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JULY 5, 2021

# NEW YORKER





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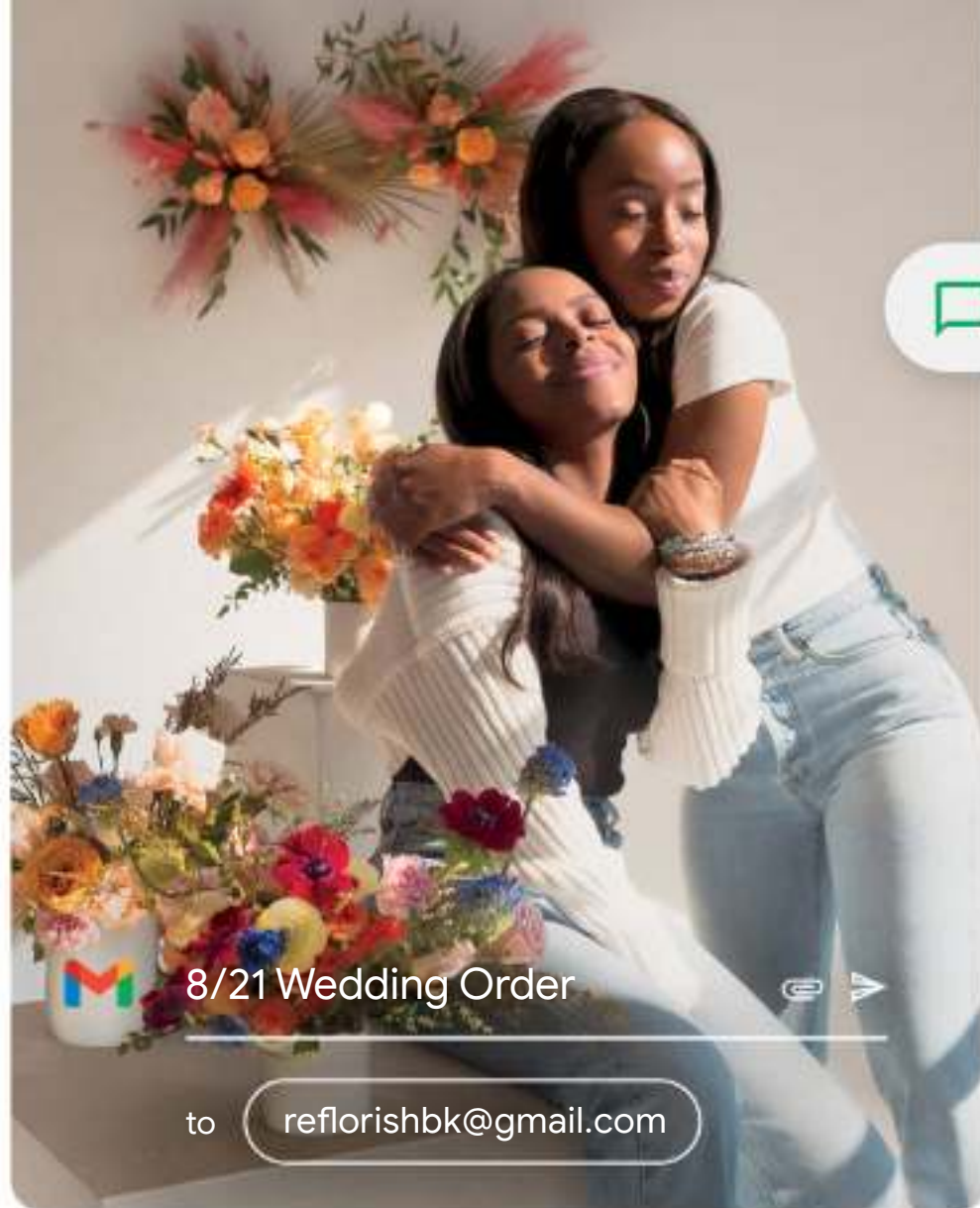






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Rugie J.

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4



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Paige Williams** (*"American Vigilante,"* p. 30) became a staff writer in 2015. She is the author of *"The Dinosaur Artist,"* which was named a *Times* Notable Book of 2018.

**R. Kikuo Johnson** (*Cover*) teaches cartooning at the Rhode Island School of Design. His graphic novel *"No One Else"* will come out in November.

**Rachel Syme** (*"Clock's Ticking,"* p. 26), a staff writer, has been a contributor to the magazine since 2012, covering style and culture.

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

**Jorie Graham** (*Poem, p. 38*), a professor at Harvard University, published *"Run-away: New Poems"* last year.

**Hua Hsu** (*Pop Music, p. 61*), a staff writer, is the author of *"A Floating Chinaman: Fantasy and Failure Across the Pacific"* and the forthcoming memoir *"Stay True."*

**Nathan Heller** (*"Togetherness,"* p. 46), a staff writer since 2013, is at work on a book about the Bay Area and the past fifty years of American society.

**Jeannie Suk Gersen** (*Comment, p. 13*) is a contributing writer to *The New Yorker* and a professor at Harvard Law School.

**Adam Zagajewski** (*Poem, p. 50*), who died in March, was an award-winning Polish poet. Clare Cavanagh's English translations of his poetry collections *"True Life"* and *"Collected Poems"* are forthcoming.

