched Survivor Corps. She sought out experts in every field and quickly found allies, including Michael Joyner, a prominent anesthesiologist at the Mayo Clinic; Kavita Patel, who was a health-policy wonk in the Obama Administration and is now at the Brookings Institution; and David Shulkin, the former Secretary of Veterans Affairs. But it’s as an outsider that she feels she has the most to offer. “Not having a background in any of this has been a phenomenal advantage,” Berrent told me. “I’m able to see this with fresh eyes and see when things just don’t make sense.” In her presentation to the N.I.H., Berrent said, “The thing that I am most



proud of is that we have really redefined what it means to be citizen scientists. We need to listen to patients' voices in guiding where science goes."

As the pandemic continued, it became clear that many Survivor Corps members were struggling with symptoms not for days or weeks but for months, and Berrent began to focus on long COVID. She alerted doctors to the symptoms that her members were reporting—tremors, internal vibrations, insomnia, shooting pains. In many cases, she said, she found the doctors' responses "disgraceful." The only thing they seemed to have to say, she told me, was "You know, it is really puzzling, isn't it?"

Berrent is a compelling storyteller—she speaks in short, powerful sentences, pausing at all the right moments. In her N.I.H. presentation, held over Zoom, she stared into the camera and declared that the medical establishment was failing people with long COVID: "What's happening on the ground is that people are having severe, severe organ damage. They are having neurological issues that are leading to suicide. We need to be looking at the symptoms and triaging the research based on the amount of human suffering they cause—not on their frequency."

Berrent tries to be a conduit between patients and the medical establishment. Often, however, the current flows only one way: she airs members' concerns to researchers, but is less preoccupied with scientists' concerns about what is and isn't supported by evidence. Berrent regularly polls Survivor Corps members, but, although such polls generate meaningful information, it's the kind that a political party gets when it surveys its most ardent supporters—it comes from a nonrepresentative slice of the population. In a recent online seminar hosted by the *Washington Post*, Berrent described a Survivor Corps poll in which she asked about the symptoms that were keeping people from going back to work. Some six thousand members responded. "The No. 1 thing that kept people from going back to work was drastic personality change," she explained. "That came as a tremendous shock."

Berrent suggested that COVID might come to be regarded not as a respiratory disease but as a neurological one. "I fear that there is a higher viral load involved

with the Delta variant and it congregates in the nose and mouth," she said. "What happens? Just using common sense, it goes up the nose, it knocks out the olfactory system, and what's right next to it? The vagus nerve, which controls all of our automatic functioning.... We know that this virus crosses the blood-brain barrier"—a critical layer of immune defense that prevents microorganisms from infecting the central nervous system—"and we are seeing evidence of direct brain damage."

The interviewer spoke up: "Now, I thought there was pretty clear evidence that we don't know yet whether it's crossing the blood-brain barrier." (In fact, many infections begin in the mouth and nose without affecting the nervous system, and, although research has suggested that the spike protein may breach the protective barrier in mice, there is no conclusive evidence that the coronavirus infects the brain in humans.)

"We know," Berrent responded.

Elsewhere in the program, Berrent took issue with the C.D.C.'s decision not to investigate breakthrough COVID cases that didn't require hospitalization. "There is no such thing as a mild case of COVID," she said, as she often does. "Let me explain what they mean by 'mild.' They mean encephalitis. They mean COVID pneumonia. They mean end-stage organ failure."

The interviewer paused, a quizzical

look on her face. "So you're saying that end-stage organ failure is counted as mild?" she asked.

For a moment, Berrent hesitated. "It sure is," she said.

Berrent's advocacy is informed in part by a group of COVID survivors that the public, and even many medical professionals, never see. She hears from people who say that they are struggling with unusual, nonrespiratory symptoms, such as erectile dysfunction and chronic diarrhea. One Survivor Corps member is a young mother with a feeding tube and eleven rotten teeth.

Through Berrent, I met Nick Güthe, who became a close adviser to Survivor Corps earlier this summer. Güthe, an independent filmmaker in his early fifties, told me his wife's story. In its tragic ambiguity, it is typical of many stories in the long-COVID movement.

In April, 2020, Heidi Ferrer, Güthe's wife and a former writer for "Dawson's Creek," felt shooting pains in her toes. Then she developed stomach pains and diarrhea. Ferrer and Güthe got rapid COVID tests at a drive-through site, and they came back negative. (Rapid tests are less reliable than P.C.R. tests.) In the weeks that followed, Ferrer experienced palpitations, muscle pains, and a fatigue so profound that she had difficulty walking up stairs.

By the fall, Ferrer was convinced that



she had long COVID. She searched for doctors specializing in the condition, but couldn't find any. She visited acupuncturists and alternative-medicine practitioners, and started taking ivermectin—the horse dewormer that has since been shown not to help with COVID-19. By the spring, she'd developed dramatic, involuntary jerking movements. She felt an internal buzzing, and told Güthe that it was like her veins had champagne bubbles fizzing in them. Unable to sleep, Ferrer started taking enormous doses of Ambien, sometimes a pill every two hours. Because she'd never tested positive for the coronavirus, her doctor hesitated to refer her to a newly opened long-COVID clinic. She consulted a neurologist, who, Güthe told me, tried "to imply it was all in her head." Ferrer had no documented history of mental illness, but she did have a strong family history of depression: both her father and her grandmother had died by suicide. She had struggled with alcoholism, but had been sober since 2017.

On May 22nd, Güthe went to pick up their thirteen-year-old son, who was at a friend's house. On the way back, Güthe said, "I have to talk to you about your mom. I want to believe she's going to get better. But I have to be honest: I don't know how this is going to turn out."

Back home, he and his son went upstairs, where they found Ferrer in the master bedroom, hanging by a drape from

the four-poster bed. Güthe told his son to go to his room. He tried to ease Ferrer down, but couldn't. He raced downstairs for scissors, and finally cut the drape.

When they reached the hospital, Ferrer's heart was still beating, but it was clear that she wouldn't recover. A doctor asked Güthe how long his wife had been depressed. "She's not depressed," Güthe said. "This is from her body breaking down from long-haul COVID." The doctor asked Güthe what that was. "Just Google it," he replied.

In June, Güthe submitted an obituary to Deadline, which went viral. "Heidi always said, 'If something happens, let the world know what long-haul COVID has done to me,'" he said. Through Twitter, Güthe connected with Berrent, and learned that Ferrer had been a member of Survivor Corps. In recent months, he has joined Berrent at about a dozen events. He now fields Facebook messages from people around the world, who relate their struggles with long COVID and ask for help. Not infrequently, someone shares suicidal thoughts. "I walk someone off the ledge every week," Güthe said. "I tell them, 'Things are moving much faster than you realize. Hope is coming. Help is on the way. People are paying attention now.'"

Others, pointing out that Ferrer never tested positive for the virus, have questioned whether COVID is to blame for her death. Such uncertainty character-

izes many cases of long COVID less extreme than Ferrer's. Doctors rightly say that some of the symptoms attributed to long COVID can result from any number of conditions. Yet many patients—both with and without documented coronavirus infections—are convinced that their problems are enduring after-effects of the virus.

Defining a new disease is a complex task, full of hazards. Some physicians believe that the condition's severity and scope have been overblown. In a recent column for the health-news site STAT, Adam Gaffney, a critical-care physician, wrote that we need to "start thinking more critically—and speaking more cautiously—about long COVID," arguing that the narrative being spun about the long-term effects of infection is "getting ahead of the evidence." A recent op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* by the psychiatrist Jeremy Devine suggested that many long-COVID symptoms may be "psychologically generated or caused by a physical illness unrelated to the prior infection." Devine proposed that long COVID is "largely an invention of vocal patient activist groups."

Like any campaign, the COVID-survivors movement must decide how big a tent it wants to build. I recently spoke with Emily Taylor, the director of the Long COVID Alliance—an umbrella organization composed of more than a hundred patient-advocacy groups. Taylor told me that the battle to legitimize long COVID echoes her prior work as an advocate for people, her mother among them, who suffer from chronic-fatigue syndrome, a mysterious illness also characterized by brain fog, exertional fatigue, and sleep disturbances. "The beautiful thing is that long COVID could legitimize other post-viral syndromes that people have been saying are all in our head," she said. Taylor has convened groups of experts to create diagnostic codes for long COVID, which would allow doctors to bill for treating it. Her team recently helped introduce the COVID-19 Long Haulers Act, federal legislation that would provide nearly a hundred million dollars for research, data infrastructure, and public education. The group plans to introduce a second bill, which would advocate for fifteen "Post-COVID Centers of Excellence"—institutes combining research and medical



*"The wind in your hair, the scent of nature all around—  
this is what data entry was meant to be."*

care—around the country. “We started long-COVID advocacy last year, and lawmakers kept saying, ‘We’re in the middle of a crisis, people are dying, that’s next year’s problem,’ ” Taylor said. “Well, now it’s next year. It’s time to act.”

**A**s a physician wading into the world of patient advocacy, I couldn’t help but face the fact that I was part of the medical establishment—the group at which so much resentment is directed. I came away feeling that medicine would be kinder and more effective if patients had a stronger presence, not just as trial subjects or people in need of care but as authentic partners in the project of improving the human condition. Still, I winced whenever someone mentioned vitamins or ivermectin as a remedy for COVID, or touted online anecdotes over peer-reviewed studies, or assailed the good intentions of doctors and nurses. I wondered whether the COVID-survivors movement harbored the same anti-élite sentiment running through much of the country—a distrust of institutions and a disregard for expertise.

If this is the case, it is partly because of the long-standing failure of health-care institutions to meet the needs of people who are suffering. Doctors have often dismissed and minimized patients’ concerns, and others have profited from overdiagnosis. If the edifice of medicine stands on a fault line—one of distrust between doctors and patients, hospitals and communities—then COVID-19 is an earthquake. We’re all responsible for holding the structure together.

“We’ve heard so much about ‘community engagement’ and ‘patient engagement’ in the last twenty years,” Michael Joyner, the Mayo Clinic anesthesiologist, told me. “They were always aspirational buzzwords. But, in the pandemic, people like Diana stepped up.” Survivor Corps helped enroll scores of patients in Joyner’s convalescent-plasma trial; ultimately, a series of randomized studies failed to show that the therapy was beneficial. “The question for the medical community is: how do we take this level of patient engagement and keep it rolling?” Joyner believes that a lack of coordination and empathy among health-care providers has led many people to turn to unproven remedies. “What you want to prevent is people getting

on these diagnostic odysseys,” he said. “When people have vexing, ambiguous symptoms, they end up seeing six different doctors. The cardiologist gives them one set of explanations, the endocrinologist another. Nothing really makes sense. Then someone says, Take zinc, or do this, or do that, and of course they’re going to try it.”

Joyner likened medical skepticism about long COVID to suspicion of conditions such as postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, or POTS. People with POTS have abnormally large swings in heart rate and blood pressure when they stand; many also experience lightheadedness, fatigue, and brain fog. Many doctors used to believe that POTS was related to anxiety or mood problems. But Joyner wanted to explore another possibility: that people’s hearts were compensating for an unusual pooling of blood in their legs. He invited patients into his lab and had them lie with their legs inside an airtight machine. Air was pumped out of the machine, so that negative pressure was applied to the legs, allowing less blood to return to the heart—mimicking the effect of standing up.

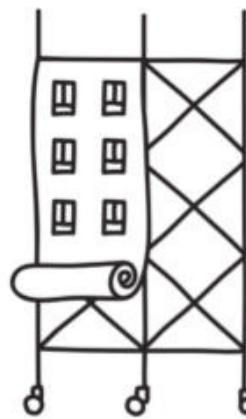
Joyner ran two “sham” experiments. First, he started the machine but deactivated the negative-pressure function. People thought that it was on, but it wasn’t. Next, he activated the negative pressure, but only after patients had slipped into special pants that blunted the machine’s effect. In both cases, people experienced no more than minor changes in their heart rates. Only when their extremities were genuinely subjected to negative pressure did their hearts really start to race. “Twenty years ago, I would have bet you dollars to doughnuts that POTS was psychosomatic,” Joyner said. “We tried like hell to show that it was. We couldn’t do it.” He now thinks that patients with POTS experience a kind of “somatic hypervigilance,” in which they become unusually sensitized to physiological changes in their bodies.

Could something similar be happening with long-COVID patients? Vinay Prasad, a physician and an expert on evidence-based medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, told me

that, when it comes to long COVID, there are two sets of scientific questions. The first focusses on better characterizing the syndrome and its prevalence: What exactly are its symptoms, and how likely is an infection to cause them? The second asks whether people’s symptoms are related to the virus itself, or to something else. Treatments for COVID can themselves cause problems: simply being on a ventilator, for instance, is associated with prolonged weakness, memory loss, anxiety, depression, and difficulty returning to work. “It’s going to take you time to get back to who you were,” Prasad said. Even patients with regular pneumonia often report symptoms like cough, fatigue, and chest pain three months later.

Answering these questions requires tackling thorny methodological issues. Early in the pandemic, millions of Americans who might otherwise have received a COVID diagnosis were never tested; should they be counted as having long COVID? Meanwhile, because of severe disruptions in routine medical care, many patients’ physical and mental health may have worsened. And the number of people infected complicates matters further. Research on chronic Lyme disease—a controversial post-infectious syndrome with symptoms broadly similar to those of long COVID—takes as its starting point some four hundred thousand Lyme cases in America each year; the U.S. once recorded nearly as many new coronavirus cases in a single day. It can be true, therefore, that some long-haulers will experience very unusual symptoms—perhaps connected to the virus, perhaps not—and also that those symptoms are not ones that the average person should fear, or that researchers should concentrate on. If you cast a die a hundred times, the chance of rolling six consecutive sixes is vanishingly small. If you roll it two hundred and twenty million times—roughly the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the world—some weird things are bound to happen.

As an amorphous post-infection syndrome, long COVID presents particular challenges. Prasad described an issue known as “ascertainment bias.” “If you had the flu two years ago versus COVID



last year, the rate at which doctors are searching for problems is very different,” he said. A related concern is “recall bias”: because COVID is such a salient event in people’s lives, they may attribute any symptom they experience in subsequent months to their infection. Recently, Berrent told me that COVID was responsible for her son’s front tooth falling out, nine months after his diagnosis. I asked her how she knew it was related to COVID; she said that she’d posted a survey to the Survivor Corps page, and that many people had reported unusual dental issues. “If you keyword something into Survivor Corps and no one else has experienced it, it’s probably not COVID-related,” Berrent said. “But, when you look and there are thousands of responses, you realize you’re on to something.” Maybe, maybe not.

I asked Berrent about her contention that “there is no such thing as a mild case of COVID.” What about the millions of people who, having been infected at some point, now feel fine? I’ve treated patients who have fully recovered, I said. Surely she knows people who have, too. “Right,” she replied. “But we’ve seen that COVID can act like a ticking time bomb in the body, that can go off at any time, at any place.”

Overdiagnosing long COVID could create its own set of risks. A century ago, doctors regularly diagnosed “dropsy,” a catchall for a condition in which excess fluid caused swelling in the body. Now known as edema, such swelling is among the most common conditions I encounter as a physician. But how I treat it depends on what’s causing it. Does the swelling reflect a problem with the heart, the liver, or the kidneys? Is the issue a nutritional deficiency, or widespread cancer? Sometimes edema calls for a simple intervention, such as a protein shake; at other times, the correct treatment might be open-heart surgery. For some symptoms, a long-COVID diagnosis could obscure more than it reveals.

Prasad told me that, in his experience, it’s getting harder to ask basic questions about the origins and the severity of long COVID. Implying that there could be psychological contributors—or that lingering symptoms are not specific to the virus—often raises accusations of gaslighting. “It can feel like you’re walking on eggshells,” he said. Several recent

studies have found that many people who report long-COVID symptoms don’t have antibodies against the coronavirus. (Though antibody levels can wane with time, most people with a prior infection continue to have antibodies for months.) Many long-COVID patient advocates, including Berrent, insist that the syndrome be seen mainly as a physiological disease, caused by the coronavirus. But mental illness is still illness; in their own way, they are setting rules about what kind of suffering counts.

Whatever the data show, Prasad said, we need to “acknowledge people’s suffering. When someone feels something in their body, that’s real—whether or not it’s linked to COVID. People spend a lot of mental energy asking whether something is long COVID or not. But ultimately the medical profession is about compassion. From a doctor’s point of view, if patients are suffering, we need to figure out how to help them.”

**E**arlier this summer, I attended a virtual patient-advocacy summit held by COVID Survivors for Change (C.S.F.C.), an organization founded by Chris Kocher, a Queens-based attorney. Some two hundred people had gathered for a crash course in patient advocacy; topics on the agenda included talking about vaccines and organizing political marches. Kocher spoke from a dimly lit room, and opened the session by lighting a candle. Behind him, on a beige wall, a corkboard was hung with badges and bracelets in support of various causes. He described one goal of COVID advocacy: “to honor the heartbreak that you all have experienced, but also build something that is inclusive and resilient and hopeful.”

Before founding C.S.F.C., Kocher, who had served as a special counsel to former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, ran the Everytown Survivor Network, the community arm of Everytown for Gun Safety, the nation’s largest gun-violence-prevention group. Last year, as his friends, acquaintances, and colleagues reeled from the pandemic, he decided to turn to COVID advocacy. He joined Facebook groups and other virtual forums for patients and families. “There were so many similarities between COVID and gun violence,” Kocher told me. “The sudden loss of a loved one, families not being able to be with them in their final

moments, this complete lack of closure.”

At the summit, a woman named Kim said that speaking to people who hadn’t dealt with long COVID made her feel “more irrelevant, in my experience, because their normal seems to matter more than our losses. It’s upsetting.” A man named Ed reported that “people think that COVID is over and that it’s time for us to get over it.” C.S.F.C. is advocating for about a dozen policies, including financial support for families affected by COVID; a national strategy for bereavement and mental health; reimbursement for funeral expenses for COVID victims; and expanded eligibility for paid leave, disability insurance, loan forgiveness, and workers’ compensation for long-haulers.

In early August, C.S.F.C. transitioned from virtual training to in-person demonstration. I joined a survivors’ march in New York City, on what Kocher billed as “one of the largest nationwide days of awareness and action for COVID survivors.” C.S.F.C. had helped organize some thirty marches in twenty states. More than a dozen buildings across the country, as well as Niagara Falls, were lit up in yellow, the color of COVID survivorship. Our goal was to take six hundred and fifteen thousand steps—one for each American who’d died of the virus. Güthe and Berrent were set to speak at the event’s finale, and we agreed to meet up before and head to the march together.

I met Berrent in a hotel lobby wearing a surgical mask; she insisted that I take one of her KN95s. (She and Güthe both wore two masks: a white KN95 inside a black cloth mask emblazoned with the Survivor Corps logo.) We squeezed into a cab and rolled down the windows. I asked Berrent what she thought of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s announcement that New York City would require proof of vaccination to dine indoors, use gyms, and attend Broadway shows. “Are you kidding me? I want a federal mandate,” she said. The way to get Americans vaccinated, she told me, was “to scare them about long COVID. No twenty-five-year-old thinks they’re going to end up on a ventilator. But tell them they’re going to have erectile dysfunction, their teeth will fall out, and they’ll never go to the gym again? They’ll get vaccinated *and* they’ll be double-masked. You know what I mean?”

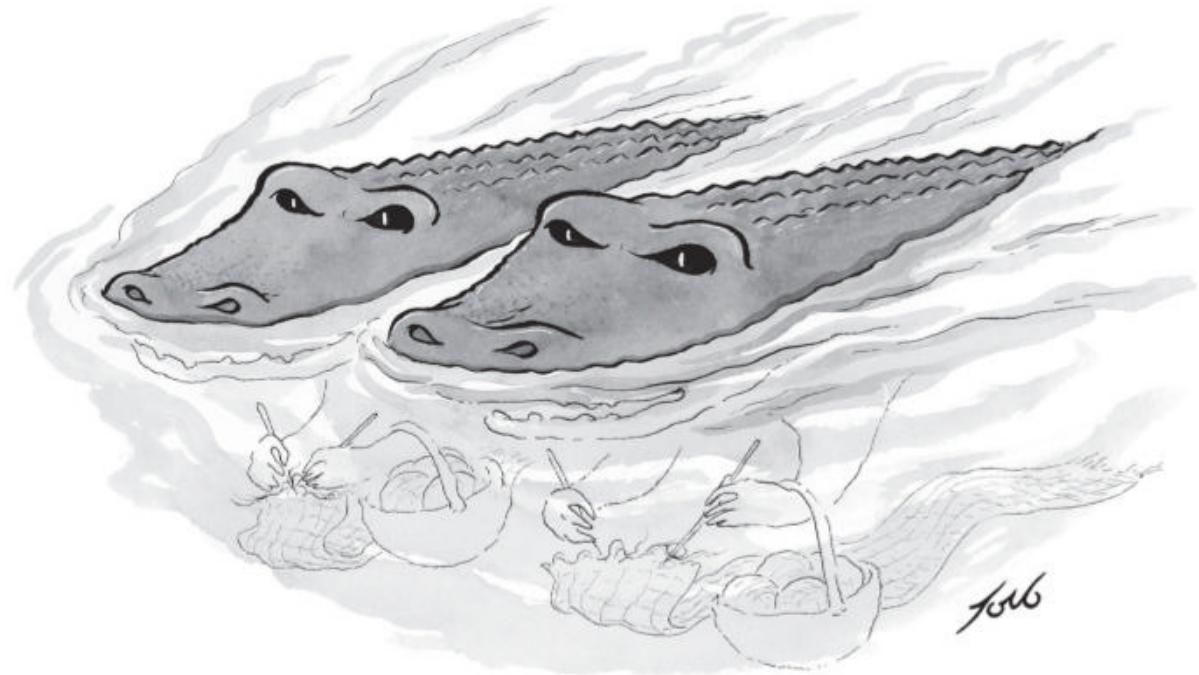
When we arrived at the eastern side

of Cadman Plaza Park, near the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, the sun shone brightly. Hundreds of people, almost all dressed in yellow, had gathered. Many had posters hanging from their necks with photos of deceased loved ones and the dates on which they'd died. Still, the atmosphere was surprisingly festive—more football tailgate than memorial service. A d.j. had set up in the middle of the park, and loudspeakers blared upbeat music: the Chainsmokers, Baby Bash, Kool & the Gang. A woman wore a yellow tutu; a man donned a neon-yellow wig. Some people were dancing. Almost everyone I could see was masked.

Berrent greeted marchers like the popular mayor of a small town. "I feel like I owe you my life," a man told her. Earlier this year, he and his wife had fallen ill with COVID, as had their three young children. His wife's parents had both died of it. "When we got it, the doctor said, 'Here's three Motrin and just go home,'" the man said. Feeling abandoned, the couple turned to Berrent's Facebook page. There they found community, and learned of several unproven, crowdsourced remedies: zinc, magnesium, aspirin, black tea. His wife described her frustration with the Biden Administration, which, she said, had emphasized vaccines while "not telling people how they can take care of themselves when they do get it. We watched the news all year and learned nothing. Your page changed our lives."

A woman with a yellow flower in her hair approached. She carried a poster with a photograph of her mother, and told Berrent how overwhelmed she had been when her mother was given a COVID diagnosis in April of last year. Isolated at home, unable to see her mother in person, the woman had visited Berrent's Facebook group. "There was more information on that page than *anywhere*," she said. "I'm telling the hospital, 'We need to do this, we need to do that.' They were, like, 'We don't do that here.'" In the end, the woman's mother died. "People on your page were unbelievably supportive," she said. "Six hundred strangers on your page, praying for my mom. The power of that is insurmountable."

The march across the bridge began. Berrent live-streamed the event from her phone, stopping for an occasional selfie. "I'm here marching for each and



*"Don't let anyone see how much we enjoy knitting."*

every one of you," she said into the camera. Cars honked in support; bicyclists high-fived us as they whizzed by. As I walked—sweat running down my temples, Manhattan's skyline up ahead—I asked myself what would become of this movement. During the pandemic, America has often seemed divided between two tribes—one that ignores scientists and another that listens to them. Now long COVID has created a third group: people who take every precaution and yet stand in broad opposition to the scientific establishment, distrustful of its motives, approach, and abilities. If the COVID-survivors movement doesn't embrace a rational approach to its suffering, it will fall victim to misinformation. But, after an ideologically polarized pandemic, COVID survivorship may now be ideological, too. An ideology compresses the space for nuance until you're left with only supporters and opponents, believers and nonbelievers. Dogma obscures data; the cause trumps the truth. When skepticism becomes taboo, progress grows more difficult.