**Rebecca Mead** (*"Invasive Species,"* p. 20) has been a staff writer since 1997. She most recently published *"My Life in Middlemarch."*

**Sam Lipsyte** (*Fiction, p. 56*) teaches writing at Columbia University. His latest novel is *"Hark."*

**Taylor Kay Phillips** (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 25*), a writer and a comedian, is working on a humor book about the Midwest.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



### DEPT. OF RETURNS

Emily Witt on the reopening of New York City's dance clubs in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.



### THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Jelani Cobb talks with the incarcerated writer Quntos KunQuest about his unconventional debut novel.

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# THE MAIL

## WHO WAS HOMER?

Adam Kirsch, in his essay on the classicist Milman Parry's studies of Homer, is too quick to conclude that the Iliad and the Odyssey were produced by the oral tradition rather than created by individual poets (Books, June 14th). Parry, whose wife, Marian, I interviewed in 1981, devoted his career to proving that the epics' treasury of formulaic epithets and passages had been developed and handed down over many generations by illiterate singers. Other scholars, Parry's contemporaries, identified structural intricacies, symmetries, and geometries in both epics that are unlikely to have occurred without writing, which came into use around 750 B.C. In their view, a gifted inheritor of that traditional material (or, more plausibly, two inheritors—one for each poem) took advantage of the possibilities that writing afforded in order to craft these long works, whose unity is the key to their power. Parry's research does not undercut this theory. The burden, therefore, falls on the skeptics to explain how the unity of the Homeric poems, in which Parry himself fervently believed, could have been achieved in the absence of an author.

*Pamela Mensch*  
New York City

Milman Parry was my grandfather. The idea that he was "the classicist who killed Homer" would have been disputed by my father, Adam Parry, also a classicist who died tragically young. Adam Parry maintained that, in spite of his father's brilliant research showing that the Iliad and the Odyssey were the products of a long oral tradition, the poems—or at least the Iliad—were probably the work of a single person who was trained in the oral tradition and could also write. The basis of this claim is the poems' stylistic and thematic integrity and their singular genius, which is responsible for their lasting impact, and which puts them in a different category from anything composed by the Yugoslav epic singers, whose works Milman Parry carefully

studied. Adam Parry contended that his father had not dismissed this idea and that, if he'd had the opportunity, he would have given it its due.

*Catherine Parry Marcial*  
Bloomfield, N.J.

## SELF-HELP SENSATIONS

Louis Menand, in his review of Jess McHugh's "Americanon," an examination of U.S. history through the country's best-selling how-to and self-help books, critiques McHugh's methodology without explicitly typifying it (Books, June 7th). McHugh engages in what the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading," which is part of a broader "hermeneutics of suspicion"—a mode of analysis in which critics anticipate that a text will perpetuate, for example, racism, sexism, and homophobia and then attempt to "unmask" those oppressive subtexts. Although it is easy to criticize McHugh's paranoid reading as offering nothing new, it is more fruitful to understand her work as part of a larger trend in literary analysis, and to consider her choice to focus on the self-help canon, which is a lens on the fluctuating American landscape of social norms. As instruction manuals for social expectations, those works set the stage for contemporary guides on acceptability, such as YouTube makeup tutorials and videos mocking suburban feminine whiteness. Taken together, the self-help best-sellers indicate that the American obsession with fitting in has always been present, but also fluid and, as McHugh argues, arbitrary. As an archive, these books also reveal that social acceptability is much easier for some of us to attain than it is for others.

*Heather Hillsburg*  
Victoria, B.C.

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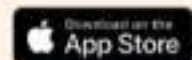
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming; as ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

JUNE 30 – JULY 6, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



On July 4, MOMA opens **“Automania,”** a show about the complicated legacy of the automobile, an emblem of freedom—of speed, escape, joyriding, and the open road—whose fossil-fuel emissions are a major cause of global warming. On the third floor, visitors encounter models, movies, car parts, posters, and works of art. Real vehicles are on view, too, in the exhibition proper, in the lobby, and in the sculpture garden, including a recently restored 1959 Volkswagen Type 1 sedan (pictured), better known as the Beetle.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EVAN ANGELASTRO



## MUSIC

### Conclave: “Conclave”

**ELECTRONIC** The New York groove unit Conclave, led by the vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Cesar Toribio, is steeped in Afro-Latin jazz and disco, in the vein of Osunlade and Nuyorican Soul. The band’s self-titled debut album has an agreeably mellow, late-summer-afternoon gauziness. This can occasionally flatten into the background, but things brighten considerably when Toribio’s sweet, subtle, sandpappy croon is in the mix. The focus, though, is on the billowing, slow-building arrangements. At an average of five minutes apiece, they feel vast—and make it easy to imagine just how much bigger they might become in a live performance.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

### “Elektra”

**OPERA** Last year, the Salzburg Festival defied whatever conventions existed in the early months of the pandemic when it refused to cancel its centennial season, opting instead for extreme hygiene protocols. The director Krzysztof Warlikowski and the conductor Franz Welser-Möst embraced that rebellious spirit with their production of Richard Strauss’s visceral one-act opera “Elektra,” which opened the 2020 season and is now available on DVD and Blu-ray. Warlikowski dispenses with the cliché of Elektra as a semi-feral Greek princess driven mad by her desire to kill her mother, Klytämnestra, in revenge for killing her father, Agamemnon; here, she’s a poor little rich girl whose party dress obscures the depths of her family trauma. The soprano Ausrine Stundyte embodies the character’s complexity with singing of astonishing delicacy and potency, and she finds worthy foils in Asmik Grigorian’s confident Chrysothemis and Tanja Ariane Baumgartner’s haunted yet haughty Klytämnestra. Under Welser-Möst, the Vienna Philharmonic plays with a sumptuousness typically reserved for Strauss’s lyric works.—*Oussama Zahr*

### GoldLink: “HARAM!”

**HIP-HOP** The D.C. rapper GoldLink made his name probing the nooks and crannies of dance-music production, dubbing his sound “future bounce.” His early songs were defined by clean mixing, grooves that extended from house to Afrobeats, and zigzagging double-time raps. His 2018 album, “Diaspora,” connected the branches of global Black music in search of a streamlined, unified sound. His newest release, “HARAM!,” breaks from tradition, pushing into the distortion of noise music, garbled, mumbled flows, and the grot of U.K. rap. It’s his least accessible but also his most ambitious album, a reimagining of how a GoldLink record functions. There are traces of his signature bounce in “Evian” and “Wild and Lethal Trash!,” but on songs such as “202” and “Culture Clash” he becomes less reliant on motion and more curious about texture, giving his music serrated edges.—*Sheldon Pearce*

### Michael Harrison: “Seven Sacred Names”

**CLASSICAL** The composer and pianist Michael Harrison intended his new album, “Seven

Sacred Names,” to complement the book “Nature’s Hidden Dimension,” in which the Sufi astrophysicist and therapist W. H. S. Gebel ponders intersections of cosmology and mysticism. Prompted by Gebel’s notion of an ever-evolving universal intelligence, Harrison responds with arrestingly simple melodies, complex rhythm patterns, and meditations saturated in the Indian classical-music tradition. Along with his singular invention, the harmonic piano (heard to astounding effect on the climactic “Basir”), Harrison showcases the vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth and his poised, attentive instrumentalists, producing music of positively intoxicating beauty.—*Steve Smith*

### Mirah

**INDIE ROCK** Since making her early murmurs in the indie-rock incubator of nineteen-nineties Olympia, Washington, Mirah has nudged her music into new territories, incorporating dramatic chamber pop, deep-dive collaborations, and droplets of unexpected genres. But the singer remains spiritually attuned to the lo-fi environs from which she sprang. Like many indie artists of her generation, she draws power from what might be perceived as a weakness: in her case, a wispy voice that nevertheless refuses to get swallowed by lavish arrangements. In recent months, she has over-

seen reissues of her early albums as well as an influence-flaunting tribute record featuring an army of musicians reworking songs from her debut LP, “You Think It’s Like This But Really It’s Like This.” At the Sultan Room, Mirah, now based in Brooklyn, performs a pair of al-fresco solo sets up on the roof.—*Jay Ruttenberg (June 30; thesultanroom.com.)*

### Nina Simone: “The Montreux Years”

**JAZZ** Nina Simone, unapologetically commanding in every word she sang and note she played on the piano, would surely have foreseen, nay, demanded, her present-day artistic deification, nearly two decades after her death. Forthrightly declaiming her personal, sexual, and political mandates in song, Simone is heard in outstanding form throughout “The Montreux Years,” a collection of performances, from 1968 through 1990, culled from the prestigious Swiss jazz festival. In candid renditions of signature tunes (“Four Women,” “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free”; her now ubiquitous “Feeling Good” is regrettably absent) and apposite choices (Janis Ian’s “Stars”), Simone’s fierce commitment to direct communication is always palpable. If more lustre can possibly be added to Simone’s legacy, this set provides it.—*Steve Futterman*

## R. & B.



The enigmatic R. & B. singer-songwriter H.E.R. steps into the light on “**Back of My Mind**,” an album pegged, bizarrely, as her debut and submitted as a sanctioned statement of purpose. The music has the preestablished latitude of an artist who has interpolated Lauryn Hill, covered the blues of Foy Vance, and sampled Floetry and Aaliyah. Although her previous releases have hinted at this range, “Back of My Mind” moves into new sounds, and is a bit more persistent in mapping out the complete array of the musician’s facilities. Her sweeping taste is on display, and she mobilizes many masters of the R. & B. style to bolster her cause—the singer Ty Dolla \$ign, the producers Kaytranada and Rodney (Darkchild) Jerkins, the songwriters Stacy Barthe and Tiara Thomas, and the bassist Thundercat. The record is a show of pedigree, not a debut but a continuation.—*Sheldon Pearce*





On July 4, 1970, six artists made history when they organized the first exhibition in Los Angeles (and most likely in the country) devoted solely to Black women's work—their own. **"The Sapphire Show"** was installed for five days at Gallery 32, an experimental loft space run by the painter Suzanne Jackson, then twenty-six years old. The event's holiday timing was coincidental; the show was conceived as a retort. Jackson and her fellow-participants—Gloria Bohanon, Yvonne Cole Meo, Betye Saar, Eileen Nelson (then Eileen Abdulrashid), and Senga Nengudi (then Sue Irons)—were staging a corrective to a corporate-backed show, also in L.A., that overwhelmingly favored the art of Black men, with one token woman. The only surviving documentation of "The Sapphire Show" is a postmarked copy of its announcement, in the archives of the Smithsonian. But, in the past decade, its legacy has been gaining momentum. Through July 30, you can see a revelatory, beautifully installed homage to the show at Ortuzar Projects, in Tribeca. The discerning curator Kari Rittenbach avoids a frozen-in-amber approach by presenting twenty-nine sculptures, photographs, prints, and paintings (including Jackson's 1972 canvas "The American Sampler," above) that span decades of the artists' careers.—*Andrea K. Scott*