A little after noon, we approached City Hall. On a small stage across the street, Kocher introduced a few of the speakers: an Air Force veteran whose veteran father had died of COVID; a fifteen-year-old girl who had lost her grandfather to the virus. Beside me, Berrent took a pair of black high heels from her bag. When it was her turn to speak, she stepped to the lectern and removed

her masks. "We represent approximately one hundred and thirty-five million Americans who have survived COVID, but are far from having recovered," she said. "COVID has been, and continues to be, the greatest war of our generation. As Americans, we do not leave our comrades on the battlefield. That is not who we are as a people."

Berrent walked offstage, and another speaker took the podium. On a nearby bench, using her phone, she read me a few of the appreciative comments that Survivor Corps members had left on the group's page in response to the live stream. Soon afterward, I said goodbye, hailed a taxi, and headed home. The cab turned east, toward a downtown hospital where I sometimes work. I thought of its examination rooms, lecture halls, and laboratories, and of the challenges ahead. The pain of COVID survivors is real and, in some cases, growing. And yet it will take years of careful research to understand it. I felt as though I had fallen into the gap along with the survivors, between science and advocacy, doctors and patients, data and demonstrations. I felt a desperation for those I'd just left and a kinship with those I drove toward: clinicians and researchers who've devoted their careers, however imperfectly, to helping patients. I wondered what it would take to navigate the gulf. I hoped that, looking across, we could come to see that it's the same bridge we have to cross. ♦

# HEIGHT OF GLAMOUR

*How the designer Harris Reed helps Harry Styles and Solange play with masculinity and femininity.*

BY REBECCA MEAD

**A**mong the portraits that hang in the National Gallery in London, few subjects look as amused, self-confident, and unassailable as Jacques Cazotte, the eighteenth-century French writer and public administrator. As painted by Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, Cazotte is wearing a powdered white wig befitting his social standing, but his posture is youthful, his eyes are gleaming, and his smile is irrepressible. His attire is strikingly showy: a plush jacket of rose-colored silk, with extravagantly flared sleeves ornamented with gold buttons, and a matching vest. White lace spills from his collar and cuffs, and a black silk band hangs from his neck.

Next spring, the portrait is scheduled to be displayed across town, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, as part of an exhibition, “Fashioning Masculinities,” which will explore the role of menswear in conveying power, artistry, and gender identity. The painting is to be hung near an ensemble by Harris Reed, a twenty-five-year-old British-American designer: fashioned from shiny, dusky-pink polyester, it consists of a blouse with puffed upper sleeves that taper to decorative ties at the wrists, and high-waisted bell-bottoms that skim the crotch and thighs. Claire Wilcox, the V.&A.’s senior fashion curator, recently spoke to me about the decision to include Reed’s work: “It melds together different historical textures. There’s a touch of masquerade wear in it, but Reed makes it extremely fashionable.”

The juxtaposition of the Reed outfit with the Perronneau portrait illuminates, among other things, how gendered assumptions about color and decoration have evolved over time. In Cazotte’s day, pink was stylish for both men and women. Lace, too, was a marker not of effeminacy but of affluence and taste. It was not until the end of the

eighteenth century—by which time Cazotte had been led to the guillotine—that English-style tailoring, in natural shades of wool, had begun displacing French splendor as Europe’s prevailing attire for men, establishing a sombre template that now extends worldwide.

Reed’s pink outfit came from a collection that he produced in 2017, while studying at Central St. Martins, the London arts-and-design college, whose alumni include Alexander McQueen and John Galliano. The collection had only three other looks, but each was equally dramatic: an outfit of black matador pants, black jabot, and frontless jacket; amber metallic pants and a matching top with flounced, detachable sleeves; and a white ensemble that included a frilled bustier jacket, with a plunging square-cut décolletage, and a hat with a brim the size of a bicycle wheel. Reed has explained to reporters that the white outfit was inspired by a story he had imagined about an eighteenth-century aristocratic boy who, after being thrown out of his home for being gay, lives backstage at the Royal Opera House and plays dress-up with the costumes. In a series of Polaroids taken to show off the collection, Reed, who is tall and slender, modelled the garments himself in silver high-heeled boots, his face framed by cascading long hair, whitened like that of an aristocrat from the ancien régime.

Reed graduated from Central St. Martins in the spring of 2020, and began using money that he made from modelling to start his own clothing line. His output has so far been very limited: the designs could almost fit onto a single garment rack, and would if they were less voluminous. But he is receiving widespread acclaim from fashion gatekeepers and forging the kinds of collaboration that provide financial support for a young designer’s creativity.

While still a student, he was identified as a promising talent by a stylist of Solange’s; a photograph was taken of her wearing Reed’s white ensemble with the jacket turned back to front. Not long after, the stylist Harry Lambert commissioned Reed to make garments that Harry Styles could wear on tour, including an outfit that went viral on social media: a taffeta blouson shirt with puffed and ruffled sleeves and a dishevelled frilly collar. The top was paired with a tiny black vest and pants with wide, flapping flares, giving him the look of an earl’s wayward son stumbling out of a brothel at dawn. “To wear Harris’s clothes is to be having fun,” Styles told me, in an e-mail. “Every frill is there to be played with, and an overwhelming sense of freedom shall rain down upon you.”

Last fall, *Vogue* asked Reed to design an outfit for a cover shoot with Styles. He created a black suit with exaggerated square shoulders and trouser legs as wide as sails; at Styles’s waist, a ball-gown skirt exploded, with white tulle and fuchsia ribbon draped over an architectural frame of black crinoline. The look previewed the sensibility that Reed put on display this past February, on the eve of London Fashion Week, when he showed a collection in which elements of men’s suiting were sometimes embellished with spray-painted tulle erupting at the hip, shoulder, or rib. Despite the brevity of Reed’s career, his aesthetic is well established. He likes to combine traditionally masculine forms—say, jacket shoulders that echo Yves Saint Laurent’s “le smoking” tuxedo—with draped layers of satin and sculptural skirts that bring to mind the gowns of Charles James, the mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American designer. Reed’s looks, which he calls demi-couture—they are handmade but,

*A model wears a design by Reed, who puts “men, or male-identifying beings, in quite ostentatious, out-there clothes.”*



of necessity, use relatively affordable materials—are often finished with what has become a signature accessory: an outlandishly outsized hat or headpiece. The 2020 collection, he told *Vogue*, was inspired partly by the lavish garb of the Victorian aristocrat Henry Paget, whose history Reed had discovered while exploring the archives at Central St. Martins. Paget, who had a pronounced fondness for furs and bejewelled headgear, became the fifth Marquess of Anglesey in 1898, at the age of twenty-three, whereupon he converted his family's chapel into a theatre in which he starred in productions of Oscar Wilde's plays. Paget was, Reed said, "shamelessly his truest self."

Critics praised Reed's show, which helped him publicize more immediately commercial ventures, among them a cosmetics collection created in collaboration with MAC, which includes palettes of iridescent colors for eye, cheek, and lip. In a promotional video, Reed dabs rouge onto his cheek, shows off his gold-painted fingernails, and recites his inspirations: "Glam rock and Romanticism, boys, girls, in between, everyone just crossing paths and mixing the old world and the new world." Sitting before a backdrop of pink silk, and wearing a see-through pink lace blouse with high-waisted ivory trousers, he exudes the jaunty élan of a Jacques Cazotte—both relishing his cultural influence and seeming utterly at ease in gorgeous finery.

I first met Reed in May in London, at the Standard hotel, near the King's Cross station. The city was under pandemic restrictions, and the hotel's lobby and bar were sparsely populated, but Reed would have been easy to spot even had the place been crowded. He measures six feet four before he zips up his preferred footwear—platform boots—and he was dressed in a black jacket that fell in supple folds and flowing black pants that could almost be taken for a skirt. His hair, which is naturally a dirty blond, had been colored a luscious auburn, and tumbled in waves around his shoulders. I have never seen anyone who looked so much like a sketch from a fashion designer's drawing pad, with impossibly elongated limbs and slender proportions—an aspira-

tional concept suggested by only a few bold, well-chosen lines.

For the past several months, Reed explained, he had been working rent-free out of the Standard, after a serendipitous encounter with the hotel's general manager, Elli Jafari, at a dinner. Reed recalled, "She asked, 'What are your plans?' and I said I was looking for a space." Absent a pandemic, he would have rented a studio alongside other newly graduated designers, but COVID-19 had complicated such arrangements. Friends with active studios were forced into quarantine whenever a fellow-occupant tested positive for the coronavirus. Reed said of Jafari, "She was, like, 'Darling, just move into the hotel!'"

Reed became the Standard's official designer-in-residence, taking meetings and doing photo shoots in its nearly vacant public spaces; on the hotel's Web site, he recommended the ginger margarita. Upstairs, he installed a small design team, spreading the workers out across several of the rooms, which are as compact as ships' cabins. "Room 121 had all the hats, and Room 124 had all the boots," Reed told me. The hotel's long, narrow corridors made social distancing not just easy but unavoidable: at one point, an assistant hand-pleated a two-hundred-foot length of tulle from one end of the hallway while Reed worked toward her from the other. The Standard's staff had given him a sense of community. "I've basically been living in a hotel by myself, which is amazing but also very eerie," Reed said. When he ventured out late at night, there were "no cars and no people." The experience felt like a surreal fulfillment of his Royal Opera House fantasy.

Under normal circumstances, students' final shows at Central St. Martins give them an opportunity to present their most ambitious ideas to a well-informed audience eager to discover originality. When Alexander McQueen graduated, in 1992, with a show called "Jack the Ripper Stalks his Victims," the influential stylist Isabella Blow anointed him by buying his entire collection. In 2020, the pandemic made it impossible to have in-person student shows, and fabric-and-accessory suppliers were closed. Unable to acquire millinery glue for his hats, Reed resorted to using Super Glue that he

bought at a hardware store in Finsbury Park. He re-created one of his hat designs as an Instagram filter that could be superimposed on digital images, and disseminated it with the help of such friends as the model Kaia Gerber, who shot herself pouting under its virtual brim like a louche Bo Peep.

Reed has four hundred thousand Instagram followers, and his account is filled with glossy images from editorial shoots featuring his clothes—*Marie Claire China*, *Vogue España*—or from other starry collaborations, such as the skintight lace-and-crystal halter top and flares that Reed made for the pop star Olly Alexander to wear while performing at the Brit Awards, in May. Instagram is essential to Reed's nascent business model, which depends on infusions of cash from sponsors and other brands. "If the business needs money, I'll D.M. someone and say, 'Want to come and collaborate?'" he told me. "I don't want to put myself into tokenism, but why *wouldn't* a big brand want to be able to partner with a queer young British designer and get great publicity, but also help me out financially?"

Several times a day, Reed uploads curated snippets to his Instagram story: posing on Halloween in a sequinned leotard with a feathered headpiece; dancing with friends while on vacation in Italy in August. Instagram, like the Standard, offered a community of sorts, albeit one distorted by wishfulness and omission. "There are people that I look at daily that I don't even know, some of them aren't even *famous*, quote-unquote," Reed told me. "But they are people that you can sometimes look at, almost like looking in a mirror, to know that you're valid, or that you're not alone in your choices."

The morning we met, Reed had received affirmation in the form of a message from the office of Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue*. She invited him to participate in the Met Gala, on September 13th. "It was a crazy phone call," Reed said, adding that it has been a dream of his to attend the ball, which wasn't held last year. Wintour had proposed an unusual collaboration: Reed would dress himself and another guest—as yet undecided—on behalf of Dolce & Gabbana's couture line, Alta Moda. Reed had not at that point agreed

to the commission. Dolce & Gabbana has a complicated history when it comes to issues close to Reed's heart, including L.G.B.T.Q. rights. In 2015, Elton John called for a boycott of the label after Domenico Dolce, one of its heads, told an Italian magazine that babies born by in vitro fertilization are "synthetic." He also, along with his co-head, Stefano Gabbana, expressed opposition to gay adoption. Reed detected an opportunity for both himself and Dolce & Gabbana: "This is a very big moment to make a next chapter for them, in a way. As well as the fact that what I could create, and achieve in my messaging, would be to such an extreme level with the resources I would have access to. If I could make my last collection with spray paint and fabric that cost five pounds a metre, what could I do with Alta Moda couture?"

He had already accepted several other commissions, and these projects would have to be squeezed into even fewer days—among them, he explained, a mermaid tail for an Olly Alexander album cover, which he had planned to work on that afternoon. Soon enough, he would accept the Met Gala commission. But, at the moment, he wanted to take a bath in his hotel-room studio. "There's no door to the bathroom, so I just look into the room and all the stuff that is going on, which is probably not the best for my mental health," he said. "Tom Ford used to take four baths a day," he added. "I remember reading that and thinking that was the absolute height of glamour."

**R**eed was born in 1996 in Los Angeles, where his father, Nick Reed, was an agent at I.C.M., the talent agency. Nick, now a film producer, was born on a military base in Gibraltar, and served in the British Navy in the early eighties. Harris Reed told me, "I'm the only man, if you will, in my family not to be in the Navy." His mother, Lynette Reed, is American, and worked as a model in New York in the eighties. After moving to the West Coast, she started a candle business and opened a boutique. Harris's eye for design was evident early on. "From the moment he could walk, he would rearrange the house," Nick told me. "He would move pillows, cushions, blankets. He would



*Reed, photographed in July. He often dresses in garments of his own design.*

say, 'Dad, can you move this chair over here?'" When Harris was four, Lynette took him to a friend's house. He began staring at a window treatment. "He looked up at me and said, 'Mommy, those curtains are *awful*,'" Lynette told me. "I said, 'Everybody has different taste,' and he said, 'Yeah, but those are *bad taste*.'"

Harris cycled through several elementary schools. His parents removed him from his first school, a traditional private institution, after teachers suggested that he should be in a remedial class. He was then enrolled at a Waldorf school, which fostered his creativity but left him, at the age of nine or ten, unable to read. He was belatedly given a diagnosis of severe dyslexia. The Reeds hired tutors, and also came up with more unconventional strate-

gies to foster literacy, including a subscription to *Women's Wear Daily*, which cultivated in Harris a precocious interest not just in the latest styles but also in the workings of the fashion industry. When he was nine, he proclaimed to Lynette that one day he would become the creative director of Chanel. Lynette recalled, "I told him, 'Oh! Well, if that doesn't happen, you can always have your own little line.' And he just looked at me and said, 'Mommy, why are you trying to squash my dreams?'"

The Reeds finalized a divorce when Harris was ten; he soon moved to Phoenix with his mother and his sister, Isabelle, who is now a senior at Arizona State University. "That was when I came into myself and my sexuality, and I started really responding with clothing," Reed told me. The social environment





*Reed's designs draw inspiration from the lavish garb of the Victorian aristocrat Henry Paget, who was, Reed said, "shamelessly his truest self."*



*When Reed—photographed in another of his designs, at right—was studying fashion in London, teachers asked him who would wear his looks. He said that his customer “shouldn’t exist yet.”*





was far more conservative than that of California. "I remember wearing a pink polo shirt on the playground and everyone turning their head," he told me. "I loved the power that fashion had—that one item on your body could set the playground on fire!" The attention was often negative, though. Lynette told me, "He didn't have any friends, because he was so weird." Some parents asked the school principal to have their children removed from his class. The family began moving around a lot, from Phoenix back to Los Angeles and then to Eugene, Oregon. Lynette's entrepreneurial fortunes rose and fell: for a time, she saved money by moving herself and her children into the warehouse for her candle business. In response to this peripatetic life style, Reed learned shortcuts for presenting himself to potential friends. "I got really good at my elevator pitch," he told me: "Hi, I'm Harris Reed, I'm twelve, I'm gay." His mother said, "I worried for his safety. I never, ever worried for his future."

After school, Reed took dressmaking classes, and by the age of nine he'd earned an editorial credit: through a connection of his father's, he was commissioned to design a slinky red dress worn

by a model in a shoot for an article featuring Jamie Bamber, a star of "Battlestar Galactica." When Reed was twelve or so, he went shopping at Nordstrom and could not find anything he wanted in the boys' department; a friendly sales assistant recommended that he try the women's section. Thereafter, he chose his clothes without regard to gender. He also developed a fashion insider's familiarity with labels and trends. Lynette recalled that Reed once stopped at the Nordstrom handbag counter and asked to see a Gucci bag: "The lady bent down to hand him a bag, and he goes, 'Not last season's.'"

Family friends, including Kelly Cutrone, the Manhattan-based fashion publicist, also helped Reed find his way. When he was fourteen, he served as Cutrone's intern during New York Fashion Week, and slept on the couch in her apartment in SoHo, one floor up from her company's office. "He was already really tall," Cutrone told me. "I would say, 'Where's Harris?' and someone would inevitably say, 'Oh, I sent him to Condé Nast.' I would be, like, 'What are you doing? He's fourteen, he is from California, and he has no idea of what is going on—you can't let

him out of the building!'" Reed returned for several seasons, eventually working in the front of the house at the shows of such designers as Jeremy Scott. In 2015, when Reed was a high-school senior, he was accepted at Central St. Martins.

Reed had visited England as a child—his paternal grandmother lives in Eastbourne, on the south coast—and had the sense that London was "this kind of posh, proper place," he told me. Upon arriving at Liverpool Street Station with his suitcase, at five or six in the morning, he realized that his impression was incomplete: "I remember seeing this guy—well, I shouldn't say 'guy'—this *being*, in a wedding dress and a beard, walking by, and then another person, a man in a very classical business suit, also walking. Not one of them looked at the other—they just continued forward. And I thought, I'm *home*." In high school, Reed wore jeans and a white T-shirt, or, mimicking the tidy self-presentation of the "Glee" character Kurt Hummel—the most readily available exemplar of out gay teenhood—suspenders and bow ties and suits. In London, he discovered a queer community with a much more varied sense of style. "It was so eclectic, and authentic and grimy and dirty, but in the best way possible," he said. "It was, like, 'This is what people look like on ecstasy at six in the morning, who have a Mohawk and no eyebrows, and who are in a polyamorous relationship.' I was so inspired and overwhelmed. I called my mom at three in the morning and said, 'Mom, am I *basic*?'" Within a month, Reed had started wearing flowing slip dresses with Dr. Martens.

At school, Reed did not always smoothly navigate the rigors of the classroom. He recalls people saying to him, "Your vibe is a costume designer." Reed told me, "I would say, 'No, I'm a *fashion* designer.' My teachers were always, like, 'Who's going to wear this? Who's your customer?' And I would say, 'I hope I don't know who my customer is, because they shouldn't exist yet.'" Reed balanced his course obligations with increasingly heady extracurricular adventures, including making the clothes for Harry Styles. The first time that Styles wore one of his out-

fits, at a concert in Amsterdam, Reed was in a basement venue at Covent Garden, attending a launch party for a Tom Ford fragrance. “It was the first fashion event I had ever been invited to—before that, I had been sneaking into everything—and I was so excited,” Reed told me. “I remember walking down the stairs and my phone lost reception, and I bumped into the model Karen Elson, who had been my idol since childhood, and she whispered, ‘You look fabulous,’ and I looked at her and said, ‘You just made my life.’” Reed went on, “I was drinking champagne and talking to people, and all of a sudden my phone loads, and there are twenty missed calls from my mom. I picked up, and she’s sobbing, and she’s, like, ‘Check your Instagram—Harry’s worn your stuff.’ And I went from, like, a thousand followers to seventy thousand in a matter of an hour.”

Soon afterward, Reed applied for an internship at Gucci. He got a call asking him to fly to Milan the next day to meet with Alessandro Michele, the brand’s creative director since 2015, who has infused Gucci with a sumptuous vintage sensibility. “I rushed home, made myself a pair of silver leather flares, and got on a plane,” Reed said. When he entered Michele’s office, “there were thousands of swatches on the floor, and he looked up at me from his tea, and I felt like in a nanosecond I just got *read*, in the best way possible.” Michele invited Reed to model in a show at a Roman burial ground in Arles, in the South of France; Reed accepted, and ended up wearing a pink satin kimono-style coat over a glittery greenish shirt and pants.

Next, Michele asked Reed to model in an advertising campaign for a Gucci perfume, alongside Styles. “I said, ‘I’ll do it, but I want to interview to be an intern,’” he told me. “I think everyone was a bit confused. They were, like, ‘You’re about to be a V.I.P. with us, and you now want to go pick up pins?’ I was, like, ‘I want to be whatever you guys want me to be, but I’m a *designer*. That’s what I do. It’s fabulous to ride around in town cars all day and stay in beautiful places, but I want to do work.’” He was at the Gucci atelier in Rome for nine months. “At the end, it was, like, ‘Do I go back to school and really pur-

sue *me*, or do I kind of stay here?’” Reed said. “I loved working for the company, but there was a moment during the show in Arles when—I was so happy with what happened, but part of me felt so empty, because I couldn’t put my name on anything.”

One morning this past May, Reed descended the steps of the Jungle Bar, in the basement of Annabel’s, a storied private club in Mayfair known for its aristocratic clientele and its tropical décor. The British Fashion Council was holding a gender-neutral Fashion Week, and Annabel’s was hosting a breakfast discussion by Reed and Harry Lambert, the stylist who had helped discover him. Reed was dressed in flares and heels, with a draped jacket that exposed a glimpse of his torso, layered with necklaces. His long hair, now red, was tucked behind his ears, which were laden with baubles. With his heart-shaped face and radiant skin, Reed looked refined and potent, like an archangel painted by Raphael.

For centuries, people have coined new language to describe the crossing of traditional gender boundaries in dress. In seventeenth-century England, a pamphlet condemning the wearing of masculine clothes by women was published under the title “Hic Mulier”—*mulier*, the Latin word for “woman,” modified by *hic*, the masculine demonstrative pronoun meaning “this.” The essay chastised women for “exchanging the modest attire of the comely Hood, Cawle, Coyfe, handsome Dresse or Kerchiefe to the cloudy Ruffianly broad-brim’d Hat and wanton Feather.” Offenders were called men-women, or masculine-feminines. Two hundred years later, the term

“He-She Ladies” was invented by journalists covering the case of Frederick William Park and Ernest Boulton—otherwise known as Fanny and Stella—who, in 1870, were arrested for “outraging public decency” by dressing as women on a night out in London. The morning after they were arrested, they appeared in the dock still wearing evening gowns. With admirable attention to sartorial detail, a reporter for the

*Illustrated Police News* noted, “Boulton wore a cerise satin dress with an ‘open-square’ body. The neck was hidden by the folds of a white lace scarf. The sleeves were short, barely reaching the elbow, and edged with white lace.” Boulton’s self-presentation was apparently persuasive enough that, during the hearing, feminine pronouns were used to refer to the accused.

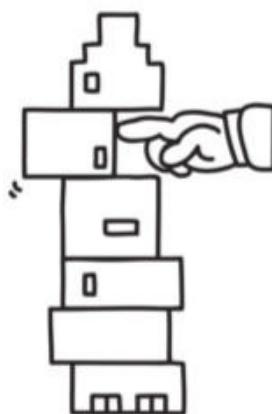
Reed’s emergence as a style icon coincides with another public reconsideration of gender boundaries: not long ago, Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary added a singular form of “they” that refers to someone who identifies as neither male nor female; more than a dozen U.S. states are issuing I.D.s with a nonbinary gender category. In fashion, numerous designers, including Alessandro Michele, have popularized the dissolving of distinctions between menswear and clothes for women. Kelly Cutrone, who has represented designers from Vivienne Westwood to Valentino, said of Reed, “This kid is so right place, right time.” Reed describes himself as gender fluid: “Not bang-smack in the middle of male and female, but fluid—literally anywhere on the pendulum.”