## ART

## Huguette Caland

At the age of thirty-nine, this Lebanese painter left her husband and teen-age children in Beirut and moved to Paris, where her buoyant work soon attracted attention. The liberated, liquid eroticism of Caland's series "Bribes de Corps" ("Body Parts"), begun in the early seventies, was in tune with the era's feminist experiments, though she remained unaffiliated with any movement. Gorgeous examples of these sexed-up hybrid color-field paintings—which feature ambiguous, close-cropped biomorphic

forms—are voluptuous foils to the tenderly meticulous drawings in "Tête-à-Tête," the Drawing Center's uplifting survey of the artist's five-decade career. (Caland died in 2019, at the age of eighty-eight.) Works on paper, thoughtfully arranged by the curator Claire Gilman in salon-style constellations, reveal a range of modes. Figures are alternately puzzled together in free-form tracteries, smoothly modelled in membranous volumes, or assembled in patterns inspired by mosaics and textiles. Caland also made caftans, displayed on mannequins here; the artist initially designed the garments for herself, but she went on to produce a covetable line for Pierre Cardin in the late seventies. Embroidered with line-drawn ver-

sions of the body parts they're meant to conceal (among other mischievous elements), these stunning dresses are emblematic of the artist's earthy, fantastical, and passionate approach to the body.—*Johanna Fateman (drawingcenter.org)*

## "Cézanne Drawing"

This show, at the Museum of Modern Art, of some two hundred and eighty works on paper by the inarguably great artist Paul Cézanne, has a cumulative impact that is practically theological—akin to a creation story, a Genesis, of modernism. It's a return to roots for MOMA, which initiated its narrative of modern painting in 1929 with an exhibition that included van Gogh, Seurat, Gauguin, and Cézanne, whose broken forms made the others look comparatively conservative as composers of pictures. He stood out then, as he does now, for an asperity of expression that is analytical in form and indifferent to style. Cézanne revolutionized visual art, changing a practice of rendering illusions to one of aggregating marks that cohere in the mind rather than in the eye of a viewer. You don't look at a Cézanne, some ravishing late works (scenes of bathers in Arcadian settings, still-lives of fruit and domestic objects) excepted. You study it, registering how it's done—in the drawings, with tangles of line and, often, patches of watercolor. Cézanne drew nearly every day, rehearsing the timeless purpose—and the impossibility—of pictorial art: to reduce three dimensions to two.—*Peter Schjeldahl (moma.org)*

## Julien Nguyen

The imagery of this buzzy Los Angeles painter feels informed by the strange, shifting hierarchies of life online, where a Sieneese altarpiece and a pulp sci-fi paperback cover have equivalent value. But his elegant work is complicated by the fact that Nguyen often paints from life, practicing an observant, detached strain of realism. The dozen or so recent canvases in his solo debut at the Matthew Marks gallery are united by their silvery palette and pared-down style. "Jake" is a naturalistic portrait, in profile, of a gaunt young man posing in a straight-backed chair, his features concealed by a lock of hair; the subject of "Richard" is similarly lithe, but he's also part monster, with pointed features and blank yellow eyes. The art-historical references here are clever, if unrelenting; "The Temptation of Christ," in which a Giacometti-esque Jesus faces off against a demonic dragon, may spark thoughts of Duccio's take on the theme, at the Frick. To accompany his captivating show, Nguyen has compiled a soundtrack and digital clips on the gallery's Web site, including a shirtless TikToker (who might have stepped out of a Nguyen portrait) brushing his teeth and a violinist serenading a beluga whale.—*J.F. (matthewmarks.com)*

## DANCE

## American Ballet Theatre

After an absence of more than a year from the New York stage, seven dancers from American Ballet Theatre present a program of solos and duets at the amphitheatre in the city's newest park, Little Island. Hee Seo, one of the troupe's most exquisite ballerinas, performs the chestnut "The Dying Swan," in which the dancer wafts delicately toward her demise, accompa-



nied by a mournful piece for piano and cello by Camille Saint-Saëns. Christine Shevchenko and Thomas Forster dance a pas de deux from Alexei Ratmanský's poetic "Seven Sonatas," set to Scarlatti. Isabella Boylston and Aran Bell provide the requisite dose of Americana with Jessica Lang's tribute to Tony Bennett, "Let Me Sing Forevermore." And Sierra Armstrong and Remy Young dance a tender pas de deux for two women, a rare occurrence in the heavily heteronormative world of ballet. Most of the music is performed live.—*Marina Harss (July 3 at 5 and 8; littleisland.org.)*

## "Dancer from the Dance"

This virtual festival of new Irish dance—a series of performances and conversations streaming free on the Facebook and YouTube pages of Irish Modern Dance Theatre, July 5-9—features more than thirty choreographers who are Irish or Irish-identifying, be they from the United States, Nigeria, or Japan. Among the participants are Tere O'Connor, Oona Doherty, Yoshiko Chuma, Tobi Omotoso, and Morgan Bullock.—*Brian Seibert*

## Gibney Company

On June 30, this group celebrates its thirtieth anniversary, online, with the premiere of a film by its new choreographic associate, Rena Butler. Available for free on the company's YouTube page, "Dream Scenarium" is a surreal portrait of its members, shot in the studios and stairways of 890 Broadway, a building that has seen a lot of dance history.—*B.S. (gibneydance.org)*

## Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Last summer, the august festival in the Berkshires was quiet, silenced by the pandemic. In November, the noise was of fire, a conflagration that devoured one of its theatres. Now the place comes back to life, June 30-July 4, with the happier sounds of Dorrance Dance, opening a summer season that combines outdoor performances with online fare. As much a dancing band as a tap troupe, the company débuts an ensemble work by its adept associate artistic director, Nicholas Van Young, and part of a praise-song piece by Josette Wiggan-Freund, with the versatile trumpeter Keyon Harrold accompanying. During the afternoons, Dorrance Dance mounts a roving effort, turning the whole campus into a drum. Additionally, July 1-15, the festival streams the Paris Opera Ballet in Crystal Pite's big, bizarre, and shal-lowly showy "Body and Soul," from 2019.—*B.S. (jacobsillow.org)*

## THE THEATRE

### Blindness

Daryl Roth

This show from Donmar Warehouse, directed by Walter Meierjohann and written by Simon Stephens, is an adaptation of José Saramago's 1995 novel of the same name. A man goes suddenly blind while driving in traffic, a mysterious case that marks the beginning of an epidemic of blindness. There is no stage for this production; the show occurs only in light and sound. The story is ably delivered by Juliet Stevenson, as the

Storyteller, in a recorded monologue, through headphones. The Storyteller's husband, an ophthalmologist, becomes blind, but the Storyteller can still, miraculously, see, a fact that she hides from everyone but her husband. As people panic and the systems of society crumble, the corpses pile up. The show's astonishing sound design, by Ben and Max Ringham, subtly underlines a lingering social worry: Exactly how far from one another are we? Are we safe?—*Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 4/19/21.)*

## Get on Your Knees

Cherry Lane

Heterosexuality and its manifold indignities are the subjects of this charmingly raunchy and very funny standup set by the comedian Jacqueline Novak, which premiered in 2019 and is playing a return engagement at the Cherry Lane. Nowadays, nothing is less cool than to be a woman who "lusts after the common shaft," but such is Novak's predicament. She makes the best of it by bringing her "poetic eye" (why call it "doggy style" when you could speak of "the Hound's Way"?) and analytical swagger to sex—particularly the oral variety. Pacing the stage in a pointedly schlumpy gray T-shirt and jeans, Novak goes deep on the semantics of the male member and the equally vulnerable male ego. Directed by John Early, the show is an overthinker's delight, and a reminder

that a woman's humor can cut as deeply as her rage.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Through July 31.)*

## Springsteen on Broadway

St. James

Bruce Springsteen's solo show, which debuted in 2017, is the first to (re)open on Broadway post-pandemic. The Boss, with his guitar and a piano, interweaves stories about his life, many from his autobiography, "Born to Run," with some of his greatest hits. (Through Sept. 4.)

## MOVIES

### Be Pretty and Shut Up!

The movie industry's failure of women, both in the substance of films and behind the scenes, is the subject of this revelatory 1976 documentary directed by Delphine Seyrig, herself one of the great modern actresses. In interviews with twenty-three actresses—including Shirley MacLaine, Jill Clayburgh, Jane Fonda, Viva, and Maria Schneider—her incisive questions and the free-flowing discussions that result yield vital observations regarding one central idea: the cinema, run by men, embodies male fantasies. Many of the participants say that, had they been men, they wouldn't have become actors

## OFF OFF BROADWAY



If the euphoria of New York's summer of reopening has you craving a bit of vinegar, look no further than Jackie Hoffman, the veteran character actress and world-class grouch. With her permanent glower and Borscht Belt deadpan, Hoffman has left her memorable sour tang on such Broadway musicals as "Hairspray" and "Xanadu," as well as on the miniseries "Feud: Bette and Joan." Before the pandemic, she was playing Yente in a Yiddish revival of "Fiddler on the Roof." Now she takes another angle on "Fiddler," in E. Dale Smith's comedy "**Fruma-Sarah (Waiting in the Wings)**," beginning previews on July 1, at the Cell. Hoffman plays a battle-scarred community-theatre actress contending with an overeager fly captain (Kelly Kinsella) while awaiting her entrance as the screeching ghost who appears in Tevye's dream. Any complaints? Join the club.—*Michael Schulman*



(some would have preferred to direct); most also say that they have never played a scene portraying a positive relationship with another female character. Fonda details the cruel plastic surgery that producers urged her to get (she didn't); Viva says that she never had a role that corresponded to her inner self. As the women express their anger and frustration, their regrets and their hopes, they are, finally, appearing in a movie that allows them to reveal the depth and originality of their own characters.—*Richard Brody* (*Streaming on MUBI.*)

## Crimson Gold

This 2003 crime drama, by the Iranian director Jafar Panahi, is a radical reinvention of the genre. It's the story of how a pizza-delivery man and petty thief named Hossein Emadeddin (played by the real-life pizza deliverer Hossein Emadeddin) becomes a major outlaw. At the start, Hossein commits a jewelry-store robbery that spins out of control; nearly the rest of the movie is a flashback to Hossein's activities in the days before the holdup, presented with

meticulous, documentary-based details that encapsulate a fiercely critical panorama of Iranian society. Hossein, along with his partner in crime and delivery colleague Ali (Kamran Sheisi), gets a cynical lesson in criminal ethics and a bitter view of Iran's extreme inequalities. Panahi, working with a script by Abbas Kiarostami, suggests the emotional ravages inflicted by the religious policing of private life, as in an extended and terrifying scene in which Hossein, making a delivery, stumbles upon soldiers arresting partygoers. One man's breaking point comes off as a stifled cry of collective revolt. In Farsi.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Film at Lincoln Center's virtual cinema.*)

## The Long, Long Trailer

Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz borrow traits from their characters in "I Love Lucy" for their starring roles in this frenetic and intricate comedy by Vincente Minnelli, from 1953. Ball plays the impulsive and accident-prone Tacy Bolton, whose fiancé, Nicky Collini (Arnaz), a practical-minded engineer, is often on the road.