Though Reed had been calling himself gay since he was nine, he began to struggle with the identity in London: “I didn’t feel like I was a gay man. I didn’t feel like my gender fit. I didn’t

feel represented by it.” For the first time, he had friends who were transgender or pansexual. “I started meeting all these people that felt so confident expressing themselves in different ways,” he said. “That’s when I came into the idea that being gender fluid suited me.” He adopted “they/them” pronouns, though he

was flexible. “If I was doing stuff in Russia, it would be ‘she,’” Reed told me. “If I was doing things in Latin America, it would be ‘he.’ And in very woke America and England it would always be ‘they.’”

Embracing gender fluidity as an identity allowed Reed to preserve indeterminacy while also rejecting stereotypical categories of masculinity and femininity as they pertain to power and





beauty. Rosalind McKeever, a co-curator of the V. & A.'s "Fashioning Masculinities" show, told me, "'Gender fluid' feels so different from something like 'unisex,' which is kind of filtering and simplifying. 'Gender fluid' is *actively* moving between and across a spectrum."

Earlier this year, Reed returned to going by "he/him." He had grown concerned that the concept of gender fluidity, rather than being a liberation, might be its own limiting categorization. When he was featured in the ad campaign for his collaboration with MAC cosmetics—wearing thousands of dollars' worth of hair extensions and standing seven feet tall in platform heels, the photographs digitally retouched—he worried that he was helping to set an impossible standard for gender fluidity. He asked himself, "Am I saying that gender fluid looks like *this*, just as when I was a kid I thought being a straight guy means looking like a ripped Abercrombie model, and being a girl means *breast, waist?*" He also had a sense that tokenism informed some of the opportunities coming his way. "'Gender fluid' and 'they/them' became other boxes to check, and I hated that," Reed told me. Switching back to masculine pronouns was occasionally fraught; Reed discovered that some people were more certain about how he should be referred to than he was. But he held firm: "I was, like, 'I don't owe anyone fucking anything—I'm just me.'"

At the breakfast in Mayfair, carefully coiffed women picked at avocado toast and sipped cappuccinos while Lambert and Reed sat on an elevated stage and chatted. They recalled meeting, and hitting it off, at a model audition for a 2016 fashion shoot; Reed had not been cast. Thereafter, Lambert repeatedly requested Reed's clothing for photo shoots, but none of it was used. "What I found is that Harris's design lives in its own space—it's really hard to mix in with other things, because it is so special," Lambert said. When he gave the Harry Styles commission to Reed, he joked, it was "payback for not casting him or shooting his clothes." At one point, Lambert asked Reed to describe what he meant

when he talked about "fluidity" in fashion. "For me, fluid fashion is about expressing yourself authentically," Reed said. "No offense to Topshop, but 'unisex' is, like, hoodie and sweatpants—no consideration of body and form, fluidity, movement, color. I think 'fluid fashion' is a lot more about this idea of self-expression, and of holding yourself in the purest and highest regard."

The opportunities for ordinary consumers to buy Reed's clothing have thus far been limited. His demi-couture garments are not available for sale in stores. In the summer of 2020, he began offering a "deadstock" blouse collection online: billowy, romantic, one-size-fits-all garments that can be worn as a top or a minidress and are fashioned from remnants of tulle, taffeta, velvet, and lace. Priced at upwards of eight hundred dollars, they quickly sold out. For the time being, however, the Harris Reed essence is principally available in olfactory form: this summer, in collaboration with his mother, he launched a line of scented candles.

Under normal circumstances, a small designer might start out by producing a limited range of separates to be sold in a few stores. But, with the pandemic having interrupted manufacturing and hobbled in-store shopping, Reed has concentrated on creating one-off garments for editorial projects or for private clients, while building brand awareness through his collaborations. This month, he is launching a jewelry collection with Missoma, featuring a labradorite cocktail ring and an ear cuff in the shape of a serpent. Reed told me, "When I talk to clothing retailers and buyers, they are, like, 'You've done this all wrong—you need things in the marketplace.' But I think that in the day of Instagram—and the day of COVID—it's really more about what people stand for, and what they are doing in the world, than 'Now buy my rack of clothes at J. C. Penney.'"

Having pushed the concept of fluidity to its limit, and perhaps past it—he recently told *Vogue* that his candle line offered "a fluid escapism in someone's home"—Reed has realized that he needs to broaden his message. In

particular, he has been eager to promote sustainability. This is another of-the-moment theme in the fashion industry, which is belatedly acknowledging its role in generating wasteful novelty and environmental pollution. Reed's personal wardrobe contains many vintage clothes collected during the past decade—a habit that proved useful, he told me this summer, when, while preparing for a Zoom call about his Met Gala collaboration, he pulled out a silk Dolce & Gabbana blouse that he'd bought at a New York thrift store. (The Met Gala outfit that Reed ultimately concocted—for the supermodel Iman—consisted of a brocade bustier, flared pants, and a hoop-skirt frame festooned with hand-gilded feathers, all of it haloed by a matching feather headpiece. He accompanied her to the event, dressed in white pants, a white tuxedo jacket with a train, and a slightly smaller version of the headpiece. *Harper's Bazaar* soon declared that "Iman stole the show.")

During the breakfast discussion at Annabel's, he explained to the audience that his commitment to sustainability was another reason he had not yet begun marketing a collection of clothes to be sold in retail stores. "We're in a space now where, hopefully, we're buying less," he said. "I love the idea of making a piece that goes from the grandmother to their trans daughter to her son to their kid, and gets handed down, like a Kelly bag or a great Chanel jacket." It may seem unlikely that a pair of Venetian-wool flares with a spray-painted tulle pannier will have the long-term utility of an Hermès handbag. But, if Reed's career maintains its current trajectory, such a garment may turn out to be a wise investment. Last year, a number of Alexander McQueen's early designs were auctioned off, including several pieces from his 1995 "Highland Rape" collection, and some dresses sold for as much as fifty thousand dollars.

In late spring, Reed began planning what he anticipated would be his first in-person show since leaving school, at London Fashion Week, on September 21st. Sustainability would be an even more prominent theme in this collection, he told me, which would consist

*Reed describes gender-fluid fashion as an exercise in "holding yourself in the purest and highest regard."*

entirely of “upcycled” clothing. For weeks, he and his team had been communicating with a representative from Oxfam, which runs hundreds of thrift shops in the U.K. One morning in June, Reed and an assistant, Rebecca Bean, took a car from the Standard to Richmond, an affluent, village-like neighborhood in southwest London, where the upper floor of the local Oxfam shop is given over to a bridal boutique filled with used gowns.

Working with wedding dresses appealed to Reed because they offered an abundance of satin and lace that he could alter in fresh ways. The gowns also came freighted with symbolic meaning. In fashion shows, a wedding gown is traditionally the final garment to be presented—the culminating exemplar of a designer’s sensibility and skill. Moreover, a wedding dress is perhaps the most gender-loaded garment that is worn today. For many women, their wedding will be the only occasion in their life in which they wear a floor-length gown adjusted to their specific measurements. A dress may reflect contemporary trends, such as “Bridgerton”-style ruffles, but it nevertheless adheres to a presentation of femininity that has prevailed for centuries.

Before going to Oxfam, Reed had tested his concept by breaking down a wedding dress that had belonged to a friend. “I loved this idea of giving it a new life,” he told me. Reed had worked with a male model, dropping the bodice to waist height, which bared the model’s sculpted pectorals, and reshaping the dress’s white tulle skirt so that part of it fanned upward from the floor to the shoulder. For his forthcoming collection, Reed intended to take the concept further and make ten looks that combined previously worn wedding gowns with used men’s formal wear. He told me, “I’m putting a lot of men, or male-identifying beings, in quite ostentatious, out-there clothes that are maybe deemed feminine.”

In Richmond, Reed was led up to the bridal boutique, the walls of which were lined with enough gowns to trigger what is known in the bridal industry as white blindness: a befuddled state brought on by the sight of too much

silk and beading. “Oh, my God, this is actually a dream,” Reed said as he started working his way down the aisles, rubbing fabric between his fingers to assess its quality, and lifting lace drapery to see how it might be detached and reapplied at unexpected angles. Reed was wearing black pants and a white long-sleeved blouse with a low neckline. Unusually, he was dressed not in heels but in furry black slides, which he slipped off so that he could move lightly among the gowns on display, like a dancer navigating around the costumes backstage at a theatre. Bean helped him select gowns, and took photographs and videos on her iPhone, to be posted later on Reed’s Instagram. “Being a young designer, it’s all about social media,” Reed said, as he squeezed behind a clothing rack and poked his head out between the skirts. “Isn’t that what it’s all about—the balance between the content and the making?”

On one rack were dresses from the sixties or even earlier, with Empire waists and delicate chiffon skirts. Reed glanced at them, then moved on. “I don’t want to cut into something vintage,” he said. “Maybe it was meant to live its life like that, and not to be cut up into some crazy, fluid thing.” Instead, he focussed on more recently manufactured garments, especially those with lots of body, drapery, and a long train: “If it has ‘bridal couture’ in cursive on the label, it’s fair game,” he said.

Reed had a budget of two thousand pounds, and he was staggered by the discounted prices. He said of one dress, “This lace *alone* would be three hundred and fifty pounds a metre, and the dress is only a hundred and fifty pounds”—about two hundred dollars. Around the bottom of the skirts of one gown, seeds had snagged onto the fabric. “Someone has spent hundreds of hours sewing tulle, and then someone has danced the night away in some field,” Reed remarked. He pulled the dress off its hanger and put it to the side to save.

At the rear of the store was an enormous mirror, and after Reed had amassed a heaping pile of gowns he stood before it, using himself as a model and as an inspiration for how each dress might be imaginatively subverted. Tak-

ing off his shirt, he slipped into a strapless dress with a ruched, sequin-bedecked bodice, which expanded into a tulle skirt at what the designer had intended to be its wearer’s hips. With the back of the dress unzipped, Reed lowered what should have been its bustline to the level of his waist. Clouds of fabric gathered around his knees and ankles. Then he stepped out of the gown and lifted the skirt to just below his chin, so that it fell around his shoulders and down to his waist, like an exaggerated collar from an eighteenth-century portrait. A few moments later, he put on a dress that was covered with an enormous lace overskirt, holding its narrow waist up to his own with his hands on his hips; he flipped the skirt up and over his head, causing it to cover his face in falling layers. With his chin demurely lowered, he looked like a bride in the moments before she is invited to raise her veil at the altar and kiss the groom.

Within days, the dresses that Reed had selected were being reshaped at the Standard. An oversized bow once affixed to a bustle would be moved to the neck, pussycat style. Panels of satin would be sliced out and stitched together with dark, tailored suiting, creating a beguiling hybrid. The collection would evoke Reed’s experience upon first arriving at London’s Liverpool Street Station, when he’d witnessed sartorial worlds crossing and merging, and felt at home.

Before Reed left the bridal boutique in Richmond, he grabbed a formal black blazer in a boy’s size and shrugged it on. After the jacket was buttoned tightly across his ribs, its narrow sleeves reaching only just below the elbow, its silhouette was transformed from nascently masculine to glamorously feminine. Reed then reached for a satin wedding dress, its long train embellished with lace and sequins, and held it up to his left hip, tipping his head to one side, with his hair blanketing his shoulders. He kicked his right pant leg loose from the folds of white fabric, so that as he looked in the mirror—imagining where he might take the dress, or where it might take him—the reflected image was half one thing and half another. ♦

*This “upcycled” wedding dress, from Reed’s new collection, will be shown on September 21st, at London Fashion Week.*



## SHOWCASE

# NOVELTY T

*An accidental collection.*

BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

I'm not particularly interested in collecting things, but there is a kind of running motif in my life: despite my basic indifference, objects seem to collect around me. Stacks and stacks of LPs, so many I'll never listen to them all; books I've already read and will probably never open again; a ragtag assemblage of magazine clippings; dinky little pencils, so worn down they don't fit into a pencil sharpener anymore. All sorts of things just keep on piling up.

T-shirts are one of those things which naturally pile up. They're cheap, so whenever an interesting one catches my eye I buy it. People give me various novelty T-shirts from around the world, I get commemorative T-shirts whenever I run a marathon, and when I travel I often pick up a few, instead of bringing along extra clothes. Which is why the number of T-shirts in my life has skyrocketed, to the point where there's no room in my drawers anymore and I have to store the overflow in stacked-up cardboard boxes.

Whenever I go to the U.S., after I leave the airport and get settled in town I invariably find myself wanting to go out and grab a hamburger. It's a natural urge, but you could also see it as a kind of ritual I go through. Either one's O.K.

Ideally, I go to a hamburger joint around one-thirty, after the lunch crowd has left, plunk myself down at the counter, and order a Coors Light on tap and a cheeseburger. I like the burger cooked medium, and I always get raw onions, tomatoes, lettuce, and pickles. Plus an order of French fries and, like an old buddy I'm visiting, a side of coleslaw. Critical partners in all this are



mustard (it's got to be Dijon) and Heinz ketchup. I sit there, quietly sipping my Coors Light, listening to the voices of the people around me and the clatter of dishes, attentively imbibing the atmosphere of this different land, as I wait for my cheeseburger to emerge. Which is when it finally hits me that, yes, I really *am* in America.

This T-shirt has a straightforward message: "I PUT KETCHUP ON MY KETCHUP." Now, that's the statement of somebody who is seriously in love with ketchup. It kind of teases those Americans who put ketchup on everything, but I find it interesting that one of the companies that distribute these shirts is none other than Heinz. A little self-deprecating humor going on here, but you can't

help feeling the American spirit in it, the optimistic, cheerful lack of introspection that says, "Who cares about being sophisticated! I'm gonna do what I want!"

When I walk around town in this shirt, Americans sometimes call out, "Love the shirt!" The ones who do this usually have that "I love ketchup" look about them. Sometimes I feel like coming back with a "Hey, don't lump me in with you guys," but usually I just give a cheerful "Yeah, pretty nice, huh? Ha-ha." This kind of T-shirt communication does a lot to liven things up. You'd never find that happening in Europe. For one thing, Europeans by and large hardly ever eat ketchup. ♦

*(Translated, from the Japanese,  
by Philip Gabriel.)*



*This shirt is from the Ventura Surf Shop, in Ventura County, an affluent surfing mecca near Santa Barbara. It sounds pretty nice, but will going there really improve your life? That much I can't say.*



*I drink Heineken a lot whenever I go to the U.S. In crowded, noisy bars, you have to shout out your order, and I've found that the one brand I can pronounce reliably is Heineken.*



*You've got to be braver than you might think to wear a car-related shirt. It's hard to say when I'd wear this Shelby Cobra one, but I could see it working with a Comme des Garçons jacket.*



*This is from the British magazine The Economist. The message is very stylish, but it's still a T-shirt, and it makes me wonder about how to react to such a sudden, challenging dictum.*



*When I attended the Reykjavík International Literary Festival, I spoke at this university. Iceland's total population is only 350,000, of whom 10,000 are students here. A pretty amazing percentage.*



*I bought this Ramones shirt from a secondhand store called Bookoff, in Kyoto. But I can't bring myself to wear it outside. There are some limits when you're over seventy.*

**O**n December 15, 1929, Dr. Philip M. Lovell, the imperiously eccentric health columnist for the Los Angeles *Times*, invited readers to tour his ultramodern new home, at 4616 Dundee Drive, in the hills of Los Feliz. On a page crowded with ads promoting quack cures for “CHRONIC CONSTIPATION” and “SAGGING FLABBY CHINS,” Lovell announced three days of open houses, adding that “Mr. Richard T. Neutra, architect who designed and supervised the construction . . . will conduct the audience from room to room.” Neutra’s middle initial was actually J., but this recent Austrian immigrant, thirty-seven years old and underemployed, had little reason to complain: he was being launched as a pioneer of American modernist architecture. Thousands of people took the tour; striking photographs were published. Three years later, Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the codifiers of the International Style, hailed Neutra’s work as “stylistically the most advanced house built in America since the War.”

The Lovell Health House, as the behemoth on Dundee Drive came to be known, remains a dumbfounding sight. It occupies a steep slope at the edge of Griffith Park, plunging three stories from street level. The main structural elements are a skeleton of light steel, a thin skin of sprayed-on concrete, and ribbons of casement windows, which run across the south-facing side. It is a monumental yet unreal creation—a silver-white vessel that seems to have docked at the top of a canyon. Inside, you have the sense of hovering in space as you look down the thick-grown hillside toward a hazy horizon and a possible sea. Neutra wrote of the design in characteristically convoluted fashion: “Through continuity of fenestration, linkage with the landscape, we should draw again on what the vitally dynamic natural scene had been for a hundred thousand years, and make it once more a human habitat.”

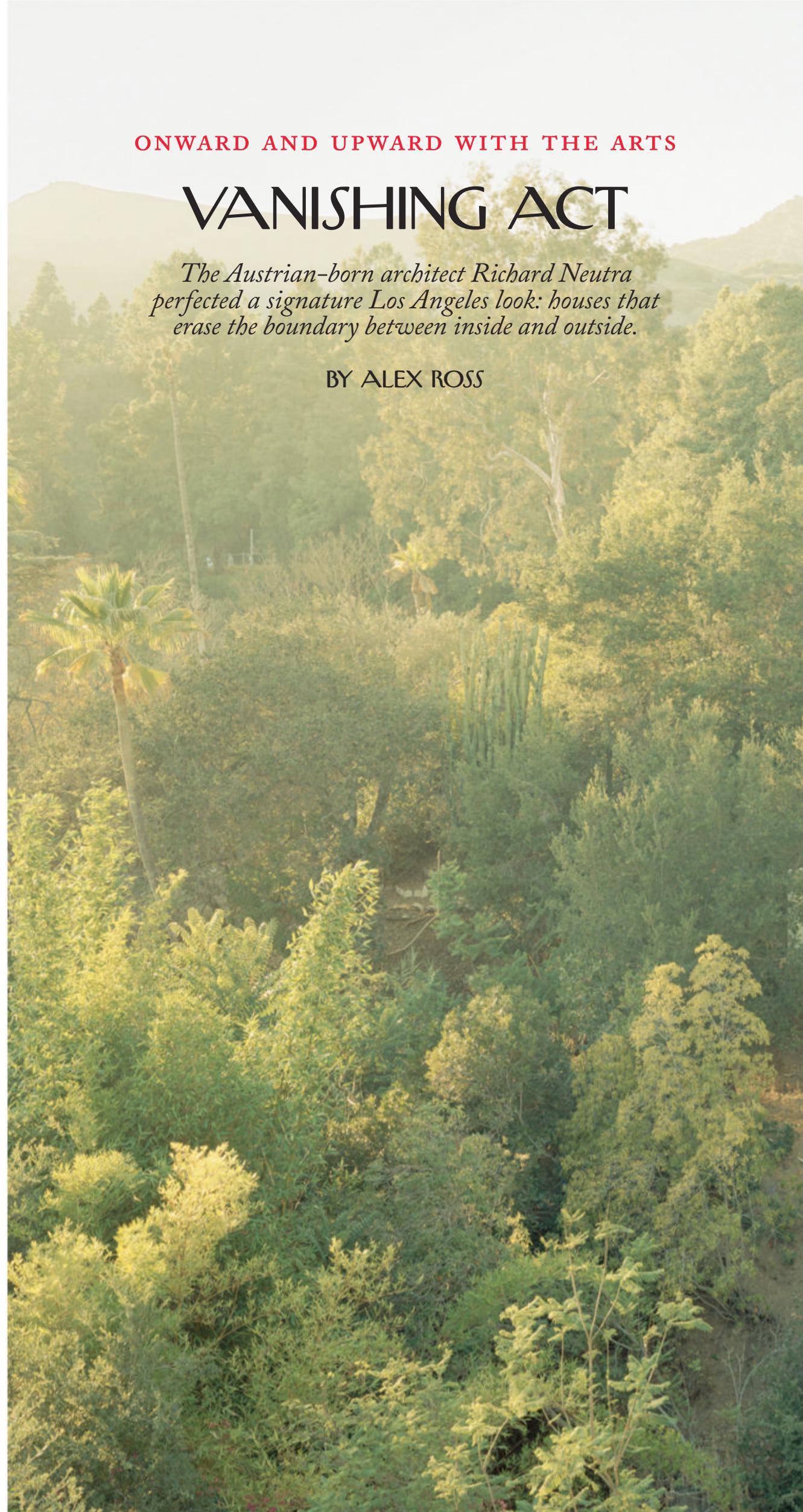
Can an aggressively modern house become indivisible from its surroundings? Neutra contemplated that challenge throughout his career, which extended from novice efforts in Germany,

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

## VANISHING ACT

*The Austrian-born architect Richard Neutra perfected a signature Los Angeles look: houses that erase the boundary between inside and outside.*

BY ALEX ROSS



*The Health House (1929) is monumental yet unreal, a glass-and-steel vessel that seems*



*to have docked at the top of a canyon. Inside, you hover in space as you look down the hillside toward a hazy horizon.*

in the early nineteen-twenties, until his death, in 1970. The Health House, majestically at odds with its environment, doesn't quite hit the mark. But if you venture a few miles to the southeast, into Silver Lake, you can see Neutra in a stealthier, suppler mode. In the early twentieth century, the neighborhood was settled by avant-garde artists, radical activists, and bohemians. Neutra joined the throng in 1932, building himself a studio-residence, the Neutra VDL House, by the Silver Lake Reservoir. Between 1948 and 1962, he built nine more houses a block to the south, in an area now called the Neutra Colony. Huddled under lofty pines and eucalyptus trees, these dwellings embody the architect's seductive later

manner: low, wide façades; plate-glass windows under overhanging roofs; darker, woodsier trim. Reticent, almost inconspicuous, they gaze out at joggers and dog walkers with a guarded serenity. The architecture within calls as little attention to itself as possible, so that your eyes are drawn to the reservoir shimmering through the foliage.

Although Neutra enjoyed fame from the thirties onward—in 1949, he appeared on the cover of *Time*—clients of relatively modest means could still afford to hire him. (Several of the Neutra Colony houses were first owned by Japanese American families whose members had been in internment camps during the Second World War.) Those economics are long gone. Amid a pro-

longed vogue for mid-century modernism, Neutras go for extravagant prices. The Kaufmann House, a Palm Springs idyll that Neutra built for the department-store owner Edgar J. Kaufmann—who also commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater—is on the market for \$16.95 million. Latter-day Neutra owners include hedge funders, shipping magnates, Saudi royals, and Hollywood superagents, although artists and academics remain in the mix. Those with more limited resources can settle for house numbers executed in Neutraface, a sans-serif font based on the architect's favored lettering. Sometimes called the “gentrification font,” it adorns countless neo-mid-century developments.

Neutra's association with luxury may be one reason that he has failed to secure a central place in the twentieth-century architectural canon, alongside the likes of Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Louis Kahn. Some critics would rank him below Rudolph Schindler, the other great Austrian modernist in Los Angeles, who helped bring Neutra to the city and later fell out with him. Neutra left behind no signature landmark on the order of the Guggenheim Museum or the Salk Institute. One project in which he invested particularly high hopes—a public-housing complex called Elysian Park Heights—stirred reactionary ire in the fifties, and was never built. Yet the fact that Neutra did his best work in domestic spaces should not detract from his significance. His mode of ground-hugging modernism—with clean, cool lines that play off against the year-round California green—helped to define the local architectural vernacular.

Above all, Neutra has inspired lasting devotion in the people who have made his homes their own. Earlier this year, I began driving around L.A. with a copy of Thomas S. Hines's authoritative 1982 book, “Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture,” seeking out more than a hundred local structures. I spoke to several original owners, ranging in age from eighty-four to a hundred and two. The houses may not be as dreamily immaculate as they are in the famous images by the architectural photographer Julius Shul-



*“Thanks, I knew I could count on you to turn my problem into something way worse than happened to you.”*

man, but their stories say something deeper about Neutra's achievement, which has less to do with stylish surfaces than with underlying rhythms—the search for a shelter that is also open to the world.

**W**ell, I don't know about *favorite*," Susie Akai Fukuhara said with a smile, when I asked about her favorite memories of Neutra. She has lived in the Neutra Colony since 1962, when the architect built a roomy home for her and her first husband, John Akai. The interior designer David Netto, who lives in the Neutra next door, introduced me to her. "He was, as you say, a big personality," Fukuhara went on. "He used to show up with his entourage, without calling me, and take them through the house." Many other clients recall Neutra arriving unannounced. Susan Sorrells, who lives in her parents' Neutra residence, in the desert town of Shoshone, California, told me, "It was understood that he had a right to stay here anytime."