## ON THE BIG SCREEN



Held aside owing to the pandemic, "**Zola**," which was one of the most eagerly anticipated releases of 2020, is now opening in theatres on June 30. This antic drama, an adaptation of a mostly factual, somewhat embellished Twitter thread by A'Ziah (Zola) King, endows a story of reckless and dangerous encounters with the electrifying sense of wonder and adventure that comes with having lived to tell it. The title character (Taylor Paige), a waitress, is lured by an overeager customer, Stefani (Riley Keough), into a road trip to Tampa, together with Stefani's boyfriend (Nicholas Braun) and her ostensible roommate (Colman Domingo), to make quick money dancing at a strip club. But, unbeknownst to Zola, the roommate is actually Stefani's pimp, who forces Zola into menacing situations to which she responds with ingeniously improvised solutions. The film's director, Janicza Bravo (who wrote the script with Jeremy O. Harris), daringly fuses unhinged excitement with exquisite stylization, building Zola's first-person narrative into the action by means of varied and whimsical effects; she both delights in the characters' extravagant range of behavior and subjects it to discerning scrutiny.—*Richard Brody*

At her behest, they buy a trailer and embark on a cross-country tour for their honeymoon; comedy ensues when the newlyweds experience unexpected trouble with the unwieldy vehicle. In effect, the antic tale is a modern-day Western, in which intrepid adventurers turn their backs on genteel society and head into the continent's vast expanses. The state-of-the-art trailer affords them all the comforts of home, yet the contraption's technical complexities are menaced by the forces of nature; meanwhile, the couple's anticipation of open-road freedom is thwarted by the intrusion of their fellow frontier dwellers. The eccentric, chaotic consequences have an undertone of horror and doom—not least after the couple's spoiled wedding night, which ends with a cold shower and a symbolic castration.—*R.B.* (*Playing on TCM July 6 and streaming on Amazon and other services.*)

## The Mist

With nerve and a certain style, Frank Darabont, the director of "The Shawshank Redemption," made a horror film in which almost nothing is redeemable. A small town in Maine is invaded by thick mist, under cover of which lurk misshapen creatures—the outcome, we vaguely learn, of wayward military experiments. As if determined to stock up on groceries, they lay siege to a supermarket, where a crowd of locals has found refuge. These include some reassuringly familiar types, such as the heroic pragmatist (Thomas Jane), the consoling schoolteacher (Laurie Holden), the finger-pointing nutcase (Marcia Gay Harden), and the skeptic (Andre Braugher) who refuses to believe in giant, writhing flesh-eaters right up to the moment at which he meets them socially. The result, adapted from a story by Stephen King, is well paced, and blood is shed in careful moderation, but do not be fooled by the anguish of the climax; this is a true, B-movie mixture of shocks and silliness, and is all the better for it. Released in 2007.—*Anthony Lane* (*Reviewed in our issue of 11/26/07.*) (*Streaming on Amazon, YouTube, and other services.*)

## The Yards

James Gray expands his bruising, family-centric New York street poetry to the political realm in this 2000 drama of crime and corruption in working-class Queens. Mark Wahlberg plays Leo Handler, a young man who has just come home from a jail term for car theft. To help Leo get back on his feet, his lifelong friend and accomplice Willie (Joaquin Phoenix) lures him into a scheme of payoffs involving subway contractors. Its ringleader, a slick operator named Frank Olchin (James Caan), has recently married into Leo's family. What's more, Willie's girlfriend, Erica (Charlize Theron), is both Leo's cousin and Frank's stepdaughter; she and Leo are very close, and, though the movie leaves their past ambiguous, there's little ambiguity in Leo's gaze. The tangle of family, business, and crime, with its resulting loyalties and betrayals, is the volatile stuff of which the drama is made. Gray, who grew up in Queens, derived the plot from real-life scandals, but the emotional fury, the fatal vision of family as an engine of destruction, is entirely his own.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Amazon, Pluto, and other services.*)

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Dhamaka

119 Delancey St.

The other night at Dhamaka, a new Indian restaurant in Essex Market, on the Lower East Side, my dining companions and I took turns dragging our spoons through a hot metal pot of *gurda kapoor*, searching for offal. Which morsels, we wondered, were the goat kidneys and which were the goat testicles? The one male in our group joked that, as the only person among us in possession of both organs, he was uniquely qualified to tell.

In all seriousness, he had eaten a lot of kidney as a child in Russia, and recognized it to be the firmer of the two organs—it was almost bouncy in texture, with a pronounced flavor that bloomed slowly and grew funkier. I preferred the testicle, meaty but mild, as supple as sweetbread, nearly spreadable. The vehicle for both was an outstanding gravy—built from a base of gelatinous lamb-trotter stock, fragrant and fiery with whole cardamom pods and green chilies, thick with melted tomato—to be spooned atop buttery, griddled halves of *pao*, a fluffy slider-size roll introduced to India during the Portuguese occupation of Goa.

It wasn't until my third visit to Dhamaka that I tried the *gurda kapoor*. During my first dinner there, I'd decided to focus on the menu's meatless options, including a vegetable *pulao*, packed with potato, carrot, and mushroom, and *bharela marcha*, sweet peppers stuffed with a cumin-and-cinnamon-scented mash of peanuts and chickpea flour. During my second, the kitchen had run out: according to Roni Mazumdar, one of Dhamaka's owners, goat kidneys and testicles are a challenge to source; each week, he and his business partner, the chef Chintan Pandya, rely on a cadre of Uber drivers game to pop into various halal butcher shops between rides, trusting that they'll find enough for a few portions per night.

I'll admit that, those circumstances notwithstanding, I hadn't exactly been itching to order the dish; the biggest barrier was psychological. But overcoming psychological barriers is a theme at Dhamaka, whose tagline is "Unapologetic Indian." My journey toward trying and loving the *gurda kapoor* is mirrored by Mazumdar and Pandya's trajectory as New York restaurateurs. They started with Rahi, in the West Village, which managed to translate Indian food into a certain Manhattan vernacular without diluting its identity, with greenmarket produce and items such as truffle *khichdi* and a masala fried-chicken sandwich. Next came Adda, in Queens, where the pair offered, in addition to exceptional versions of Indian dishes commonly served in the U.S.—the paneer house-made, the spices toasted to order—a host

of braver bets, including *bheja fry*, which has its origins in India's medieval Muslim culture and features goat brain.

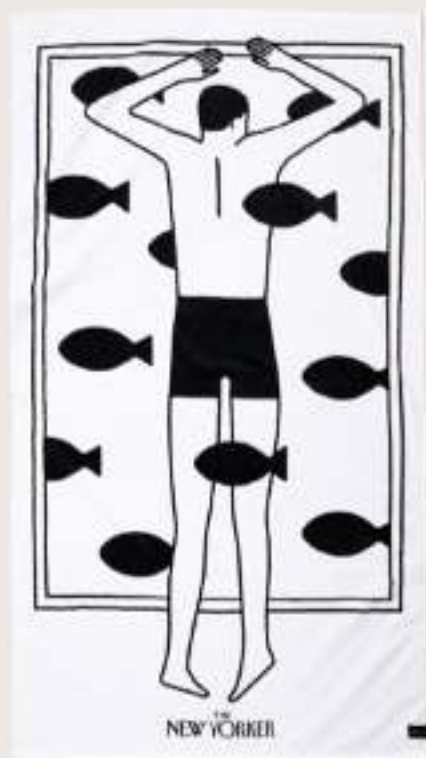
At Dhamaka, Mazumdar and Pandya have shed almost all aversion to risk. Not only have they opened a restaurant that doesn't offer takeout, let alone delivery, during what is still technically a pandemic; they've designed a menu that effectively rejects assimilation and focusses on expanding, if not transforming, diners' understanding of Indian food. "The first question some guests ask me," Mazumdar recounted the other day, "is 'Do people in India eat pork?'" My own assumption was that the answer was no, which is probably why I'd skipped over a dish called *doh khleh*: "pork, lime, cilantro, onion, ginger." But, Mazumdar explained, "if you add up the number of people in India who eat pork or eat beef, that's a country on its own."

The *doh khleh*, made with pig head that's pressure-cooked and seared on a grill until the skin grows crisp and the rendered fat becomes lusciously sticky, then coarsely chopped, is phenomenally delicious. It's a Khasi dish, meaning that it comes from an indigenous ethnic group that lives in Meghalaya, one of India's easternmost states, which is closer to Myanmar than to Mumbai. Even restaurants in cosmopolitan India tend to focus on the regions that people travel to most, which are more affluent, Mazumdar said. "What we needed to do was to say, This is the other side. Let's tell people who we really are. And the flavors are absolutely incredible." (Dishes \$9–\$39.)

—Hannah Goldfield



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

The Supreme Court term that began last fall has spanned several epochal upheavals at once: the second peak and wind-down of the coronavirus pandemic, the 2020 Presidential election, and its dramatic aftermath, including the violent mob attempt to block the certification of the outcome. During the term, oral arguments were conducted entirely by telephone, a low-tech option that had the effect of keeping the Justices less visually accessible to the public. Amy Coney Barrett took the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat, creating a six-Justice conservative majority that seemed to insure losses for liberals for at least a generation. In response to strong outcry from Democrats at that prospect, President Biden created a commission to study possible reforms to the Court, such as adding more Justices to it, and limiting their terms.

But, if the expectation was that the country's political divisions would be mirrored in starkly split decisions, it mostly was not met. The Court didn't even attempt to decide the 2020 Presidential election, as Donald Trump wanted it to and as many feared that it would. Instead, the Justices repeatedly defied expectations, with conservatives and liberals together forming majorities in high-profile cases in order to avoid or defer the fighting of deeper wars.

On June 17th, in *Fulton v. Philadelphia*, the Court ruled unanimously that the city had violated a Catholic foster-care agency's free exercise of religion by requiring it to work with same-sex

couples as potential foster parents. The case was supposed to be a showdown between gay people's right to be free of discrimination and religious people's right to discriminate on the basis of their religious beliefs. But an alliance of liberals and conservatives, led by Chief Justice John Roberts, focussed on the particular facts of the case, which plausibly enabled a ruling in favor of the Catholic agency, without going the full distance to a true win for religion and against gay rights. An angry Justice Samuel Alito accused the Court of issuing a too timid non-decision that "might as well be written on the dissolving paper sold in magic shops."