Neutra is one of those artists, like Gertrude Stein and Mark Rothko, who present a fundamental contradiction between their personality and their work. The houses are tranquil and graceful; the man who made them could be pompous, overbearing, needy, exasperating. "He was, in a word, impossible," Ann Brown, the original owner of a 1968 Neutra in Washington, D.C., told me. Brown, who chaired the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission during the Clinton Administration, recalled travelling to Los Angeles with her husband, the late Donald A. Brown, to confer with Neutra. One morning, they were kept waiting because—as Dione Neutra, the architect's wife, told them—"in the night Mr. Neutra had a revelation." Brown hastened to add that she was in awe of Neutra's brilliance. "I never feel alone here," she said. "I find something new to see every day."

There was something almost comical about Neutra's conceitedness. In later years, he travelled with a copy of his *Time* cover, presenting it to flight attendants and maître d's. The late art historian Constance Perkins, for whom Neutra built a gemlike house in Pasadena, remembered meetings at which

he had himself theatrically summoned away for an "important phone call." Still, this titan of self-absorption somehow absorbed everything around him. Claire Leddy, who grew up in her parents' Neutra in Bakersfield, remembers him asking her to play her flute for him: "This man, so imposing with his shock of white hair and his black huge eyebrows, watching my every movement—I had never been paid that kind of attention by an adult of that stature. He was interested in everything."

As taxing as Neutra could be, most clients felt grateful to him. Perkins, who lived in her house from 1955 until her death, in 1991, wrote, "It is impossible to say how much I love my home." According to the present owner, the historian Sharon Salinger, Perkins slept on a daybed off the living room so that she could wake up to a primal Neutra effect: floor-to-ceiling glass walls meeting at a transparent corner, giving the illusion of the house dissolving into space. A similar mirage appears in Susie Fukuhara's bedroom. "It feels like I'm in the middle of paradise here," Fukuhara told me.

**N**ovelists from Nathanael West to Alison Lurie have mocked Los Angeles's mishmash of residential architectural styles, from Cape Cod bungalows to Queen Anne Victorians to ersatz Italian villas. Neutra, too, disapproved of the city's "array of pickings and tidbits from all historical and geographical latitudes and longitudes." Such accusations could be levelled at any American city: a Tudor cottage is as fake in Boston as it is in Brentwood. Critics have long sensed, though, a deeper dishonesty in L.A.'s manic nostalgia—a plastering over of ugly histories. The red tile roofs and white stucco walls of the Spanish Colonial style, which peaked in the nineteen-twenties, bring to mind two cycles of violence: the displacement of Native populations by Spanish-speaking invaders, and the subsequent displacement of Mexicans by Anglo invaders. Modernism promised, falsely or not, a sober new beginning.

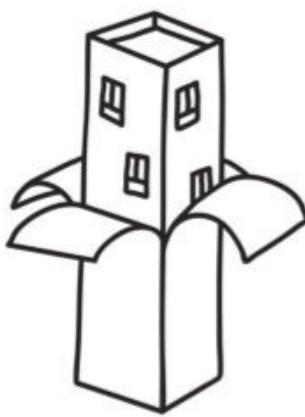
Around the turn of the twentieth

century, Southern California evolved a discrete architectural identity. In Pasadena, Charles and Henry Greene constructed big-roofed bungalows that struck up a convivial conversation with the landscape. In La Jolla, Irving Gill reduced the Spanish style to near-abstraction: stark façades, unadorned windows. In 1916, Gill wrote, "We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to Nature." Gill seems to have arrived independently at the kind of modernist philosophy that was being propagated in the same period by the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, with his proclamation that "freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength." But

Gill's houses proved less confrontational than Loos's, which scandalized Vienna: instead, they receded into the California greenwood.

Often, the motivation for architectural reform was rooted in the Southern Californian mania for healthy, open-air living. As Lyra Kilston notes, in her 2019 book, "Sun Seekers: The Cure of California," the Southland was considered a refuge for people with tuberculosis, and common features of sanatoriums—white walls, decluttered interiors, picture windows, sleeping porches—coincided with modernist values. A purified aesthetic also appealed to California's alternative cultures: leftist cells, utopian communes, dietetic retreats, nudist colonies. Philip Lovell, the health guru, catered to that element in his *Times* column, "The Care of the Body," where he promoted vegetarianism, nude sunbathing, and sleeping in the open air. The Health House could be mistaken for a Swiss spa that has wandered into the Los Feliz hills.

California modernism found crucial champions in independent women, who, as the scholar Alice T. Friedman has shown, seized on the new architecture as an opportunity to reshape the domestic sphere. Gill's chief patron in La Jolla was the left-leaning newspaperwoman Ellen Browning Scripps. In Los Angeles, the dominant figure was the radical-minded oil heiress Aline





JULIUS SHULMAN © J. PAUL GETTY TRUST. GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES

*At the Perkins House (1955), a “spider leg,” or extended roof beam, gives the illusion of the structure dissolving into space.*

Barnsdall, who, in 1919, developed a plan for a progressive arts complex, with residences, on Olive Hill, in East Hollywood. She hired as her architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who never fully engaged with her vision and instead lavished attention on the main villa, Hollyhock House, an early example of his colossal Mayan Revival style. Barnsdall later wrote that she felt “weary and under vitalized” in the space. More congenial to her sensibilities were the ideas of a pair of Austrians who came west in Wright’s wake: Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra.

**T**here is no way to tell Neutra’s story without telling Schindler’s, and vice versa. Their broken friendship makes for one of the great parlor games of American architectural history, with connoisseurs apt to argue the case deep into the night. In the Schindler camp, the tale is often cast in the mold of “All About Eve,” with Schindler being wronged by the ruthless up-and-comer Neutra.

Both men came from middle-class Viennese families; Schindler was born in 1887, Neutra in 1892. Schindler’s background was both Catholic and Jewish; Neutra’s was entirely Jewish. Both were steeped in the opulent milieu of fin-de-siècle Vienna; one of Neutra’s closest school friends was Sigmund Freud’s son Ernst. Schindler and Neutra met in their student days, when both were under the sway of the local modernist idols, Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos. Schindler was the first to find his own path. Around 1913, he wrote a manifesto championing what became known as “space architecture,” which aims to create an almost metaphysical experience of “light, air, and temperature.” Wright had anticipated this thinking, but Schindler went further in declaring his desire to break open interiors. He later wrote, “Our rooms will descend close to the ground and the garden will become an integral part of the house. The distinction between indoors and the out-of-doors will disappear.”

Schindler was also the first to cross the Atlantic, taking a job at a Chicago architecture firm in early 1914. If the First World War had not intervened, Neutra would probably have

soon followed; instead, he spent the next four years in the Austro-Hungarian Army. Only in 1921, by which time Schindler was working for Wright in Los Angeles, did Neutra finally launch his career: after designing a forest cemetery in Luckenwalde, Germany, he went to Berlin, to collaborate with the Expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn. All the while, he appealed to Schindler for help in getting to America. He married Dione Niedermann, a cellist from Zurich, and while staying in that city he saw a sign saying “CALIFORNIA CALLS YOU.” The words became a mantra. When travel finally became possible, in 1923, Neutra went first to New York, then to Chicago, and on to Taliesin, the Wright compound in Wisconsin, where he served as an apprentice-servant to the Master. Dione joined him there with their first child, Frank, and in 1925 the Neutras at last arrived in Los Angeles.

Their first address was 835 Kings Road, in West Hollywood—a communal dwelling that Schindler had built in 1922, and that he shared with his wife, the writer and educator Pauline Gibling Schindler. This celebrated house was bolder than anything Neutra had seen in Europe. The core structure consists of exposed concrete walls that gently lean inward, like the sides of a tall tent. Indeed, the design was partly inspired by a camping trip to Yosemite that the Schindlers had taken in 1921. The walls were cast in horizontal molds and then tilted toward the vertical—a technique that Schindler had adopted from Gill. Vertical slits and clerestory windows admit light; Japanese-style canvas doors open onto patios. Half industrial, half rustic, the house exudes primeval stillness. It is now open to the public as an exhibition space, as is the Neutra VDL House.

In the early days, modish pandemonium prevailed at Kings Road. Schindler wore open-necked shirts and went about in sandals; Neutra attempted to loosen up. Nude modern dance was performed. Drink was served throughout Prohibition. Progressive Angelenos passed through: the novelist turned politician Upton Sinclair, the photographer Edward Weston, the art dealer Galka Scheyer,

and the young composer John Cage, who, improbably, had an affair with Pauline Schindler. The two architects worked side by side and sometimes collaborated: when Schindler built a hilltop house for James Eads How, known as the Millionaire Hobo, Neutra oversaw the landscaping. The two men also jointly made a failed bid to design the League of Nations headquarters, in Geneva, proposing an inverted-pyramid construction.

Into this fragile ménage barged Dr. Lovell—né Morris Saperstein—whose sole medical qualification was a chiropractic degree. After visiting Kings Road, Lovell commissioned Schindler to build him a mountain cabin, a farmhouse, and a beach house. The last, in Newport Beach, was a startling concrete-footed beast with a quasi-nautical upper structure. At the time of its completion, Lovell invited Schindler to elaborate on his ideas in a series of essays for the *Times*. Yet when Lovell turned to his next project—a “home of health” in Los Feliz—he hired Neutra. The suspicion arose that Neutra had somehow tricked Lovell into giving him the job. The likelier explanation is that Lovell had grown wary of Schindler’s occasionally devil-may-care attitude toward technical issues: the mountain cabin’s roof collapsed after a hard winter.

Neutra, rigorously trained in engineering, made the Health House a tour-de-force demonstration of his skills. In effect, he served not only as the architect but also as the contractor and the site manager. Prefabricated steel girders were assembled in less than forty work hours; the spraying of the concrete skin was accomplished in two days. In the end, though, the industrial might of the building may have detracted from its livability. The Lovells later complained that it had “no lilt, no happiness, no joy.” The house has experienced wear and tear in recent years, and needs a thorough restoration. The art-world potentates Iwan and Manuela Wirth are buying the property, with plans to bring back its original lustre.

If the Health House had merely received a flurry of publicity in Lovell’s column, Schindler might have felt no lasting bitterness. As Thomas Hines

has argued, the real affront came in 1932, when the epoch-making “Modern Architecture” show at the Museum of Modern Art omitted Schindler while saluting Neutra as a major talent. Schindler took to calling his former friend a “go-getter type” and a “racketeer.” Neutra, for his part, felt that he had become the target of irrational resentment. Ultimately, perpetuating this stale contest of male egos conceals the myriad ways the architects influenced each other and thrived in a sympathetic bohemian culture.

The story has a somewhat happy ending. In early 1953, Neutra had a heart attack and was hospitalized at Cedars of Lebanon, in East Hollywood. Seemingly incapable of being alone, he asked for a shared room. By extreme coincidence, he was placed with Schindler, who was undergoing treatment for prostate cancer and had just a few months to live. The two men hadn’t spoken for many years, but they soon fell to reminiscing about Vienna. Frank Gehry, who was in his early twenties at the time, went to see them. “They were in two beds side by side—I couldn’t believe it,” Gehry told me recently. “Neutra was there with books. He had an assistant, and he was working. Schindler was sitting in bed, just hanging out, in a cavalier mood.”

Schindler houses are active forms, propelling the visitor from one room to another. In the words of the critic Esther McCoy, they are “as close to the dance as architecture will ever come.” You can see five of them on the hill just west of the Silver Lake Reservoir, where their intersecting planes and asymmetrical volumes land like jazz chords on the winding streets. If you are invited inside the Walker House, you immediately glimpse the reservoir over a dividing wall, and that tease of a view pulls you in deeper. The Oliver House, a few streets over, contains what might be the world’s most vertiginous breakfast nook, hanging over the yard at a diagonal to the street. The astounding Kallis House, in the Hollywood Hills, has walls that bend in and out, like an accordion. Modernist rhetoric notwithstanding, there’s a residual Romantic streak in Schindler’s buildings. As Todd Cronan notes, in a

forthcoming book on California modernism, they retain an unmistakable sculptural quality.

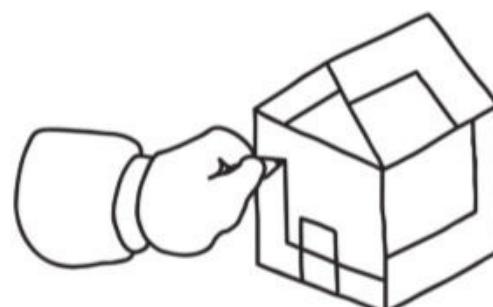
The aura of a Neutra house is calmer and quieter. The view from the street is unimportant; what matters is how it looks from the inside. And, if Schindler has you scampering about in delight, Neutra sends you into a slow-moving trance. The blurring of the border between indoors and outdoors is part of the spell. Both Wright and Schindler theorized this effect, yet the assertiveness of their designs prevented them from realizing it fully. Neutra’s mature work exemplified the aesthetic of dematerialization. The photographer and filmmaker Clara Balzary, who has been living in a home that Neutra built for his secretary Dorothy Serulnic, told me, “The house itself seems to disappear, and it feels as though I’m living in light and color.”

Glass walls, sliding doors, and glazed corners are integral to the illusion, but Neutra tricks the eye in other ways. From the late forties onward, he made obsessive use of what he called the “spider leg”: a roof beam that extends past the edge of the roof and meets up with a freestanding vertical post. This phantom limb creates a pleasurable uncertainty about where the building ends. When spider legs appear in front of glass corners, you begin to wonder if the entire structure is a mirage. Equally arresting is Neutra’s way of running the same

Leddy House was being planned, the dancer, artist, and publisher Patricia Leddy, who commissioned the house with her husband, Albert, heard from her mother that a strange man in a suit was inspecting trees on the property. It was Neutra, who announced that he had found the tree that would anchor the project. He once wrote, “If there are trees granted you by fate, can you conceive a layout to conserve them? Never sacrifice a tree if you can help it.” The ethos again smacks of Wright—the home as an outgrowth of the land. Yet Neutra didn’t subscribe to naïve organicism; for him, all buildings were insertions, impositions, artifacts. “Houses do not sprout from the ground,” he wrote. “That is a lyrical exaggeration, a pretty fairy tale for children.”

Neutra houses are, more than anything, sites of psychological conditioning—a consequence, perhaps, of the architect’s boyhood proximity to Freud. Sylvia Lavin, in her 2004 book, “Form Follows Libido,” describes how Neutra saw himself as a therapist—easing the stresses of modern life, increasing clients’ comfort. He even supplied a certain aphrodisiac atmosphere for the young couples with whom he liked to work. Families were asked to fill out questionnaires about their daily routines. Some sample queries: “Can you sleep when the sun shines into your room?” “Do you notice or enjoy the dinner smell?” “Does the ‘whiff of nature’ mean much to you?” “What kind of music do you play on your gramophone, soft or noisy?”

Neutra called himself a “biorealist,” meaning that he attended to elemental needs of the mind and body. As the scholar Barbara Lamprecht points out, he liked to cite the savanna hypothesis, once fashionable among evolutionary biologists, which posits the bipedal human as a hyperaware creature of the open plain. Neutra elaborated such speculations in a series of books—“Mystery and Realities of the Site,” “Survival Through Design,” “World and Dwelling”—that mix dilettantism with acute insights. In one of his more lyrical moments, he wrote, “Human habitat in the deepest sense is much more than mere shelter. It is the fulfillment of the search—in space—for happiness and emotional equilibrium. It is a



flooring material on either side of an exterior door or a floor-to-ceiling window. At the Leddy House, in Bakersfield, you enter along a scroll of pebbled concrete. At the Wilkins House, in South Pasadena, terrazzo extends from the living areas to a covered outdoor space. Such effects induce a kind of horizontal vertigo.

Landscape shaped every aspect of Neutra’s design process. When the

## HALF-LIFE IN EXILE

I'm forever living between Aprils.  
The air here smells of jacarandas and lime;  
it's sunset before I know it. I'm supposed  
to rest, but that's where the children live.  
In the hot mist of sleep. Dream after dream.  
Instead, I obsess. I draw stars on receipts.  
Everybody loves the poem.  
It's embroidered on a pillow in Milwaukee.  
It's done nothing for Palestine.  
There are plants out West that emerge only after fires.  
They listen for smoke. I wrote the poem  
after weeks of despair, hauling myself  
like a rock. Everyone loves the poem.  
The plants are called fire-followers,  
but sometimes it's after the rains. At night,  
I am a zombie feeding on the comments.  
Is it compulsive to watch videos?  
Is it compulsive to memorize names?  
Rafif and Ammar and Mahmoud.  
Poppies and snapdragons and calandrinias:  
I can't hear you. I can't hear you under the missiles.  
A plant waits for fire to grow.  
A child waits for a siren. It must be a child.  
Never a man. Never a man without a child.  
There is nothing more terrible  
than waiting for the terrible. I promise.  
Was the grief worth the poem? No,  
but you don't interrogate a weed  
for what it does with wreckage.  
For what it's done to get here.

—Hala Alyan

matter of settling down at one point in the wide open spaces—a voluntarily restricted spot to come home to—to be with one's belongings and with those closest to one's self."

The *Time* cover of 1949 carried the caption "What will the neighbors think?" Increasingly, the article implied, the neighbors were envious, rather than scornful, of the Neutra on the block. That same year, *Life* published one of Julius Shulman's now legendary photographs of the Kaufmann House—a dream vision of postwar leisure, with Liliane Kaufmann lounging by the pool as the Palm Springs sun sets behind desert mountains. In this same period, John Entenza, the editor of the magazine *Arts & Architecture*, launched the Case Study program, fea-

turing designs for model progressive homes. The mid-century-modern heyday had begun.

Neutra didn't seem to mind being the star architect of the upwardly mobile white middle class, yet he longed to apply his indoors-outdoors philosophy to a broader swath of the population. Schools were one target of his reformist urge. He bemoaned traditional layouts that had children sitting in rigid rows in an airless space, "supposedly listening to a sermon resounding from the blackboard." Instead, single-story classrooms should open onto patios through sliding doors. In the thirties, L.A. school boards allowed Neutra to realize this vision: his Emerson and Corona Avenue schools are still in use today, as are half a dozen other Neutra school buildings.

Could there also be Neutra housing for the people? The possibility surfaced in the thirties and forties, as California politics swung to the left and the Los Angeles City Housing Authority initiated an ambitious schedule of projects. In 1941, Neutra joined a team working on Hacienda Village, in Watts, where one of the lead designers was the pathbreaking Black architect Paul Revere Williams. In the same period, Neutra oversaw a housing development for defense workers, Channel Heights, in San Pedro. In that almost bucolic scheme, low-rise buildings stood amid fields of wildflowers, with playgrounds, schools, and shopping all at hand. Although occupants found Channel Heights eminently livable, it lacked the kind of density that housing planners required. Suburban sprawl plowed it under long ago.

A bigger opportunity arose in 1950, when the city commissioned Neutra and his colleague Robert Alexander to create Elysian Park Heights, a thirty-four-hundred-unit public-housing complex in an area sometimes called Chavez Ravine. On the site stood three semirural villages—Palo Verde, Bishop, and La Loma—inhabited almost exclusively by Mexican Americans. Neutra wandered around the area, making sketches and interviewing the residents. This was always his point of departure, Alexander later said—"not looking at maps first but looking at the people." In a memorandum, Neutra expressed admiration for the community that the villagers had built. It was, he wrote, "the loveliest slum in the most charming setting which the country can boast." His use of "slum" showed that, despite his sympathetic slant, he adhered to the paternalistic mentality of mid-century urban planning.

Neutra promised to preserve the spirit of the extant villages, but there was no way to accommodate more than three thousand units without resorting to high-rises. The final plan included twenty-four thirteen-story towers. The supposed saving grace was the greenery that would surround them. Neutra wrote, "The tall buildings here will be spaced great distances apart and in spacious groups, separated by several valleys." It's doubtful whether families on the thirteenth floor would have

felt nature's embrace in any real sense. Residents of Palo Verde, Bishop, and La Loma understandably distrusted the scheme, and not just on architectural grounds. Racial restrictions had barred them from living in most other neighborhoods, and there was no guarantee that they would find a place in Neutra's concrete utopia.

Worse was to come. Real-estate moguls like Fritz Burns, whose tract-home developments were devouring much of Los Angeles County, resented competition from the City Housing Authority, and they activated a potent weapon: Red-baiting attacks on the leftists who populated the agency, such as a senior officer named Frank Wilkinson, who was a Communist Party member. As Eric Nusbaum recounts in "Stealing Home," an absorbing history of the Elysian Park Heights affair, Wilkinson lived for a time in Neutra's Silver Lake residence—and was talked into joining the Party at a Sunday breakfast there. Although Neutra himself avoided explicit political commitments, he did not hesitate to work with radical clients. In 1946, he designed an appliance store for Samuel and Joseph Ayeroff, who later attracted the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

The L.A. City Council began holding hearings on Elysian Park Heights. Neutra spoke on April 26, 1951, conceding that the existing villages were "really very lovely" but arguing that "a much greater density is needed to give urban amenities to these people or anybody who wants to live there." Such technocratic language must have sounded feeble next to the angry pleas of the residents and the political red meat served up by their lawyers. (The phrase "cancer of socialism" was used.) At a hearing the following year, Wilkinson declined to discuss his political affiliations, hastening the demise of the city's entire public-housing effort. He later went to prison for refusing to answer questions from HUAC.

The aftermath is one of the more grotesque episodes in Los Angeles history. Most of the families had been cleared out, but a proud few remained. The city struck a deal with Walter O'Malley, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who had expressed interest

in moving his team to Los Angeles. Manuel and Abrana Aréchiga, who were among the last holdouts in the villages, were escorted off the property; their daughter, Aurora Vargas, was carried out by force. Bulldozers buried the local elementary school in mounds of dirt. Dodger Stadium opened in 1962.

Most of Neutra's papers are at U.C.L.A., where you can find a document in his handwriting melodramatically lamenting the loss of Elysian Park Heights: "The life, health and crowning achievement of Neutra's life got broken in this struggle, not only his financial strength." Others came to feel that the undertaking had been wrongheaded from the outset. Robert Alexander wondered whether it would have been a disaster on the order of the Pruitt-Igoe complex, in St. Louis, which opened in 1954, rapidly deteriorated into a segregated poverty zone, and was demolished in the seventies. "Dodger Stadium is a blessing compared to the housing project we designed," Alexander once said.

I heard a different perspective from the architect Elizabeth Timme, who lives in the Neutra Colony and is the co-founder of a design nonprofit called LA Más. Much of her work is taken up with devising affordable-housing initiatives, and her home has given her inspiration. She told me, "There's a thoughtfulness in the way Neutra planned every detail, which goes to the dignity and care and craft that should be more on our minds when we talk about housing." She added that projects like Pruitt-Igoe failed less because of their modernist architecture than because of racially charged policies and a lack of sustained financial support. In a very different political climate, a reduced version of Elysian Park Heights might have become the verdant, nourishing community of which Neutra dreamed. Such a world remains far out of reach.

**N**eutra did not abandon his city-shaping aspirations in later years, but his work tended to lose focus whenever it moved to a larger scale. He and Alexander collaborated on the Los Angeles County Hall of Records, a dour structure on Temple Street. The Orange County Courthouse, in Santa

Ana, cuts a crisper profile, not least because of the Neutra lettering on its tower. Perhaps the finest of his public buildings is the Claremont United Methodist Church, where the San Gabriel Mountains are framed by plate-glass windows behind the altar. Neutra office complexes, medical facilities, and storefronts are scattered around Southern California, ranging in appearance from the nondescript to the decrepit. The Hughes Auto Showroom, in Toluca Lake, now houses Universal Smog and Repair, which looks drab but gets good reviews on Yelp. I arrived at the former Ayeroff Brothers store, on La Cienega, to find that it had just been knocked down for a residential development.

Neutra's bankability in the high-end real-estate market poses a subtler threat to his legacy. His houses are small by McMansion standards: dozens of Neutras have floor plans of less than fifteen hundred square feet. Over the years, many have accrued additions—sometimes tastefully applied, as at the Freedman House, in Pacific Palisades; sometimes obliterating the original, as at the Branch House, in the Hollywood Hills. Other properties have remained intact only by becoming the guest house adjoining some hulking new structure. Wealthy connoisseurs collect modernist residences as they do art work—an activity that defeats Neutra's notion of performing architectural therapy on newlywed couples and growing families. The purpose for preservation becomes obscure: What, exactly, is being saved, and for whom?

The architect John Bertram, who has overseen several restorations of Neutra homes, has wrestled with these issues. He lives in a small Neutra in Silver Lake, which he shares with his wife, the actress Ann Magnuson. "I used to be much more of a purist about restoration," Bertram told me. "Not all houses should adapt to their owners, but most of them should be able to, on some level. What people want is almost always the same—larger bathrooms, larger kitchens, more storage. If you change absolutely nothing, it's hard to imagine how the space can really be a home. It's a general issue with modernist design—it's not willing to embrace a certain amount of human



*The Sorrells House (1957), in Shoshone, California. Neutra saw himself as a therapist who eased clients' stress.*

disarray. The other huge issue is that the Neutras, with their expanses of single-paned glass, often don't conform to modern energy codes."

Ryan Soniat is a preservationist in the purist camp—the sort who tries to persuade clients to install a vintage nineteen-fifties oven. One day, I followed him as he checked on two active projects: Schindler's McAlmon House, in Silver Lake, and Neutra's Linn House, off Mulholland Drive. At the McAlmon, he and the occupants, Larry Schaffer and Magdalena Sikorska, were scraping away layers of paint, trying to excavate the original color scheme. They'd found traces of a typical Schindler hue: a pale eucalyptus green. At the Linn House, built-in furniture by Neutra had long since disappeared, but Soniat had manufactured plausible substitutes. "For me, it's about geeking out, getting into

the minutiae," Soniat said. "Neutra plotted every aspect of the picture. When there's a huge modern dishwasher in a tiny birch kitchen, it's jarring. When you get everything right, it falls into place."

A newly completed Neutra restoration can be breathtaking. I visited the Brice House, in Brentwood Glen, just as Oscar A. Ramirez, who had spent more than a year repainting the structure, was applying finishing touches. The house, long occupied by the modernist artist William Brice, is made of Douglas-fir plywood, but the window frames, the trim, and many other elements are painted a metallic silver-gray. Ramirez, who also works as a scenic artist at Universal Studios Hollywood, had resurrected the original metallic sheen. "When you apply each layer of paint, you have to control the environment," he told me. "I had fans blow-

ing in the opposite direction, sucking all the air away from the paint, so it would dry evenly. I had to find a really heavy primer that I could sand down. If there's one little ripple or drip, the metallic effect is gone."

With such attention to detail, the houses return to the pristine condition in which Shulman photographed them. It's worth remembering, though, that those images are themselves fictions. Neutra directed the shoots with an exactitude worthy of the Austrian filmmaker Josef von Sternberg (for whom he built a now vanished modernist villa). Because the landscaping had usually not yet grown in, Neutra would arrive in a car stuffed with freshly cut vegetation, which he distributed around the exterior. If the residents had already moved in, offending clutter would be expunged. Neutra was seeking an effective advertisement for an architectural



JULIUS SHULMAN © J. PAUL GETTY TRUST. GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES

*The Kaufmann House (1947), a Palm Springs idyll. Neutra's association with luxury has undercut his reputation.*

philosophy that could not, in fact, be captured on film, because ultimately it had to do with a state of mind.

**T**helma Lager Huebsch is the oldest surviving original owner of a Neutra house. She turned a hundred and two in July, celebrating with family and friends in the carport of her home, in Monterey Park, south of Pasadena. The day I called on her, she was joined by her children, Mark Huebsch and Hilary Cohen, both attorneys in Southern California. I found her sitting in a reclining chair in her living room, surrounded by books and magazines: Haruki Murakami's "Kafka on the Shore," a Rachel Maddow book, *The New York Review of Books*. She told me, with a smile, "Oh, yes, he would have hated this pile of stuff."

She continued, "We spent hours debating every detail. Suits, for example. Mr. Neutra owned three suits. He was horrified by the number of suits my husband owned. And books! It was a fight to get one bookcase. See that sideboard back there? My father built it. Mr. Neutra despised it. He spent hours trying to talk me into putting his preferred knobs on it. He did not like my art work. It's all by people I know. In Chicago, I knew Max Kahn, who was involved in the W.P.A. arts program. Mr. Neutra eventually gave in. But he sent to Germany for nails, and he showed up one day with a stepladder and a hammer, and he hung the art work himself."

Huebsch was born in Danville, Illinois, the daughter of Nathan Lager, a Russian-born cabinetmaker. She majored in music at Illinois Wesleyan, playing the violin and the viola. In Chicago, in the thirties, she attended a recital by Sergei Rachmaninoff. "Yes, Rachmaninoff," she said, when I expressed astonishment. "A tall, tall, gaunt man. He came out and sat down at this enormous grand piano, and it would move, it would jump. Tremendous sound." After the Second World War, she lived for several years in occupied Germany: her husband, Maurice, served as an associate counsel in the Nuremberg war-crimes trials. When the couple moved to Los Angeles, Huebsch started an advertising agency. She still goes to the office once a week.

"We wanted a modern house," Huebsch said. "I was a Bauhaus nut, so

I knew a little. In Germany, I'd look for anything connected to the Bauhaus." She went on, "I ended up tracking down Ida Kerkovius, who'd been in the Bauhaus weaving department. We brought her food and coffee. Anyway, my brother-in-law recommended two architects. I called the first one, who was busy. So I called Neutra. Mark and Hilary were small children then, and he was excited by the idea of making a house for a family with little kids—he hadn't done that in years, he said." This was around 1952. Neutra drew up blueprints and helped the Huebsches buy a plot of land, but they couldn't afford to begin construction until a full decade later.

The Huebsch children gave me a tour of the residence while their mother, who moves with some difficulty, remained in the living room. The most salient feature of the design is a stairwell that descends to the lower level, its outer walls made of translucent Fac-trolite glass. When Mark showed me his childhood room, he said, "Neutra thought I was going to be a dashing young guy, so the room has a door to the outside. It's so I could 'steal in' after a night on the town. I didn't really use it, regrettably." Hilary added, with a laugh, "You'll notice that I did not have an outside door."

When we returned upstairs, Thelma Huebsch handed me two leather-bound portfolios of documents. The first included Neutra's instructions for the contractor—manically precise indications for floors, windows, piping, lighting fixtures, bathroom fixtures. A representative line: "Furnish plain incidental metal trim to support mirrors as detailed and manufactured by Garden City Plating and Manufacturing Company, 3912 Broadway Place, Los Angeles; phone: ADams 3-6293." Although assistants handled most of the day-to-day tasks, Neutra attended to every stage of the process. "He picked out in the lumberyard every door that is in this house," Huebsch told me. "He said that doors are paintings."

The second folder contained dozens of letters and postcards from Richard and Dione Neutra, and communications from their son Dion, also an architect, who died in 2019. (The couple's only surviving son is Raymond Neutra, a retired physician, who now

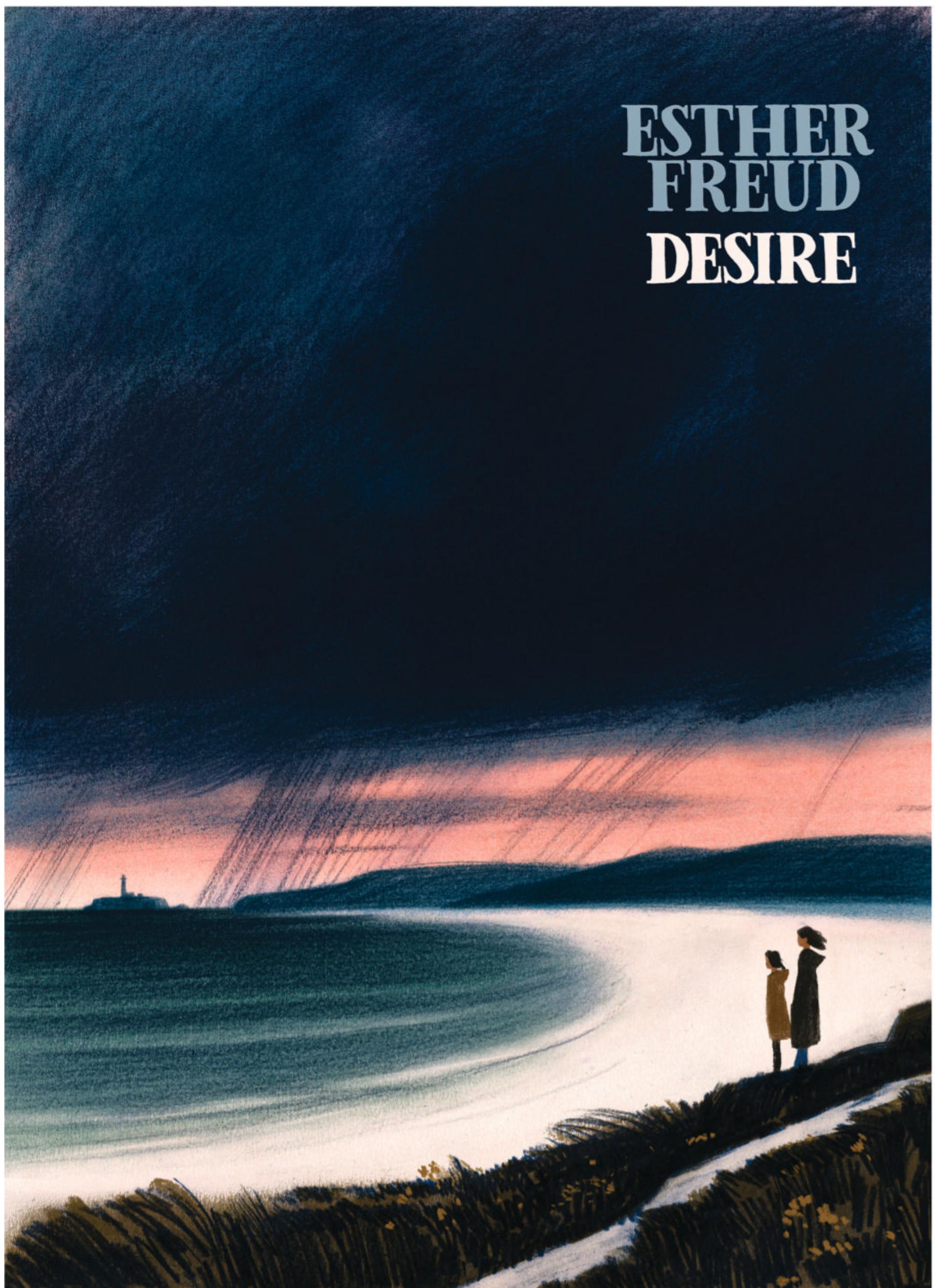
runs the Neutra Institute for Survival Through Design, which connects his father's legacy to the climate crisis.) Most of the correspondence postdated the completion of the Huebsches' house. The Huebsches were now part of the vast clan of "dear victims," as Neutra liked to say, receiving updates about his tours, vacations, honors, crises, and squabbles. Dione Neutra's handwriting is everywhere; her husband's dependence on her was absolute. At times, the notes take on a curiously plaintive tone. One "Dear friends" letter from 1963 reads, in its entirety, "My heart may have flaws, but it is all for you and your happiness." I asked Huebsch if Neutra ever discussed the vagaries of his career. "Yes, he always talked about Chavez Ravine," she replied. "He was heartbroken about it."

Did she ever feel as though she and her husband were being treated in a kind of therapeutic process, with Neutra as Freudian analyst? "Well, I don't know about that," she said, looking at me a bit askance. "We were very happy together here. And it *has* been so easy to live in." She gave a matter-of-fact shrug. "Incidentally, when I was in Vienna, I was in touch with Sophie Sabine Freud, who married Sigmund's brother Alexander. We learned that documents had been sequestered in fake walls at the home of the opera singer Grete Scheider...."

As Huebsch unfurled her mesmerizing stories, I thought of the other women of advanced age who were still in their Neutra homes: Susie Akai Fukuhara, ensconced above the Silver Lake Reservoir; Ann Brown, watching a summer rainstorm enshroud her house on Rock Creek Park, in Washington; Patricia Leddy, in Bakersfield, who still produces one small art work a day and fondly recalls her days dancing for Martha Graham. Was it merely a coincidence that they had lived such long, rich lives? It was: Neutra was no necromancer, nor could he mandate happiness through design. The resentments incubated by the Lovell Health House show as much. The most that Neutra could do, aside from making a beautiful structure, was to find people who also saw the beauty in it. No house can be greater than the life that is lived inside it. ♦

FICTION

ESTHER  
FREUD  
DESIRE



**T**he three of you are sisters, surely?" A man, awash with drink, waylaid us as we fought through to the lounge. Our mother smiled, eyes fixed on an empty row of seats, while Bea and I stepped sideways to avoid the steam cloud of his breath.

"Quick." A couple were snaking their way toward our chairs and, lifting Max, Mum rushed to intercept them. The boat was cheaper than the plane, the night boat cheaper still, and it was possible, if you were fast, to find enough seats to allow you to lie down. The man, red-faced, lost his footing and, one arm flailing, caught Bea around the waist. "Fuck off," she said, yanking herself free.

"Remember, not a word about the move," our mother said when we were settled, and I glanced at the dark curtain of her hair, her fine, drawn skin and worried eyes. Bea had twisted around to check the rubbery doors, slapping back and forth into the bar. "Sure," she said, and I agreed, and Max, who'd only recently turned three, ran a train along her arm.

We hadn't been to Ireland since Nana and Grandpa sold the farm. They were living in a bungalow on the other side of Youghal, and although there'd been invitations in Nana's fine blue hand, we'd let the opportunities slip by. Now, with nowhere else to go, we heaved across the sea toward them, the churn of engine oil, the dry salt smell of chips. "Nothing has changed." Our mother was determined that her parents never know that she'd left Max's father, even though for the past two months Bea and I had slept in a series of spare rooms, our hosts watchful and polite, while our old beds in our old bedrooms lay empty. What we would do when we got back I wasn't sure, and I imagined Bea beginning her new life—she'd been willing herself to turn sixteen so she could get away—while I'd go back to the same school, to the clock tower and the drinking fountain, the wishing gate and the walk down to the bus, to where our stepfather would still be teaching drama, even if he wasn't our stepfather anymore.

**N**ana and Grandpa met us at the dock. "Look at the lot of you," Nana said, eager. She had a silk scarf wrapped around her hair and her lipstick made a bright-red bow. "Haven't

you got big." There was the familiar grip of her fingers and the rustle of her mac as she drew close. Grandpa was dressed as I'd only seen him dress for Mass. His farm jacket and green Wellingtons discarded, he wore pressed trousers and a short beige jacket. His beard was trimmed, his bald head shiny. He looked small without his work.

"And how are you all, my pets?"

All I could think of was what I mustn't say.

"We're fine." Bea filled the silence with her plans of London, and the college she'd be starting in September—art, art history, French—while Nana fluttered that she always was a clever one, and hadn't she the smart handwriting, she always admired it, when she wrote. There was a pause as we looked guiltily through the car windows, aware of how long the stretches were when her letters lay unanswered, how hard it was to know what to say.

The bungalow they'd moved to was on a slope that overlooked the bay. "Will you look at the view," Nana said when we'd taken off our shoes. There was an oatmeal carpet and the place was very neat. Grandpa sat down in an armchair and picked up the paper—he still read *Farmers Weekly*—and Nana went into the small kitchen to put on the kettle.

There were two spare bedrooms in the bungalow. I was in a twin room with Bea. Our mother was to share with Max. "Fuck," Bea said, rolling herself a cigarette, and I thought about how often I'd watched her blow smoke out of the window, or had waited for her to come home at night. The first place we'd stayed after our mother escaped to her friend Jane's was the Humphrys'. They had two boys: the younger, Steve, was known for being handsome; the older had already moved out. One morning, the night after I'd locked myself in the bathroom for the second time (even though they'd warned me not to lock it), Mrs. Humphry suggested that I walk to school with Steve. She gave me a fortifying hug, and while I did my best not to sob against her bosom, Steve finished his toast. Together we walked under an umbrella, stumbling beneath its shadowed dome, along the edge of the golf course, across the Brighton Road, and down the cow path, my right arm stiff lest I acciden-

tally touch him. But even before we reached the school Mrs. Humphry must have caught Bea climbing in through the window I'd left open, because when I arrived back that afternoon it was only to collect my things and move to another family prepared to take us in.

"Fuck," Bea had said then, too, although the place that was found for us was the Godbers', whose middle son, Lawrie, had, until that Easter, been my boyfriend. The bedroom was next to his, and, just as we'd done during the winter of our going out, we lay together on his bed while he flicked through motorcycle magazines, and I breathed in the raw, fresh-air smell of him and wondered how we could find our way back to the time before.

He'll find me more interesting now, I'd thought when our mother told us we were leaving. But if Lawrie did find me more interesting his ways of showing it were subtle. He'd call me on a homemade telephone, two tin cans and a length of string strung between our rooms, and we'd talk, leaning out of our adjoining windows, sometimes for up to an hour. We didn't mention Fenella—the cause of our breakup—who I blanked in class, but neither did he try and kiss me, which left a large, sad stretch of time where kissing once took place.

"I'm going for a walk," Bea said, flinging away the mashed end of her roll-up. I started into the sitting room, where the adults were on a second pot of tea, and then, fearful of getting into conversation and finding myself tripped up, I grabbed my jacket. Bea had reached the end of the short drive. "Let's go down," I said, pointing to the water, but she turned the other way and hurried uphill.

I followed her in silence. The bungalow was new, and above it, at regular intervals, were other, even newer bungalows, all with the same plate-glass windows framing the view. We kept on, passing fields crossed with low stone walls, rocks stacked so slackly they looked ready to slide. There was a whitewashed cottage nestled in a thicket, built, presumably, before a view was required. A flock of sheep surged, thick as porridge, around a bend, and we climbed onto the ridge to let them

pass. "Afternoon," the farmer said, squinting, curious, and when he whistled his dog slithered ahead and worried the sheep into a field.

On we walked, through spits of rain, and I thought about the places where we might live when we went back to England. There were two rooms in a house on the outskirts of the village, and a kitchen, sour with gas and mold, shared with the small, pecking woman who had shown us around. "It's very reasonable," she said, "although you'll have to keep the little one quiet," and she watched us, hopeful, as we hurried away. There was a flat, newly built, on the road that led, eventually, to Brighton. Its walls were thin and the windows rattled, and the rent, even if we'd wanted it, was twice what we had to spend. The communal house was the one that I'd liked best. There were three rooms built around the stairwell at the very top, and a balcony that looked out over fields, but the landlord would have to accept my mother's offer of help with the garden—the grounds were large, with formal beds that ran in terraces to a pond—in lieu of some portion of the rent if we were to afford it.

"Bea." I was breathless as I caught up with her. It was strange to think she wouldn't be living with us again, that she'd be leaving home at the same age

our mother had, when she'd moved to London to live, unmarried, with our father. We'd reached a plateau and the road had narrowed. "Should we go on?" I was relieved when she turned back.

**N**ana had a ladle in her hand and was describing the ailments that afflicted her, the arthritis in her fingers, the heart trouble that had forced my grandparents to retire.

"Stop the moaning, woman." Grandpa knocked his pipe against the chair. His beard was stained yellow, and he wheezed as he heaved himself up.

"And then there's his chest, so bad."

"Enough!"

Nana bit her lip and served the soup. It was a leek soup with potato and small nubs of mutton that floated to the top. "It's only the smallest bit," she said, defensive. "For the taste."

Bea put down her spoon. We'd not eaten meat since arriving at the farm one summer to find our own orphaned, bottle-fed lambs had been carted off to market, but today there was nothing else save a white buttered triangle of bread, so I ate the potato and left the mutton in a small gray pile.

Max gobbled his up. "He likes that." Grandpa shot my mother an accusing look. "Give the child a steak, that'll set him straight," he said, and he turned to

Nana. "Get into that kitchen and put one on to grill."

"No!" Mum's eyes flashed, fierce.

Nana hovered above her chair.

"It's what the boy needs." Grandpa stared at Max as if he were defective, and we all looked, at his pale face and straight, pudding-bowl hair, and no one said it—how fearfully he looked like his father.

"There's no need." Mum was firm, and she turned to her mother and told her to sit down. Grandpa glared, and Nana, nervous, clattered her spoon against her bowl.

"I hope he dies first, and Nana can have some fun," Bea said that night in bed, and I crossed myself below the covers as I sometimes privately did.

**W**e stayed for three days before setting off for Bantry.

"Whatever is there in Bantry?" Nana had lipstick on her teeth.

"I have a friend, and the girls can see the country. We'll be back, don't worry. We'll be back before you know."

It didn't start to rain until they'd dropped us at the bus stop. I thought momentarily that we might catch the bus, but as soon as their car was out of sight my mother took Max by the hand and, insisting that we follow, trudged off along the road.

"Fucking hell." Bea stared at the flared ends of her trousers, soaking up the wet.

"Smile." Mum stuck out her thumb, and I did smile—at the men and women peering out between the wipers, at children turning around to look. A red car approached, a man and a woman, side by side. I froze, sure it was our grandparents returned, and I lowered my arm, expecting the screech of their brakes, the accusations. *Nothing but tinkers*. But it wasn't them, or, if it was, shame had blinded them and they drove on.

"We'll need a van at least," my sister huffed. Her trousers were stained wet halfway to the knee. "Who's going to stop for all of us?" But just then a car pulled over. "Where are you off to?" A man leant across and pushed open the door.

"Bantry Bay." My mother's dripping hair swung over her face.

"That's a way," he said, hesitating, but even as he spoke, explaining that



*"I'm going for that look where a lot of things partially obscure a lot of other things."*

he was only going as far as Ballincollig, she swung open the back door. "Thanks so much." She picked Max up and slid him in.

Max sat between Bea and me and played with his trains. In one hand he had Thomas, in the other Gordon, and he ran them up and down the seat, muttering, "Ballincollig, Colligballin," while Mum sat in the front and studied the map. "If we could make it to Clonakilty, I know some people there." She looked back at the three of us. "Martin and Petula?" She didn't sound as if she expected us to remember, and when we said nothing she gave her full attention to the driver.

The rain had eased by the time we were set down at the turn. "Good luck." The man waved, and we shook ourselves, and Mum stood Max against the verge, and we all watched as the snail of his willy fattened and unfurled.

"Damn, now I need to go."

"And me." I followed Bea toward a scrubby bank behind which we squatted, our pee steaming hot against the ground.

"Quick!" Mum yelled as we were shaking out the drops.

"For God's sake." Bea buttoned up her flies and the elastic of my knickers twisted as I tugged them up.

A car was waiting on the road.

"Here they are," Mum said, smiling, and the driver, a woman in a plastic mac, widened her eyes in alarm. The woman was going to Clonakilty, and although she didn't know Martin and Petula, it was clear that she'd heard their names. "They're up at the farm with the dogs, is that it?" Her hands tightened on the wheel.

At the entrance to the farm there was a statue made from rubber gloves, and as we eased open the gate a pack of hounds came barking out to meet us. I held tight to Max, although it was me who was afraid, but the dogs only circled, sniffing, and soon there was a shout and a woman sloshed across the yard.

"Petula!" Our mother waved.

Petula looked with horror at our bags. It was quite obvious that she didn't recognize Mum, although when prompted—I'm a friend of Jane's, do you remember, Appleby?—they em-



*"Let's not bother it while it's eating."*

braced, and we were told to come and see the puppies, seven of them, born the day before.

The mother, Sorrel, was a lurcher, who lay in a heap of straw in the corner of the barn. "Aren't they adorable!" The puppies were bald and blind, but Petula was so delighted by them, their snuffling noses, the greedy way they sucked, that we knelt down to pay homage as each one was unplugged from its teat and passed around. Sorrel looked up with weary eyes, and I was reminded of when Max was born and we crowded in to examine our new brother.

Martin was in the kitchen, hacking up a rabbit. He grunted and said welcome, and slowly over that slow afternoon, the rabbit bubbling into a stew, men and women drifted in and sat at the table, playing music, dealing cards. The stew, when it was ready, was served with potato, mashed with skin and eyes, and afterward we were shown to two sofas in a dark-beamed sitting room, so damp that we made a fire with paper to cheer us while we settled down to sleep.

We were woken by shrieking in the yard. Mum threw off the covers and ran from the room. Max sat up and shivered, and I crawled across to him and climbed into the warm space where our mother's body had been. He curved his knotty back against me, and we listened as voices rose, anguished, angry, interspersed with wails.

"Hell." Bea pulled on her boots, and with a quilt around her she went out. Minutes later, she was back. "It's a bloodbath."

Max went rigid in my arms.

"The puppies are dead."

I put my hands over his ears.

"They think it's a local, came in and killed them."

We waited in silence until our mother returned. "We should probably get out on the road and make an early start."

"What if they think it's us?" My teeth were chattering.

"It was Sorrel," she said, "and they know it."

"Sorrel?"

"It happens sometimes if the mother is too young."

I thought of our mice and how the father, Cassius Clay, had eaten the entire litter. We hadn't known then that parents should be kept apart.

"They're doing it for their own good," our mother had said, and she said it again now as she gathered up our things.

There was very little traffic going out of Clonakilty. A van passed, a trailer attached, and when the farmer stopped it was only to tell us that he was going to collect sheep from the next field, and although he'd be happy to take us, it might be quicker to walk. We did walk. It was a fine, soft day and the trees in the lane stretched above our heads, forming a leaf-green cave. Mum

handed out dried apricots from a packet in her bag.

"Are we going to the dog farm again later?" Max asked, and when we said no he stamped in one of yesterday's puddles and shouted "Hurrah!" and we all laughed. Even Bea was cheerful.

Bantry, when we arrived, was quiet. It was lunchtime, and the sky had clouded over. Xavier had been our step-father's friend. He'd visited us once in Sussex, all bone and Adam's apple, and now, for no other reason than that he lived in the west of Ireland, we were to stay with him for a few days. "He said to find him at the Bantry Inn."

"What, anytime?" We toiled through the streets until we came across the pub, which was small and plain, with three men at the bar. None of whom was Xavier.

The landlord hadn't seen him. Not for days.

Tears sprang into our mother's eyes. Don't cry! I willed her, and I caught Bea's grimace. "Last week he was here, and most likely next week he'll be sitting on that stool, but just now he's away to Galway to bring back his wife, God help him."

"The thing is." Mum was blinking. "We've come from England. He said we'd find him if we—"

"Ah." The man's face cleared. "So it's yourselves he's been waiting for," and he rummaged through a drawer, searched the till, and, not finding anything, disappeared to a back room. "It's a bit of a walk," he called. "Down to the harbor, keep to the right and up the hill, and you'll not miss it, it's the last house." He laid a large iron key on the bar.

We were so grateful that we stopped and had a drink, shared a plate of chips and, while we were waiting, a packet of crisps. Restored, we set off, climbing and stopping, carrying and cajoling, leaving the town behind. The sky was gray by the time we reached the house. It was a stone house built up from the cliff, and if you peered down from the back windows you could see the waves churning against rocks.

Welcome. Xavier had left a note and a large raw salmon on a plate.

My mother switched the oven on while we explored. The bedrooms were downstairs, small arrow-slit windows, the largest room, Xavier's, a mattress on

the floor, the smallest, a child's, dusty and shut up, a mobile swaying in the draft. Max rushed in and examined the toys. Two Teddies tucked into the bed, and a heap of books none of which featured trains. There was a musty bathroom and a study with a desk facing the sea, but upstairs all along the walls was one long daybed, foam seating wrapped in Indian prints, soft enough to sleep on.

I read Max a story—one of three that we'd brought with us—about an engine, banished to a siding, that learned to be good and was grateful for it, and when it was finished I looked down at the beach and there was Bea, barefoot, climbing over the rocks. As I watched,

|

know myself I  
say to my  
self so I  
cannot be

led astray. Led  
astray I say I  
know myself more  
fully now so I

cannot be made  
to do some-  
thing I as  
an other

wld never  
do. But I  
did it. Didn't I  
do it. It wasn't

me to do such  
a thing or believe  
such a thing I  
tell myself as I

look carefully into  
the only mirror I  
am given—my  
self in there—me

looking carefully &  
hard. I am honest in  
my looking I  
think as I see

someone else in there

she stopped and looked at the ocean and I looked, too, at the spit of the estuary, the lighthouse on its island, the lowering sky.

"Bea," I called when I'd run down to her, but my voice was thrown back by the wind. I pulled off my shoes. "Bea!" I was panting by the time I'd scrambled close, and she turned around, startled.

"What?" Her nose was swollen, her eyes two slits of red, and alongside my pity was a small mean streak of curiosity to see her beauty dissolved.

"Sorry." Beyond her was a white-sand crescent, washed smooth by the tide. "I was . . . bored." I wanted to cry, too. Will you miss us? Will you come

opening, will in their eyes wild like a sail in the wind, wind rising now as I

look in, bewildered. The old gentleness where is it. I put my hand

to my face but it touches glass. Where is my body to guide me I

think. I tap at the prisoner in there, is that the schoolroom, the

blank in the lesson, is that my soul gradually by its ten thousand adjustments

to its own increasing absence opening too far. Is it blind. I tap my face which is

gone on the glass which is not gone. Don't stop I hear my mind hiss, don't stop for

anything.

—Jorie Graham

home? Will it just be me now? Instead, navigating the next foothold, I began to scale the sharp black stones.

There was the smell of baking salmon, and "Desire" boomed from two tall speakers. "Saaaara," Dylan wailed, "Saaaara," while Mum whisked oil for mayonnaise.

"What are we going to do here?" Bea shouted. She'd flicked through Xavier's records. No Sex Pistols, No Clash.

I wondered how it would feel to be loved as much as Sara. "I don't know." Mum smiled, sad. She beat the egg.

I sat with Bea on the daybed and we listened, over and over, to "Desire," star-

ting when the wind rattled the house, relieved to find that it wasn't Xavier, returned. When the first side of the record ended, we let the hiss and crackle of it play on, the small regular bump as it rotated, until one of us got up and turned it over. When the salmon was cooked we ate it with potatoes, and afterward, by candlelight, lay down on what were now our beds to mourn again the lost hopes of the boxer Hurricane, languishing in jail, and the death of the gangster Joey, gunned down in a clam bar in New York. Bea and I mouthed "Oh, Sister" to each other, and sang along to "One More Cup of Coffee," howling like hyenas, our voices rising above the wind,

the chorus coming around so often that Max's thin accompaniment wound its way up from below, where he'd been tucked into Xavier's daughter's bed.

The next morning the sky was clear. Small breezes shuddered the windows, and gulls called as they swept by. I stood up and stretched, and, before I'd had a chance to turn, Bea clicked the record player on and let the needle drop. "Hurricane" began again, his story so familiar by now that I could have testified on his behalf in court—and to avoid the painful unwinding of his fate I pulled my clothes on and walked up onto the cliff. The grass was short and scattered with droppings, and as I stood, eyes closed, the sun on my face, I wondered if the Hurricane was still in prison, and hoped to God he wasn't.

"Saaa-ra, Saaa-ra," Bea warbled as she ran toward me, and, picking up speed, she raced past and away along the fine white path, her hair streaming out behind. I followed, my own hair streaming, bursting, as I'd always been, to catch up with her.

The salmon lasted for three days and then we were forced to walk down the hill to Bantry. It was warm and the grass sang green, and the harbor from above was turquoise. White gulls floated in small flocks, and boats with their white sails tacked across the bay. Tall houses stood, reflected. We were crossing the square, making for the grocer, when a flash of orange caught my eye, and there was a young man, thin and pale, dressed in saffron robes. "Have you heard of the Beatles?"

We stared at him, affronted.

"George Harrison has a solo album, and he'd like you to have a copy." He slid a record from his bag and thrust it at Bea. "For a small donation to the monks of Skibbereen . . ." and he went on, talking so fast and so determinedly that our mother opened the drawstring knot of her purse and paid him to stop. He bowed, his hands pressed together at his heart.

"Now, what am I meant to do with this?" Bea said when he was gone.

"I don't know." Mum was counting our diminished funds. "Leave it by the side of the road."

But we couldn't leave it. It had cost us more than tickets for the bus, and what if the monk found it, or, worse still,

George Harrison, who'd been my favorite, when I had a favorite. He'd be hurt.

"Damn." Bea sighed.

We bought bread and cheese and a bag of tomatoes, and we were looking for a bench where we could sit and make a sandwich, when we passed the Bantry Inn. Music floated out. A lone voice, singing. We stood and listened, and then our mother pushed open the door and, finding the place full, we squeezed in.

A man was sitting at a table, a young boy on his lap. When he reached the chorus—"Bobbing up and down like this, bobbing up and down"—the whole pub bobbed. We bobbed, too; there was no notwithstanding it. We bobbed again, and then again, until even we were laughing. When the song came to an end, there was a cheer, and another man began. His voice was clear and carrying. It was the story of how his village came to have a bus, and while he sang there was a deep, attentive silence. Verse after verse, the song unspooled, his face expressionless, his eyes fixed on the distance, every breath in that room his. He finished, and his neighbor pushed a glass of drink into his hand.

"Come all you roving blades, that ramble through the city." The words were slurred, and had a tang of English. "Kissing pretty maids." I turned, and there at the bar was Xavier.

"What'll it be?" he asked when we'd pushed our way through to him. "Pretty maids indeed." His eyes were wet, his mouth, too, and when we declined he ordered us three glasses of Guinness, and a whiskey for himself.

That night Xavier made a seafood stew, and as it cooked he talked, his words rising above the crash of the waves, about his wife who wasn't coming home. "The bitch." He poured more wine, detailing for us her faults, her jealousies, her moaning, the demands she made, her squalor. Just when I thought he'd stopped, he lowered his voice to tell us how he'd caught her, down on the strand, her skirts hitched up, pleasuring herself.

Heat flushed across my face, and I looked quick at my mother. Had she not heard? Her eyes were flat and far away.

Xavier bent low over Bea's chair. "Is that what you're up to yourself, down on the beach?" He licked his lips and sloshed a spoonful of seafood into her

bowl. "I thought maybe I'd seen you there when I was peeling prawns."

It was dark on the hill and there was nowhere else to go, and I thought of my stepfather and his own babyish words when I'd gone back to collect my clothes. "I loved your mummy," he'd said, although I knew by then he'd spent the half-term holiday with a girl who'd starred some years ago in the school production of "Medea." I'd looked at him, his hair mussed, his trousers shrunk to reveal his socks, and I'd been clear, although I couldn't say it: You didn't.

**W**e were quiet on the way back to Youghal. We carried our George Harrison record under our arms, on our heads; Max even used it as a branch line for his engines when for more than an hour no car passed. "Leave it," Bea hissed as we were dropped, finally, on the road that led up to the bungalow.

"You leave it." But we didn't have enough of anything to let it go.

"There you are." Nana threw open the door. "You've only now this minute missed him."

"Missed who?"

"Your man about the flat. He called to say that you can have it, in exchange for gardening, at a nice low rent."

Our mother paled.

"So you've left him." It was Grandpa. We waited for the row.

"Sit down if you're sitting down." Nana's voice was high, and she ushered us toward the table, which she laid with a cold tea. Sliced bread, egg mayonnaise, coleslaw. "I never thought, for sure, he was the right one." She looked sternly at Grandpa. "It may be best to make a break for it. While you're still young."

"Is that so?" Grandpa blew a plume of smoke into the air, and he leant back in his chair.

We ate in silence, until, unable to bear the strain, I described our new home. The flowered carpet, the staircase, the flight of wooden steps that led to our own door, and all the while I was thinking how, when Bea and I were babies, Mum kept us secret. She'd been terrified, she'd said, that if she came back to Ireland she'd be locked up in a home for wayward girls and women. That we'd be taken away.

"And where will you be staying when you start your studies?" Nana turned to

Bea, and Bea told them how our father had found a place for her to live in London, not too far from college.

"Now, isn't that something," she exclaimed.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Grandpa snapped. "It's only his duty that he's doing." He looked at Max and shook his head as if they'd all be fools to expect any decency to come his way.

**L**ate that night as I slipped out to fetch a glass of water, I saw them through a slice of open door standing in the gap between their beds. "Will you calm down." My grandfather held Nana by both arms.

"I will not!" Tears blurred her face.  
"You'll wear yourself out."

She quieted then and laid her head against his shoulder. There was a silence as they rocked from side to side. "How is she to manage?"

"Stop fretting, woman." It was his familiar, cross voice, but, as I readied myself to tiptoe past, I heard the crack in it.

**T**he next day they drove us to the ferry. We stood on the deck while all around rose up the wrench of chains, the bellow of the funnel, the shrieks and squalls of parting. "Bye!" we shouted, and we watched their open mouths, their open palms, and when we'd waved enough we went inside to find our bags, which we'd thrown onto a row of seats.

It was a calm crossing, and as I lay sleepless I saw us travelling through London, boarding our train south, the bus we always caught from the station swaying through country roads, turning at the church where in our old life we'd leap off. We'd stay on now until we reached the last village on the route. We'd pull open the door of the communal house, and trail past strangers to the flat on the top floor, where we'd make a new triangular family, with me at the farthest point, while Bea, escaped, spun off into her new life.

"Bea?" I hissed. "Are you awake?" I nudged George Harrison, on which her coat was heaped to make a pillow.

"No," she said, and together we listened to the great steel ship pounding through the waves. ♦

# THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

## DEAD RECKONING

*The novelist Percival Everett has always played games with genre and identity. Now he's raising the stakes.*

BY JULIAN LUCAS

Percival Everett has one of the best poker faces in contemporary American literature. The author of twenty-two novels, he excels at the unblinking execution of extraordinary conceits. “If I can make you believe it, then it’s fair game,” he once said of his books, which range from elliptical thriller to genre-shattering farce; their narrators

include a vengeful romance novelist (“The Water Cure”), a hyperliterate baby (“Glyph”), and a suicidal English professor risen from the dead (“American Desert”). Everett, sixty-four, is so consistently surprising that his agent once begged him to try repeating himself—advice he’s studiously ignored. “I’ve been called a Southern writer, a

Western writer, an experimental writer, a mystery writer, and I find it all kind of silly,” he said earlier this year. “I write fiction.”

Beneath his work’s ever-changing surface lies an obsession with the instability of meaning, and with unpredictable shifts of identity. In his short story “The Appropriation of Cultures,”

*In “The Trees,” a postmodern thriller about lynchings avenged, a character remarks, “Dead is the new Black.”*



*"Still growing it out?"*

from 1996, a Black guitarist playing at a joint near the University of South Carolina is asked by a group of white fraternity brothers to sing "Dixie." He obliges with a rendition so genuine that the secessionist anthem becomes his own, shaming the pranksters and eliciting an ovation. Later, he buys a used truck with a Confederate-flag decal, sparking a trend that turns the hateful symbol into an emblem of Black pride. The story ends with the flag's removal from the state capitol: "There was no ceremony, no notice. One day, it was not there. *Look away, look away, look away . . .*"

Such commitment to the bit is exemplary of Everett's fiction. Yet nothing he has written could be sufficient preparation for his latest book, "The Trees" (Graywolf), a murder mystery set in the town of Money, Mississippi. The novel begins, stealthily enough, as a mordant hillbilly comedy, Flannery O'Connor transposed to the age of QAnon. We are introduced to Wheat Bryant, an ex-trucker who lost his job in a viral drunk-driving inci-

dent; his faithless wife, Charlene; his cousin Junior Junior Milam; and his mother, Granny C, who zones out on a motorized shopping cart while the family bickers about hogs. The old woman appears to be having a stroke but is actually reflecting on "something I wished I hadn't done. About the lie I told all them years back on that nigger boy":

"Oh Lawd," Charlene said. "We on that again."

"I wronged that little pickaninny. Like it say in the good book, what goes around comes around."

"What good book is that?" Charlene asked. "Guns and Ammo?"

Granny C, it turns out, is a fictionalized Carolyn Bryant Donham, whose accusation that Emmett Till had whistled at and grabbed her, at the country store in Money where she worked, instigated the twentieth century's most notorious lynching. On August 28, 1955, Donham's husband, Roy Bryant, and her brother-in-law J. W. Milam kidnapped, tortured, and killed the fourteen-year-old boy for violating

the color line. The case drew condemnation throughout the world but ended in Bryant and Milam's acquittal by an all-white jury. (They later confessed to a reporter in exchange for three thousand dollars.) Donham, alleged by some witnesses to have participated in the abduction, went on to live in peaceful anonymity—until 2017, when, in an interview with the historian Timothy Tyson, she admitted to fabricating details of her encounter with Till. The octogenarian "felt tender sorrow" over Till's fate but offered no apology. Her longevity renewed outrage about the half-century-old crime: Till died at fourteen; his accuser lived to finish her memoirs, which are due to be made public in 2036.

"The Trees" is not much interested in anyone's tender sorrow. In the opening chapters, Wheat and Junior Junior—invited sons of Till's killers—are found castrated, and with barbed wire around their necks. Beside each white victim lies a dead Black man in a suit, disfigured as Till was and clutching the white man's severed testicles like a trophy. Later, Granny C is found dead of shock beside an identical besuited corpse. Similar murders occur elsewhere in the area, and, each time, a spectral body appears, stirring terrified rumors of a "walking dead Negro man." The killings spread throughout the country; in several Western states, the vanishing corpse seems to be that of an Asian man. Is it the handiwork of a serial killer? A cadre of vigilante assassins? A swarm of vengeful ghosts?

Into this maelstrom Everett hurls three Black detectives: Ed Morgan, a gentle giant with a young family; Jim Davis, a wisecracking bachelor; and Herberta Hind, a misanthropic professional who joined the F.B.I. to spite her radical parents. (Jim and Ed work for the *Mississippi* Bureau of Investigation, often to their embarrassment: "That's some crazy shit to yell out. MBI! Fucking ridiculous.") Received with fear and prejudice by the town's white citizens, the trio feels distinctly ambivalent about the case, which they initially treat as a dark joke. "Maybe it's some kind of Black ninja," Jim says. "Jamal Lee swinging lengths of barbed wire in Money, Mississippi."

The detectives zero in on what seems like a conspiracy involving a soul-food restaurant (with a secret dojo) and a centenarian root doctor, Mama Z, who keeps records of every lynching in America. The stage is set for a Black-cop ex machina à la “In the Heat of the Night,” “BlacKkKlansman,” or the 2021 New York mayoral election. But the detectives quickly find themselves in the wrong genre of justice. What begins as a macabre sendup of the unreconstructed South culminates in a more unsettling and possibly supernatural wave of vengeance, as the killings assume the dimensions of an Old Testament plague:

Some called it a throng. A reporter on the scene used the word horde. A minister of an AME church in Jefferson County, Mississippi, called it a *congregation* . . . and like a tornado it would destroy one life and leave the one beside it unscathed. It made a noise. A moan that filled the air. *Rise*, it said, *Rise*. It left towns torn apart. Families grieved. Families assessed their histories. It was weather. *Rise*. It was a cloud. It was a front, a front of dead air.

**T**he unresolved legacy of lynching might seem like a surprising choice of theme for the cool, analytic, and resolutely idiosyncratic Percival Everett. Brought up in a family of doctors and dentists, in Columbia, South Carolina, he studied the philosophy of language in graduate school, drifting from the dissection of invented dialogue into full-blown fiction organically. He wrote his début novel, “Suder” (1983)—the story of a baseball player’s madcap odyssey after a humiliating slump—as a master’s student in creative writing at Brown, where he met the great literary trickster Robert Coover. Everett, too, established himself as an author of terse and wily postmodern fiction, drawing on such influences as Lewis Carroll, Chester Himes, Zora Neale Hurston, and, especially, Laurence Sterne, whose “Tristram Shandy” remains a model for his playfully withholding work.

A character named Percival Everett makes opaque cameos in several of his novels but offers few keys to his creator’s life. Publicity-avoidant—he

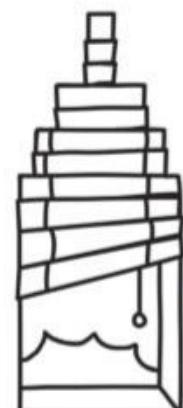
told audiences on his one book tour, for his twelfth novel, “Erasure” (2001), that he was there only because he needed money for a new roof—Everett likes to downplay his literary vocation. He routinely describes fiction as a sideline to hands-on pursuits like fly-fishing, wood carving, ranching, and training animals, especially horses, whom he credits with teaching him to write. Everett himself teaches English at the University of Southern California, in Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife, Danzy Senna, a novelist and a fellow U.S.C. faculty member. Yet he’s reluctant to admit that he has anything to teach. He speaks of writing fiction as a Zen-like process of unlearning, each novel leaving him more aware of his ignorance than the last. As he once said, “My goal is to know nothing, and my friends tell me I’m well on my way.”

His protagonists, too, are buffeted by destabilizing revelations—crises of identity that double as crises of genre. In “American Desert” (2004), the jolt of being resurrected forces Ted Street to reevaluate a broken marriage, even as Christian fundamentalists try to conscript him into millenarian schemes. Baby Ralph, the narrator of “Glyph” (2014), terrifies adults with his mastery of language—especially his father,

an insecure post-structuralist academic—upending several disciplines by writing prodigiously yet refusing to speak. (“I was a baby fat with words, but I made no sound,” he reflects.) The novel is a characteristically Everett mixture of deadpan wit, slapstick accident, and serious philosophical inquiry, often conducted

by famous figures cribbed from reality: Hurston, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and an inexplicably heterosexual Roland Barthes.

An Oprah Winfrey stand-in makes an appearance in “Erasure,” Everett’s best-known work, which ridicules the pressure on Black writers to publish “authentic” testimonials of urban poverty. Thelonious Ellison, a frustrated author of rarefied experimental fiction, is caring for his Alzheimer’s-stricken mother when he learns about “We’s



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Lives in Da Ghetto,” a runaway best-seller by a Black Oberlin graduate. Ellison is so enraged that he writes a pseudonymous parody, titled “My Pafology” (later simply “Fuck”), which is included as a novel within the novel. To his astonishment, it becomes a best-seller—an irony compounded by the breakout success of “Erasure.”

Another cat-and-mouse game with stereotypes unfolds in Everett’s hilarious “I Am Not Sidney Poitier” (2009), a picaresque story of a wealthy Black orphan with a fatefully strange name. Not Sidney Poitier, as he is called, is raised by servants on the estate of Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, because his late mother made a generous investment in a predecessor of the network. Unencumbered by family, necessity, or identity, he sets off on a series of adventures that riff on his eponym’s films. The actor’s cipher-like versatility—a dignified emissary of Black America in every role—provides endless material for parody: Not Sidney escapes from prison shackled to another inmate (“The Defiant Ones”), dates a light-skinned girl from a colorist family (“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”), and fixes a roof for a commune of religious women (“Lilies of the Field”). Yet a darker theme of self-surrender runs throughout. During an extended allusion to “In the Heat of the Night,” Not Sidney is asked to examine what appears to be his own dead body at an Alabama police station:

As we stepped out of the makeshift morgue, I thought that if that body in the chest was Not Sidney Poitier, then I was not Not Sidney Poitier and that by all I knew of double negatives, I was therefore Sidney Poitier.

Corpses are omnipresent in Everett’s fiction, their disruptive energies catalyzing important revelations. In his comic novels, they often fall prey to cultists, body snatchers, and creepy morticians, serving as carnivalesque reminders of the self’s plasticity. In his thrillers, mostly set in the American West, they become traces of atrocities that might otherwise remain invisible: torture, toxic pollution, massacres, femicide. Novels such as “Watershed” (1996), “Wounded” (2005), “The Water Cure” (2007), and “Assumption” (2011) feature loners whose rugged isolation—

usually involving a lot of fly-fishing—is interrupted by encounters with the dead, who lure them into deeper currents of violence.

The deaths of children loom large, especially in Everett’s previous two novels, both of which make the shock of mortality the basis of formal experiments. “So Much Blue” (2017), a painter’s story, unfolds in three parallel time lines centered on nested secrets: an extramarital affair, an immense blue masterpiece locked in a barn, and the traumatic memory of a little girl’s death in war-torn El Salvador. “Telephone” (2020), which was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize, is split even more dramatically. The story of a middle-aged geologist’s struggle with his teen-age daughter’s terminal genetic disorder, it was issued in three nearly indistinguishable editions with separate endings. The novel’s epigraph, from Søren Kierkegaard, suggests the world’s bleakest choose-your-own-adventure: “Do it or do not do it—you will regret both.” But the geologist’s inevitable loss is also strangely freeing; with nothing left to fear, he attempts a mad act of heroism in the rural Southwest, drawn by an anonymous note that reads “Please Help Us.”

Death issues a more terrifying summons in Everett’s gripping “The Body of Martin Aguilera” (1997), a compact work set in the canyons of northern New Mexico. A retired professor discovers his neighbor dead at home. Soon after he reports the apparent killing, the body vanishes—only to reappear, seemingly drowned, in a nearby river. The professor suspects foul play, and his investigation reveals a vast ecological crime. Everything depends on his ability to overcome fear and repulsion as he fights to secure the body. In a pivotal scene, he attends a clandestine funeral where members of a lay Catholic brotherhood, the Penitentes, scourge themselves as they process around a putrefying dead man. In a violent culture afraid of mortality, the willingness to be intimate with death can be a form of vigilance.

“**T**he Trees,” Everett’s longest book yet, synthesizes many of these abiding preoccupations: race and media, symbols and appropriation, and, especially, the unsettling power of

corpses to shock and reorient the living. The novel can be read as a grisly fable about whose murder counts in the public imagination—reprising the question that Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, confronted in 1955: How do you make America notice Black death?

The lynched body originally functioned as a weapon of white-supremacist terror. Strung up from trees or bridges and photographed for macabre postcards, victims were transformed into banners for the cause that had taken their lives. But in 1955 Till-Mobley made the historic decision to hold an open-casket viewing of her maimed son, galvanizing millions against segregation and lynching. She reappropriated her son’s death from his killers, who had intended it as an act of intimidation, and turned it into an act of defiance, inviting press photographers and crowds of strangers to, in her words, “let the world see what I’ve seen.”

Less well known than the funeral is Till-Mobley’s struggle to recover her son’s body. Mississippi authorities were rushing to bury it when news of his death reached her, in Chicago. After they finally agreed to surrender the body, they sent it in a sealed casket, with instructions that it never be opened. Later, Till-Mobley had to fight for her son’s body in court, where his killers’ attorneys argued that it was too decomposed for reliable identification. Till was probably still alive, they suggested, conspiratorially speculating that the N.A.A.C.P. had staged the lynching.

In “The Trees,” this bad-faith defense returns with vengeful irony, as staged Black cadavers appear at the scene of each murder in Money. What in 1955 was a calculated blindness about lynching becomes not a proof of power but a sign of weakness: the body that Mississippi once refused to recognize comes back as a terror its citizens cannot understand. Everett envisages the town as stalked by sinister allusions, shadows of the pervasive past. Billboards encourage visitors to “pull a catfish out of the Little Tallahatchie! They’re good eating!” (It was a boy checking catfish nets in the river who discovered Till’s body.) When Charlene Bryant is

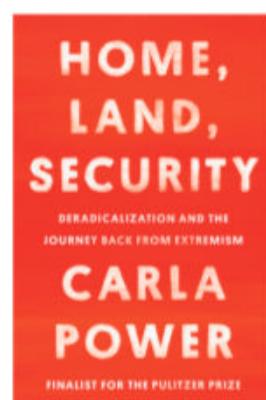
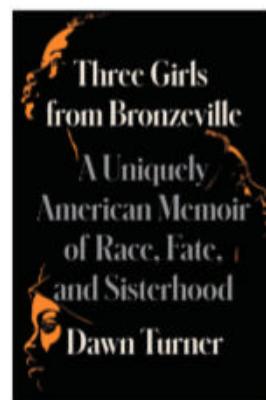
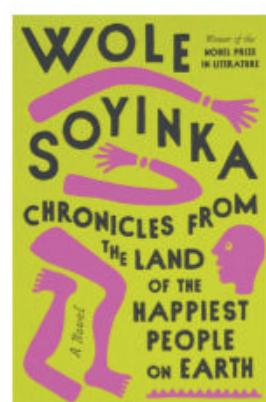
asked if she can identify the man at the scene of her husband's murder, she replies, "His own Black mama couldn't have knowned him."

The slip is characteristic of a novel that uses humor less to provoke laughter than to eviscerate false innocence—funny, yes, but mostly in the maddening way that it was funny when the cops who arrested Dylann Roof treated him to Burger King. Everett's scathing portrayal of Money's self-protective amnesia has an affinity with the artist Kerry James Marshall's "Heirlooms and Accessories," a triptych of prints depicting lockets that contain black-and-white photographs of different smiling white women. Though each may be someone's beloved grandmother, the portraits are excerpted from a 1930 photograph of a lynching; every individual is an "accessory" to murder. The killings in "The Trees" represent an even more striking attempt to return focus to the culprits. One suspect in the murders explains, "If that Griffin book had been *Lynched Like Me*, America might have looked up from dinner or baseball."

There's a certain self-referential exhaustion to the novel's killings, which can be understood as a kind of despairing joke: for the country to really care about dead Black people, they'd have to be found next to white ones. And even if the repressed violence of American history did erupt, few would recognize it for what it was. Everett's townspeople concoct copious theories about the killings—mass delusion, a race war, satanic assassins capable of faking death—but hardly anyone draws the connection to Emmett Till. When the killings reach the White House, a Trump-like President cowers under the Resolute desk and wonders if Ben Carson might be to blame.

The satire's ultimate target is America's inability to make cultural sense of atrocities that it has never fully acknowledged, much less atoned for. Its persistent flights from the obvious evoke the evasions of our era, as the unprecedented visibility of racist killings gives rise to new strains of misdirection, exploitation, and apathy. In one memorable scene, Jim tracks the vanishing corpses to a warehouse in Chicago, the aptly named Acme Cadaver

## BRIEFLY NOTED



**Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth**, by Wole Soyinka (Pantheon). The Nobel Prize-winning playwright's first novel in half a century is a riotous satire set in a thinly fictionalized Nigeria, where a "National Board of Happiness," comprising the media, the government, and organized religion, distracts the public from rampant corruption by bestowing titles of rococo dubiousness ("People's Steward," "Yeomen of the Year"). A celebrated surgeon and his engineer friend uncover a black market for human body parts which implicates the highest rungs of society. With caustic wit, Soyinka's carnivalesque depictions of venality ferret out hypocrisy from behind its elaborate guises and condemn crimes that challenge "the collective notion of soul."

**Savage Tongues**, by Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). In this cerebral novel, an Iranian British writer raised partly in Spain returns to the apartment in Andalusia where, at seventeen, she spent a summer with a much older man, who was violent and controlling. Exploring her ambivalent feelings about her persecutor, she sees the relationship as a demonstration of "how desire is shaped by the destructive logic of empire." Believing that "mourning isn't really possible when you're alone," she has brought a friend, a Jewish activist for Palestinian rights who has her own trauma. The pair spend their days drinking at the beach and trying to scrub the apartment clean while they confront the ghosts inhabiting its walls.

**Three Girls from Bronzeville**, by Dawn Turner (Simon & Schuster). The girls of the title are the author, her younger sister, and her childhood best friend, who grew up in aspirational working-class Black families in Chicago in the sixties and seventies, "at the threshold of what our parents hope is a new, post-racial era." But the girls' lives took drastically different turns: the author became a writer; her sister died of alcoholism; the friend fell victim to the crack epidemic and was imprisoned for murder. Turner reexamines their lives and shows how both personal choices and structural racism shaped their fates. She is stunned when a white newspaper editor insists that she could never have ended up like the others—"as if the right combination of rage, desperation, hopelessness, drugs couldn't land you in a place you never dreamed."

**Home, Land, Security**, by Carla Power (One World). This timely study of deradicalization attempts to understand the lure of extremism. Power meets the mothers of ISIS recruits in the U.K., France, and Belgium; leaders of deradicalization programs in Indonesia and Pakistan; and an erstwhile German neo-Nazi now combatting white supremacy. She examines compassionate strategies for discouraging would-be extremists or rehabilitating former ones, and criticizes the punitive approach taken by countries like the U.S. and the U.K., noting that Western governments have done much to create the conditions for extremism to flourish in the first place: "The recruitment successes of militant groups serve as maps of a society's mistakes."

Company. The bathetic tableau recalls the video for Childish Gambino's "This Is America," a vision of mass entertainment laundering mass death:

It was like a cleaner's facility, except instead of shirts, blouses, and jackets, corpses, women and men, slid by on suspended rails. Farther away, through the center of the room, naked cadavers glided along, head to toe, on a conveyer belt. The music of the Jackson Five blared. A-B-C. One two three. Chicago Bears and Bulls banners hung from the ceiling some twenty feet above them. . . . The music changed to Marvin Gaye. What was going on?

"The Trees" is an almost disconcertingly smooth narrative, the short chapters dealt as quickly as cards. Gruesome scenes and hardboiled detective banter alternate with comic vignettes (F.B.I. antics, an online white-supremacist meeting) and stark meditations on what one character describes as the slow "genocide" of American lynching. The mystery itself is tightly constructed and suspensefully paced—until, as in Everett's other novels, a chasm opens between form and content. The tension, in this case, lies between the open-and-shut conventions of the crime novel and the immensity of Everett's subject.

Nobody feels this more keenly than the trio of detectives, who are constantly stymied by being "Black and blue." The white residents of Money hate them out of prejudice; the Black ones distrust them as cops. "You're from the F.B.I.," Mama Z tells Herberta when questioned about her archives. Herberta says, "I'm also a Black woman." Mama Z replies, "So you see my problem." The discomfort between the two mirrors the divisions of last summer's uprising, when many protesters found themselves on the other side of cordons and curfews enforced by Black officers and mayors. In one uncanny moment, the detectives arrive at a bar in Money's Black neighborhood just as a young woman with a Mohawk begins a haunting performance of "Strange Fruit." The scene quietly undercuts any presumption of racial solidarity, as the watching officers realize that they've been shut out of a community secret.

Everett's novel seems to look askance even at itself. When Damon Thruff, a young Black professor specializing in

the history of lynching, arrives in Money to assist Mama Z, she tells him that she's read his work and finds it unfeeling: "You were able to construct three hundred and seven pages on such a topic without an ounce of outrage." The figure is curiously close to the number of pages in "The Trees," implicitly questioning not only Damon's sang-froid but Everett's. Novels about the legacy of racist violence often strive to voice buried emotion. Bernice L. McFadden's "Gathering of Waters" (2012), another novel about Emmett Till, is elegiacally narrated by the collective consciousness of Money. Jesmyn Ward's "Sing, Unburied, Sing" (2017), also set in Mississippi, grieves for victims of the state's Parchman Farm penitentiary through the lyrical narration of ghosts.

"The Trees," by contrast, is as cold and matter-of-fact as Mama Z's lynching archive, where the drawers are "like those in a morgue." Uncharacteristically for Everett, who is known for cerebral narrators, the novel surveys a wide cast from an indifferent third-person remove. Sometimes Everett appears reluctant to commit his attention, or to decide between drawing caricatures and fleshing out human quandaries. Is this the story of Granny C's agonized comeuppance? Mama Z's patient revenge? The alienation of Jim, Ed, and Herberta, as they pursue vigilantes with whom they quietly sympathize? No character is allowed quite enough presence to say. But denying readers a surrogate is also a strategy, turning the moral crisis back onto us, unresolved.

To make art about lynching is an increasingly fraught endeavor. Since Mamie Till-Mobley's decision to "let the world see," the pendulum has swung back to a suspicion that many representations of anti-Black violence risk offering up their subjects to a mob's eyes. When the artist Dana Schutz, who is white, exhibited her painting of Emmett Till's mangled face in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, protesters demanded its removal and encouraged her to destroy it. At the time, the debate was largely about who should be entitled to such an image, and whether that line ought to be drawn on the basis of race. Schutz's defenders frequently pointed

out that Henry Taylor, a Black artist, had a painting of Philando Castile's killing in the same show.

Now, though, scrutiny has fallen on such representations regardless of who creates them. The bereaved relatives of police-killing victims have begun to challenge Black artists and activists for adapting, and even profiting from, images of their dead loved ones. Many writers, especially of the Afropessimist school, argue that Black trauma has been hijacked by narratives of redemption, as names like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor cease to refer to individuals and become—by a kind of necromancy—avatars of others' political ideals. "Dead is the new Black," as one of Everett's suspects quips.

"The Trees," in its rigorous denial of sentiment, shuts down such catharsis—as if to say that funeral oratory is inappropriate when so many victims have yet to be counted. As Damon, the scholar, begins working in Mama Z's archives, he is most disturbed by lynching's effacement of individuality:

The crime, the practice, the religion of it, was becoming more pernicious as he realized that the similarity of their deaths had caused these men and women to be at once erased and coalesced like one piece, like one body. They were all number and no number at all, many and one, a symptom, a sign.

Suddenly, he feels compelled to write down each victim's name in pencil and erase it. From Emmett Till to Alton Sterling, the list occupies an entire chapter.

The focus shifts from Everett's characters to the phenomenon of lynching in all its geographic breadth, intangible influence, and individual particularity. Beyond the South, there are revenge killings in Rock Springs, Wyoming, where dozens of Chinese miners were massacred, in 1885; in Carbon County, Utah, where a Black coal miner was hanged from a cottonwood tree, in 1925; and in Duluth, Minnesota, where an unemployed man fondly reflects on his grandfather's role in the town's lynching of three Black men, in 1920. (He wishes someone would do the same to the "fucking Hispanics" who took his job.) The novel makes good on its title's promise, as the trees of a particular mystery recede into the forest of an ongoing crime. ♦



BOOKS

## LET THERE BE DARKNESS

*The shadow language of Joy Williams.*

BY KATY WALDMAN

You don't encounter the fiction of Joy Williams without experiencing a measure of bewilderment. Williams, one of the country's best living writers of the short story, draws praise from titans such as George Saunders, Don DeLillo, and Lauren Groff, and many of her readers, having imprinted on her wayward phrasing and screwball characters, will follow her anywhere. But the route can be disorienting, like climbing an uneven staircase in a dream. Her tales offer a dark, provisional illumination, and they make the kind of sense that disperses upon waking. For years, Williams has worn sunglasses at

all hours, as if to blacken her vision. The central subject of art, she has written, is "nothingness."

Williams is now seventy-nine. In her stories, and in her five novels, she opens cracks in reality, through which issue ghosts, clairvoyants, changelings, and suffering. She seems especially attuned to the psychoanalytic distinction between "manifest" and "latent" content—the smoke versus the fire beneath it. In "The Farm," from 1979, a woman utters words as "codes for other words, terrible words." Her son has died, yet she prattles on about "food, men, the red clouds massed above the

*In "Harrow," Williams writes sentences that seem to warp and remake reality.*

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA LANNES

sea." One of the strangest parts of reading Williams is the jumpiness in her language, a feeling that her nouns and verbs, no matter how meticulously ordered, might be arbitrary, a "code" for things impossible to say.

Williams uses the variation of her distinct, mysterious sentences to bypass the conventions of plot. Her basic unit is short, declarative, and deceptively simple. ("Preparation for a Collie," from 1974, begins, "There is Jane and there is Jackson and there is David.") Sometimes, thrillingly, the sparse habitat of the prose yields a hoof or a horn, a glimpse of exotic vocabulary. (Of a pack of feral children Williams writes, they "certainly weren't babies, nor would they be the resigned and ingavescent old.") More intricate statements pair a blank tone with a confounding meaning: a girl "is propelled by sidereal energies." And then there are the mother lodes, the lines that disarm the reader with their lovely, freakish surrealism: "He is a tall, dark tree rooted in the stubborn night, and she is a flame seeking him—unstable, transparent."

Energy flickers in and out of this writing, with its flatness and sudden, lyrical bursts. Williams is endlessly interested in the attribute of spirit and who or what possesses it. Her work proposes limit cases in animation: taxidermied creatures, people in comas, people with dementia, the very old and the unborn. She often assigns life-like qualities to sunlight or plants or even buildings. In one passage, "the balconies did not look as if they would suffer to be enjoyed"; in another, "the wind rose, searching the sky for something to engage, then finding nothing, dropped down to nudge the water in the pool."

If Williams's breezes indulge in child's play, her human characters resemble something close to forces of nature. They behave like beasts, fall to earth like meteors. Their motivations prove hard to fathom, even and especially to themselves, which makes them read like cosmic misfires, unequal to the rest of creation. Williams is at her most entertaining when skewering peoples' preposterous dinner parties and daffy beach houses. Someone is always drinking too much; a husband is frequently cheating. Characters meet brutal, untimely,

bathetic deaths, which may or may not slow them down. (In “The Quick and the Dead,” from 2000, a spectral socialite torments her spouse, who has a crush on the yard boy.) Villains, marked by their cruelty to children and to pets, are particularly doomed: one man has his penis blown off.

At the wistful center of things usually stands a young woman. She may be a new mother, like Pearl, in “The Changeling” (1978); perhaps she has just done something drastic, like Corvus, from “The Quick and the Dead,” who burns down her house after her parents drown. Ontological anxiety is a shared affliction: Kate, from “State of Grace” (1973), “often worried about never being born.” A God-shaped shadow hovers over these books, whose cadences feel Biblical, their proportions vast. Williams, the daughter of a Congregational minister, invokes themes of purity and sin, and yet the religious retains an aura of anachronism. In much of Williams’s writing, a question lingers: Has holiness finally withdrawn from the world?

Williams’s new novel, “Harrow” (Knopf), answers that question definitively. When the curtain lifts, nature lies in tatters, its remains soon to be converted into so-called sewer meadows or leased to Supercuts. The protagonist, Khristen, is a teen-ager with a grand destiny, according to her mother, who insists that her daughter briefly died as an infant and then returned. Khristen is shipped off to a school for the gifted—a Kafkaesque place, with no books or paper—before her father dies, her mother disappears, a mysterious cataclysm occurs, and the academy closes. She wanders into a retirement community next to a befouled lake, which the elderly residents have named Big Girl. The group, which calls itself the Institute, is not, one of its leaders reflects, “a suicide academy or a terrorist hospice. Or not exactly.” Its members seek to avenge the natural world, to kill scientists who vivisect animals or breed germs for warfare. They’re “a gabby seditious lot,” Williams writes, “in the worst of health but with kamikaze hearts...determined to refresh, through crackpot violence, a plundered earth.”

In the past two decades, Williams has churned out stories and furious, eschatological, climate-themed essays, but she hasn’t published a novel since “The Quick and the Dead,” which earned a Pulitzer nomination. “Harrow” extends several of that book’s pre-occupations—the eco-terrorism theme recalls Alice, a militant environmentalist, who at one point ties up a drifter for animal cruelty. But “Harrow” summons a more alien palette, with Williams’s tone achieving a new, perfectly hostile register. Characters are ruthlessly dispatched—a student, broken by the academy, is “taken away a shuddering ruin”—and society’s foibles are laid bare. At the end of history, we learn, Disney World “is going strong” and apathy amounts to a “sign of refinement.” Academics flock to voguish conferences to deliver lectures on “The Potentiality of Landscape’s Emptiness: The Integrity of Half Measures.” Much of this would be hilarious, if it weren’t so sad.

Williams’s vision of an annihilated earth seems to have flown from the brain of Francisco Goya. “The land was bright with raging fires ringed by sportsmen shooting the crazed creatures trying to escape the flames,” she writes. As the novel continues, it plumbs ever-deeper zones of dystopian weirdness. Rain does not sparkle or ricochet but clings “grayly like tiny sticky-bodied caterpillars.” Tree bark burns to

of Yoko Tawada’s “The Emissary” (2018), another novel of environmental crisis, which imagines vigorous centenarians tending to the weak, toxin-addled young. In a way, these books’ atmosphere of warning draws strength from ageism: a reader’s disturbance—the heroes are *old*?—is conscripted to make the future seem even scarier. And yet Williams’s seniors don’t scan as “feisty,” or as insipidly, twinklingly wise. They can be petty, harsh with obsolescence, yearning only for “a proud and wolfish death.” Such pessimism generates haunted, peculiar prose. One of the Institute’s leaders, Lola, considers Big Girl, the tainted lake: “Someone was down in her depths, this she’d once believed. A woman, of course, with long tangled hair. And all the wickedness of humankind against nature fell down through the waters and collected in her dark locks.”

There is a way of understanding Williams that connects her imagery to the nature of grief, to how it makes experience gigantic and strange. She practices a kind of hallucinogenic realism, which takes at face value the psychological flights of characters deranged by loss. Kate, Khristen, and the three teen-agers at the heart of “The Quick and the Dead” are all motherless, and many of the short stories fall open with an intimation of tragedy. For Williams, sorrow doesn’t contract the universe; it expands it. In this, she’s an heir to the poet Wallace Stevens, who wrote, in “Sunday Morning,” that “death is the mother of beauty.” (Stevens, who called himself a “dried-up Presbyterian,” was likewise reckoning with a residual God-shape.) It is Lola’s sadness that begets a vision of a lady in the water. Pain prompts these women’s imaginations; pain is the new mother of creation, now that the earth has been despoiled.



the touch. Even the days themselves, with their “rubbery, unforgiving texture,” seem “hesitant, as though waiting for something further and not to their benefit to be decided.”

Any remaining goodness persists in an ironic place: humanity, the part that understands its own crimes. And it is doubly ironic that the keepers of this flame belong to a demographic—the elderly—that is so consistently belittled and undervalued. I thought

Reading “Harrow,” I was struck by a memory. When I was in middle school, my mother learned on a phone call that her brother-in-law, my uncle, had died. After she told me, the first thing I asked her was whether I had to go to swim practice. Then I laughed uncontrollably at something

unrelated that my sister had said. This is a Joy Williams story: bad behavior, broken synapses. Loss rewrites the rules of the living. It seemed impossible, in that moment, that certain words might continue meaning what they had always meant. The rupture had rendered everyday language incoherent—had driven us to converse in hoots, like animals.

Williams seems uniquely sensitized to the pressure that grief exerts on expression. Her novel flips frantically through specialized vocabularies: bureaucratic, commercial, medical, poetic. Can any of them meet the moment? At the lake, Khristen encounters a precocious ten-year-old, Jeffrey, who dreams of a career in law, and who speaks mostly in legalese. He is the reader's surrogate, or advocate. "Of course the whole situation is opaque," he declares, referring to the rules of the community they've washed up in, or perhaps to the novel, or perhaps to life itself. "I expected more incandescence." But, by the end of the book, Jeffrey has become a judge who presides over incomprehensible proceedings, in what might be the underworld. Reason and justice: these are matters for the dead, if not dead things themselves.

Art, that vaunted human achievement, might impress Williams even less than the law does. At an Institute meeting, members discuss whether Khristen's project should be "killing all the poets," with their "pious revulsion" at contemporary excess, which has only ever been "useless." (One woman moves to defend writers who "write unsentimentally with cold disgust," but she is overruled.) The activists seem to mourn the very idea of narrative: the hope of a human tale that doesn't imprison life within its limits. During her lakeside reverie, Lola envisions someone—"shaman, vizier, gangrel"—diving to the lake's bottom to tenderly comb out Big Girl's knotted curls. It is a mother's fantasy of caring for her child, a reparative inversion of the usual metaphor, in which people are nurtured by the earth. But Lola catches herself. "The old dear stories of possibility," she thinks, dismissively.

If a new story is possible, it will require an entirely different language; the current one has been desecrated



*"Nothing exciting ever happens in the suburbs."*

with the climate. ("You really couldn't call it dirt anymore, least of all soil . . . but the stuff was generally referred to as dirt, it being accepted that it was too much trouble to define it as something else.") One suspects that, for Williams, our mixture of political cant, scientific jargon, and corporate cliché has passed the point of no return. An Institute member drafts a manifesto full of words like "aridity" and "desertification"; to Khristen, it sounds like gibberish. Take, by contrast, Williams's delightful rendering of a post-apocalyptic bowling alley, whose patrons, "of that pastime's typical bent—hefty, of a tribal disposition and with themselves well pleased," upon releasing the ball "held the afterward of their poses for a vanity of time." There is the archaic diction ("with themselves well pleased"), the perfect and surprising nouns (the "afterward" of their poses, a "vanity" of time), the curious anthropological remove. Williams has long written to the side of conventional English, pursuing a form that feels more commensurate with actual experience—with the terror, comedy, and mystery

of moving through the world. In "Harrow," perhaps, she conjures a denatured earth to go with her denatured prose.

But that's not quite right. While the habitat of the novel has gone dry, Williams's sentences swerve toward lushness. What she seeks is a healing language, something suited to God's once-unbroken design. One could call this re-natured prose, writing that makes room for the rest of the ecosystem, and the simplicity of Williams's sentences can have a pleading, encouraging quality: *speaking this way isn't hard*. At one point, Khristen is walking around the lake when a word appears, in her mind, "as though upon the path. Like a great wilted flower. Pronounced. It was a word they used before the dead in that instant when everything was altered." She imagines pushing past the verb's "petaled softness," and the elegy of the passage is almost unbearable. Williams is evoking, and lamenting, another transformative moment: the Creation, in which God's Word manifested as the universe, and language and nature met as one. ♦



ON TELEVISION

## TERRA NOVA

*“Reservation Dogs,” on FX on Hulu; “Only Murders in the Building,” on Hulu.*

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

**I**t is a bad day for Miles, a mild-mannered trucker. Not two minutes into the pilot of *“Reservation Dogs,”* on FX on Hulu, some boosters jack his delivery van, full of Flaming Flamers hot chips. He loses his job. His wife leaves him, taking all his money. As he recounts all this to the owner of a local catfish joint, he laments, “Only thing left in the house was a bag of sugar. Now you know what’s gonna happen. Diabetes.” Unknown to him, the culprits, our Reservation Dogs, are celebrating the caper at a table nearby. Bear, their leader, overhears Miles, and feels remorse. Into the booth he sinks. His guilt takes the shape of an apparition,

a sinister-looking Miles, who hisses in his ear, “When I catch your ass, I’m gonna kick your ass.”

Created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi, *“Reservation Dogs”* is a near-perfect study of dispossession. Chips are the least of what has been stolen. Bear (D’Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai), Willie Jack (Paulina Alexis), Cheese (Lane Factor), and Elora (Devery Jacobs) are teen-agers living on a reservation in rural Oklahoma. The madcap quartet harbor pipe dreams of escaping rez life for the foreign land of California. To leave would be to honor the memory of their friend Daniel, who planted the idea in their heads before his death. “We’re saving

our money so we can leave this dump before it kills us, too,” Bear narrates, in a home-video montage of their exploits. To finance their trip out West, the kids commit petty theft, like peddling stolen vehicles to meth heads for parts, and swiping steak from the market, so that Willie Jack can sell pies outside a health clinic. The chips get sold, too, to neighbors. That’s how survival works in this small town. Anyone can get got.

Like the series *“Search Party,”* which spirals unpredictably out of the bounds of the noir genre, *“Reservation Dogs”* evolves beyond the confines of the heist comedy. The Tarantino reference is front and center, but the show’s general vibe is more influenced by indie movies and hood films, and is reminiscent of the washed-out palette of FX’s *“Atlanta,”* with occasional swerves into the surreal. From the actors to the crew, the whole operation is run by people of Indigenous descent. The show may boast the single most exciting cast of the fall television season. The acting is confidently slight. As Bear, Woon-A-Tai is a mess of young masculine contradiction, desperate for the attention of his deadbeat father, Punkin Lusty (Sten Joddi), a rapper, and tentative in the embrace of his mother, Rita (Sarah Podemski), who protects Bear from his father’s empty overtures. Jacobs plays Elora as a wounded disciplinarian, keeping everyone on task, and Factor, as Cheese, is the squinty-eyed wise man. Alexis, as Willie Jack, is the true original. Sardonic, ambitious, and a little butch, she is the loner among the loners. Never has “fuck” or “love you, bitch” been mumbled with such spiky finesse. The cool humor of *“Reservation Dogs”* is a welcome downshift from the look-at-me joke density of some of its peers; it’s the kind of show that never forces a punch line.

The California reverie becomes peripheral. Technically, the eight episodes of this début season are driven forward by the gradual disclosure of the circumstances of Daniel’s death, and by the fallout from some of the group’s get-money schemes. But *“Reservation Dogs”* is a mood piece, and a sweet one, a collection of intertwined and poetic portraiture that focusses not solely on the central cast. Mentor figures pop up in this meditation on kinship, encouraging the young generation to reconsider home as

*“Reservation Dogs” is a heist comedy with occasional swerves into the surreal.*

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a portal to their culture, rather than as a dead end. Take “Uncle Brownie,” the third episode. NDN Mafia, a rival crew, is threatening the supremacy of the Reservation Dogs. Elora begs her uncle Brownie, played by Gary Farmer, to teach her and her friends how to fight. (Legend has it that Brownie once took down ten or twenty or thirty men in one night.) Brownie guards his property, warding off intruders, and he smokes fifteen-year-old weed. He is the sort of man whom the group is afraid of becoming. But, in the kids’ presence, Brownie finds himself rejuvenated. He decides to make amends with those he’s hurt by offering them a fine cut of roadkill deer meat. As he pulls the carcass out of a trunk, the animal’s blood squirts onto his face. “I’m sorry, Uncle,” Elora says. “You still would have been home if I hadn’t come to your house.” “Exactly,” he replies, lovingly. “Exactly. I would have still been home.”

“Reservation Dogs” was shot entirely in the Muscogee Nation, and a strong sense of regionality dictates every detail in its compositions. Viewers are brought to the place, not to a facsimile of the place—that would never do, given that land, and who can claim ownership of it, is a central preoccupation. “We’re Indian,” Willie Jack’s father, Leon (Jon Proudstar), lectures her, while on a hunting trip. “We don’t own land.” But the land speaks, helping its inhabitants process personal and historical grief. This is the first trip that Willie Jack and Leon have taken in the year since Daniel died. Daniel, Leon’s nephew and Willie Jack’s cousin, used to join them on these hunts. Willie Jack is fixated on killing Chunk, a gigantic buck that the trio could never nail. Leon tells her why he’s been avoiding this year’s hunting season: after Daniel’s death, Leon encountered a being in the woods—a black mass, covered in hair, with red, glowing eyes. He wonders if he was being haunted by Tall Man, an omen of death.

The creature reminded me of the Monkey Ghost, another haunting, in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Remember His Past Lives.” Like that film, “Reservation Dogs” is interested in the permeable border between physical and spiritual life. Willie Jack encourages Leon to welcome the beast. What if it’s Daniel’s spirit? The screen goes black and

we hear a gunshot, and then we get a glimpse of the felled prize, hanging out of the back of a pickup truck. From the woods, the figure looks on.

“Only Murders in the Building” is another late-summer comedy about the norms of a region, albeit a very different one. Steve Martin and Martin Short have reunited for this parody of the Upper West Side élite—obliquely parodying their own creative legacies—and, to get young audiences to tune in, the team has brought on Selena Gomez. The three play variants of the island snob. Martin and Short do their pas de deux, with Martin as Charles Haden-Savage, a downcast and obsolete actor, and Short as Oliver Putnam, a leechy, rococo theatre director who hasn’t had a hit in years. The two are longtime residents of the Arconia—a fictionalization of the Ansonia building—and in the elevator they encounter Gomez’s Mabel, an affectless illustrator. The three strangers are united by an obsession with a “Serial”-esque podcast, “All is not OK in Oklahoma,” hosted by their idol Cinda Canning (Tina Fey), and by the mysterious death of their neighbor, a businessman named Tim Kono (Julian Cihi), which the police have ruled a suicide. They decide to start their own audio investigation, “Only Murders in the Building,” and go full Hardy Boys, disappearing behind trapdoors and limboing under police tape, to uncover the true cause of Kono’s death.

This ten-episode charmer, streaming on Hulu, is a fine sendup of media culture, in particular the true-crime genre, which makes stars out of corpses. The show was created by Martin and John Hoffman. Is it a vanity project? The production-design department of HBO’s “The Undoing” has nothing on the apartments in this series. An Ed Ruscha, likely owned by Martin, an avid collector, hangs in his enviable green kitchen. A romance ensues between Martin’s character and a bassoonist (Amy Ryan), presumably to give Martin, who plays the concertina, a chance to duet with his crush from the window. But he’s a damn good musician. No deep feelings are stirred, yet the laughs come steadily, especially because of Short, a master at embodying the helpless narcissism of Broadway’s show-biz denizens. He would tap-dance until exhaustion if we requested. ♦

# BETTER SELVES

*"I'm Your Man"* and *"The Eyes of Tammy Faye."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

**A**llow me to introduce Tom. You'll like him. Tom is handsome and sleek, with a discreet dress sense and all the social graces, but what really counts is that he's kind. You can't beat kindness. He won't bug you or bore you, and so exactly will he meet your needs, whatever they are, that it's as if he understood, in advance, what they were going to be.

we hear not a whisper of catastrophe.

Nowhere is sprucer than the Pergamon Museum, the stately collection of antiquities and archeological treasures. Among its resident experts is Alma (Maren Eggert), a specialist in Sumerian cuneiform, who is close to completing a three-year project; it's telling that the first crack in her demeanor—usually

This is not a movie that labors to join the dots on our behalf. Instead, Schrader invites us to take certain matters on trust. It's up to us to accept that androids exist; the issue is not how they were created but how they can be programmed to serve our needs and what such service, for good or ill, might do to us. The special effects, therefore, are spectacularly few—a handful of holograms, near the start. Only once does Tom suffer a moment of malfunction, when his head jerks repeatedly to one side and he gets stuck on the words "I am. I am." At which point any secret Cartesians in the cinema will faint with unbearable delight and have to be revived with a splash of Mountain Dew.

Tom is on a mission, explaining to Alma that "my algorithm has been designed to make you happy." Great. No wonder most of his ploys fall flat. He quotes Rilke; he makes Alma a luscious breakfast that she doesn't want; and he runs her a foaming bath, lit by candles and strewn with rose petals, on the basis that "ninety-three percent of German women dream of this." Alma, who belongs firmly to the other seven per cent, is unmoved, though there's a touching coda, in which Tom lies and soaks in the bath, alone, as if assessing the concept of sensory delight. Strictly speaking, he has no desires of his own, but he is undeterred. "I'll act like a person who wants things," he declares. Could the forging of feelings, as it were, summon a ghost in the machine?

We are hardly in unfamiliar territory here. Well-meaning or dutiful androids have crossed our screens before. Consider Jude Law as the gigolo in *"A.I."* (2001), Lance Henriksen as the wryly heroic Bishop in *"Aliens"* (1986)—"I may be synthetic, but I'm not stupid"—and, most Tom-like of all, John Malkovich as the blond cyber-boyfriend in *"Making Mr. Right"* (1987). Never, though, has the evolution of an automaton been depicted with the extensive grace and wit that Dan Stevens, speaking good German with a slight British accent, brings to *"I'm Your Man."* The whole thing is worth seeing for the scene in which Tom, sitting stiffly on a couch, and realizing that the occasion calls for increased relaxation, leans back and crosses his legs; by delaying the change of position for a second, Stevens allows us to view Tom's



Dan Stevens and Maren Eggert star in Maria Schrader's film.

And did I mention that he knows a lot? As in, *everything*? To sum up, Tom is quite a guy. If you want to be picky, or downright rude, you could point out that he's a robot, but hey: nobody's perfect.

Tom is played by Dan Stevens in *"I'm Your Man,"* a new German comedy from the director Maria Schrader. No date is given, but the setting appears to be the near future. It looks just like the present day, only cleaner—a good joke in itself, given that, as moviegoers, we have had it drummed into us that the world to come will be dystopically horrible. Yet here we are, in and around Berlin, mostly in blessed sunshine. The streets are so uncrowded as to make us wonder if, and how, the population has been thinned out, though

cool and composed—is caused not by any private malaise but by the pulverizing news that another researcher, in the same field, has beaten her to the punch.

Meanwhile, Alma has been asked by her superior, Roger (Falilou Seck), who sits on an ethics committee, to advise on a separate venture. This has nothing to do with her studies and everything to do with her being single and childless. She must meet a designated android, take him to her apartment, live with him for three weeks, and submit her findings. On the basis of such evidence, important decisions will be made: "whether these things will be allowed to marry, to work, to get passports, human rights, or partial human rights," as Roger says to Alma. Tom is her thing.

operating system at work. Notice, too, how he glances aside, pausing for upgraded thought, whenever there are fresh data to be processed. Later on, when Alma describes what it feels like to have an orgasm, Tom's eyes, of an unearthly blue, gaze off into space, barely blinking, as if in contemplation of a boundless mystery.

As has long been clear to fans of "Groundhog Day" (1993), and to anyone who has read Stanley Cavell's discussion of screwball gems such as "Bringing Up Baby" (1938), it is comedy, rather than tragedy, that is the proper playground for philosophical suggestion. Listen to Tom, in Schrader's film, responding to taunts about his self-control. "If it seems appropriate, I believe I could display something like anger," he says, adding, "Or even get angry. I've never understood the difference." We are watching an actor playing a humanoid playing a human, and, as with the raising of a mortal child, nothing is funnier or more stirring than the sight of somebody learning how to be. In terms of wisdom, as opposed to knowledge, Tom is a baby who must bring himself up.

Given all this heavy lifting of ideas, is "I'm Your Man" still light enough to qualify as a rom-com? Yes, but only just. As Alma, Eggert delivers a persuasive portrait of an emotional skeptic, who has to be convinced that happiness might, after all, be worth the pursuit. The plot, structured around Tom's encounters with Alma's colleagues, friends, and relations—and, best of all, her inquisitive ex—is as calm and as anti-frantic as she is, yet you sense a gathering momentum, and the conjoining of this real woman and this unreal man comes to

feel as romantically inevitable as it is logically absurd. Toward the end, Tom refers to the possibility of his being returned to "the factory" (a place we never see), and seeks to console Alma by saying, "That's an advantage of not being alive. You can't die either." She is horrified by the prospect of his erasure, and so are we, and our horror proves that the movie, like the robot, has succeeded in its task. It's alive!

If you somehow missed a 1990 TV movie entitled "Fall from Grace," in which the tarnished televangelist Jim Bakker was played by Kevin Spacey, I bring you glad tidings. Another tale of Jim and his shy, retiring wife, Tammy Faye—stalwarts of faith-based broadcasting in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, who reaped a fortune and sowed plenty of it on themselves—is upon us. "The Eyes of Tammy Faye," directed by Michael Showalter, stars Andrew Garfield as Jim Bakker and Jessica Chastain, plus vats of makeup, as his other half. Mind you, it's hard to think of Tammy Faye as half of anything. At a conservative estimate, she consumes four-fifths of the dramatic oxygen in the film.

Showalter pulls us briefly back to Tammy Faye's modest origins, in International Falls, Minnesota. We see her, as a young girl, being amazed by the Pentecostal ravings in her local huts-size church and reduced to weeping by her obdurate mother, Rachel (Cherry Jones), at the dinner table. "Stop performing," Rachel says, thereby raising the question that will ring through the movie: Are Tammy Faye's tears—or, later, her yelps of praise to the Almighty, and her urgent pleas for phone dona-

tions—real or assumed? Can she herself tell the difference?

The question was settled, for many onlookers, when Jim was jailed on multiple counts of fraud, in 1989, and his wife was cast into the wilderness. Yet the film hangs fire, and, while Jim shrivels into a small and whining figure, Tammy Faye swells into a grand American hybrid, both rapacious and devout, and so relentlessly sincere that any fussing over fraudulence is trampled underfoot. Her eyes, fenced in with ironclad lashes, *have* seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, and don't you dare say otherwise.

Jones is as formidable as ever, and Vincent D'Onofrio gives a sombre and riveting portrayal of Jerry Falwell, the Baptist Savonarola, who doesn't hesitate to scythe down the Bakkers for their sins. But this is Chastain's movie, through and through. She sings her lungs out; she toys with puppets, for the benefit of budding believers; she breaks into a witchy giggle, when there's nothing to laugh at; and she braves an ever more terrifying succession of wigs, thus proving that what keeps her character marching on—apart from the obvious mixture of lipstick, fur coats, Ativan, Diet Coke, and God—is the strange power of the truly unembarrassable. And the biggest surprise, in this carnival of the lurid? An interview, on live TV, with a young gay man who has AIDS, to whom Tammy Faye, risking the rage of Falwell and his troops, offers her unreserved love. Even the most mockable of souls, now and then, can do the right thing. ♦

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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 Lonnie Millsap, must be received by Sunday, September 26th. The finalists in the September 13th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 11th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" " .....

### THE FINALISTS



*"Honey, the remote is in your hand."*  
Tony Pechi, San Diego, Calif.

*"Don't worry about it—I wasn't going to say yes anyway."*  
Aaron Sherman, St. Louis, Mo.

*"You looked under the cushions, right?"*  
Michael Carroll, South Hero, Vt.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"His favorite book is 'A Farewell to Arms,'  
so don't get too close."*  
Thomas Vida, Tucson, Ariz.

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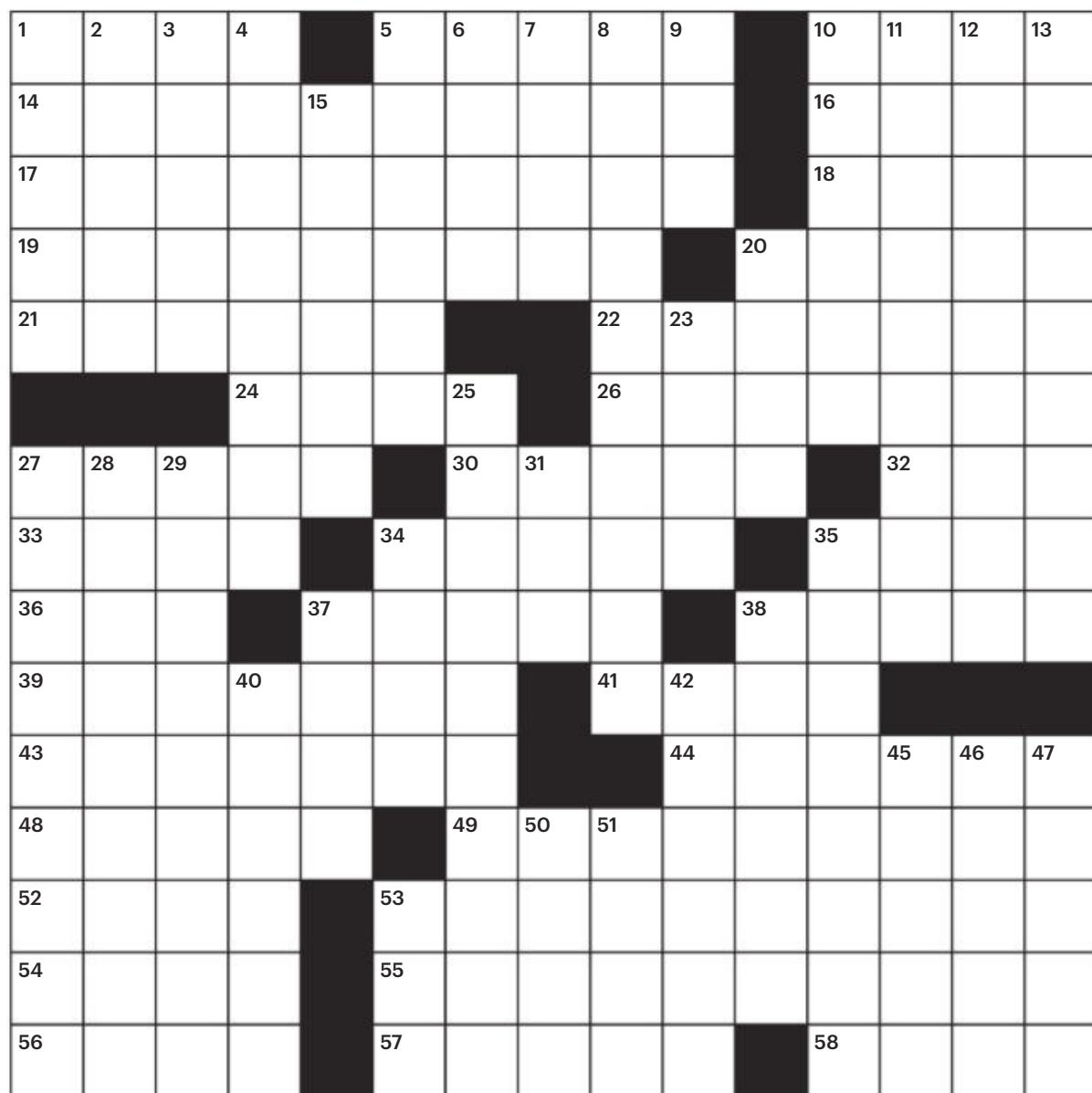
# THE CROSSWORD

*A challenging puzzle.*

BY PATRICK BERRY

## ACROSS

- 1 Feature of Tokyo's Imperial Palace
- 5 Dairy source
- 10 Spare lock
- 14 In need of checkers
- 16 Rounds
- 17 Gets steadily closer to
- 18 Reading \_\_\_\_ (site of Oscar Wilde's incarceration)
- 19 Ellie Fredricksen's job, in "Up"
- 20 "Sgt. \_\_\_\_" (1996 comedy)
- 21 Comedian who narrates the sitcom "The Goldbergs"
- 22 Receiving satellite transmissions?
- 24 What a falling star might prompt
- 26 Sid's "Your Show of Shows" co-host
- 27 Like the tradition of Christmas trees
- 30 Blubberless marine mammal
- 32 Steely Dan album featuring the song "Deacon Blues"
- 33 Maker of Ultimate Eye Cream
- 34 "O, I am \_\_\_\_" (Polonius's last words, in "Hamlet")
- 35 Born in
- 36 Abbr. on vinyl albums
- 37 Member of *la familia*
- 38 Ennead of Greek myth
- 39 1993 thriller with an Oscar-nominated score that's mostly just piano
- 41 Gap filler in carpentry
- 43 Is involved in decision-making
- 44 Actress Cuthbert of "The Ranch"
- 48 Subject of the 2016 bio-pic "Race"
- 49 Device used to summon the World's Greatest Detective
- 52 What aa and pahoehoe are varieties of
- 53 Helper on the Hill
- 54 At least once
- 55 Baitfish named for its weight
- 56 E-mail folder
- 57 Make oneself smart
- 58 Challenge



## DOWN

- 1 Carmen in "Carmen" or Dido in "Dido and Aeneas," briefly
- 2 Ingredients in a dirt cake
- 3 Weapon that brought down Achilles
- 4 Confiscated
- 5 Unpredictable results
- 6 Plumbing problem
- 7 "It's a deal!"
- 8 Misdeeds that are hard to overlook
- 9 Knights of \_\_\_\_ (villainous "Star Wars" order)
- 10 Carrying out
- 11 "You've got my undivided attention"
- 12 He defeated the Greatest in 1971's Fight of the Century
- 13 They meet on horseback
- 15 Land
- 20 Upscale-party ruiner
- 23 Warning sign
- 25 Pre-fight announcement?
- 27 They may offer a view of the ocean
- 28 Electroencephalogram reading associated with wakeful relaxation
- 29 Feature of roughly one-third of all World Series
- 31 Substance used in Egyptian mummification
- 34 "Spamalot" actress Ramirez
- 35 It might fill an empty house
- 37 Long to see

- 38 Environment
- 40 Drawings that may violate copyright laws
- 42 "Soylent Green" star
- 45 Disrespectful
- 46 2020 video game in which Zagreus, the son of the title character, attempts to escape the Greek underworld
- 47 On the lookout
- 50 \_\_\_\_ Elliot (heroine of Jane Austen's "Persuasion")
- 51 Crime-scene surround
- 53 Longtime Nascar sponsor

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

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

*Find more puzzles and this week's solution at [newyorker.com/crossword](http://newyorker.com/crossword)*

THE NEW YORKER'S

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