For the third time, Republicans had asked the Court to strike down the Affordable Care Act as unconstitutional. But, also on June 17th, the Court refused, by a vote of 7–2, with Justices Alito and Neil Gorsuch dissenting. The

big issue on which a partisan divide was anticipated was whether the law became unconstitutional when Congress, in 2017, nullified its "individual mandate." In a decision written by Justice Stephen Breyer, the Court was able to avoid answering entirely—and to avoid invalidating Obamacare—by holding that the eighteen states and two individuals who had brought the suit did not have standing to challenge the law, because they weren't concretely injured by its enforcement. Justice Alito lamented that "fans of judicial inventiveness will applaud once again," which was not a compliment.

Last week brought a ruling in the widely followed case of a Pennsylvania high-school cheerleader who was suspended from the team for a year, as punishment for a Snapchat post she made on a weekend, when she wasn't at school, showing her and a friend giving the finger, and profanely expressing her frustration at not making the varsity team. The Justices decided, 8–1, that, in disciplining the student, the Pennsylvania public-school district had violated her First Amendment right to free speech. The lone dissenter was Justice Clarence Thomas, who has previously argued that "the Constitution does not afford students a right to free speech in public schools." The other eight Justices signed on to a majority opinion that was uncategorical and vague—all the better for keeping the liberal-conservative coalition on board—saying that schools could discipline students' off-campus and online speech some of the time, but not on the specific facts in this





case, because the cheerleader's Snap seemed not to have caused much "disruption" at the school.

The Justices again flaunted their unanimity last week by joining an opinion written by Justice Gorsuch, which held that the National Collegiate Athletic Association violates federal antitrust law by restricting compensation for student athletes—in this instance, with rules that restrict education-related benefits from colleges, such as postgraduate scholarships, equipment, and tutoring. The most surprising aspect of the case was a concurring opinion by Justice Brett Kavanaugh, an avid sports fan, who approvingly underscored the decision's implication that other N.C.A.A. rules that depress wages for student athletes' labor below competitive levels raise serious questions under antitrust law. As he put it, "Price-fixing labor is price-fixing labor." The world in which the spirit of amateurism justifies keeping students from making money for playing sports for their colleges now looks likely to unravel. Kavanaugh also noted the racially exploitative effect of sup-

pressing pay for student athletes "who collectively generate billions of dollars in revenues for colleges," since the athletes, "many of whom are African American and from lower-income backgrounds, end up with little or nothing."

Finally, the Court will decide this week whether two Arizona voting restrictions violate provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that protect against racial discrimination. The first requires ballots cast at the wrong precinct to be discarded, and the second makes it a felony for most people to deliver the ballots of others to polling places. The Court agreed to hear the case a month before the 2020 election, and since then many Republican-led states, in the name of preventing fraud and with overt recognition that greater voting access favors Democrats, have passed or introduced more draconian limits on voting. The case has the potential to stymie future legal challenges to those efforts. But the Biden Administration has told the Court that "it does not disagree with" the Trump Administration's position that the Ari-

zona restrictions are lawful, and so it would not seem excessively partisan for the Court to uphold them. The most telling feature of the decision will not be its outcome but its reasoning, which could reflect a continuing cooperative compromise, or display its fault lines—a fitting capstone to a term in a year marked by fundamental challenges to American democracy.

The Justices presumably understand that, if we fail to channel social conflict into legal means, it will, in part, reflect poorly on their job performance. And if the Court's decisions lose the public respect that undergirds its power, it may aggravate, or even generate, social conflict. This term, the Justices worked hard at conflict management. At times, they even appeared to be demonstrating how to properly practice politics: reach broad agreement on narrow issues, enhance legitimacy, and avoid coming to partisan blows. As the Court turns to next term's cases on abortion and gun rights, we'll see how long its defiance of expectations can last.

—Jeannie Suk Gersen

## COUGH, COUGH THE COLD



Have you caught the cold? Or a cold, anyway? One is going around. Or maybe it's more than one. There are thousands of viruses wandering the earth: rhino, corona, mysharona. Each seems common, at least once you've determined, or decided, that it isn't something less than common but increasingly prevalent, such as the COVID-19 variant known as Delta. This isn't that. It's the "reemergence cold." The plague after the plague. The thief who rolls in beneath the descending garage door.

We declare victory, remove our masks, go to a game or a movie or a show, shake hands, sleep with strangers, share cabs and salads and vapes, and suddenly everyone is sick, or "sick." There's no vaccine for it. Contact tracing is hopeless. This one got it from that one, who got it there, probably

from him, who was just with them. Frank Sinatra had it. E.T. might've. Sneezzy, too. It was mentioned, three and a half millennia ago, in the Ebers Papyrus, the ancient Egyptian catalogue of ills and remedies, which recommended a therapeutic spell: "Flow out, fetid nose, flow out, son of fetid nose! Flow out, you who break bones, destroy the skull and make ill the seven holes of the head."

Seven holes! The thieves sneak in, and out. If a friend warned you, before coming over for dinner, that she had COVID, you might bar the door, but if she said "I have a cold" you'd open it wide. It's been so long. We've been through so much. We've been retrained. We've all become germophobes. You say, "We won't touch each other, not even with elbows or fists. We'll keep our distance and wash our hands. We'll break bread—separate loaves." And yet, a few days later, gesundheit: son of fetid nose.

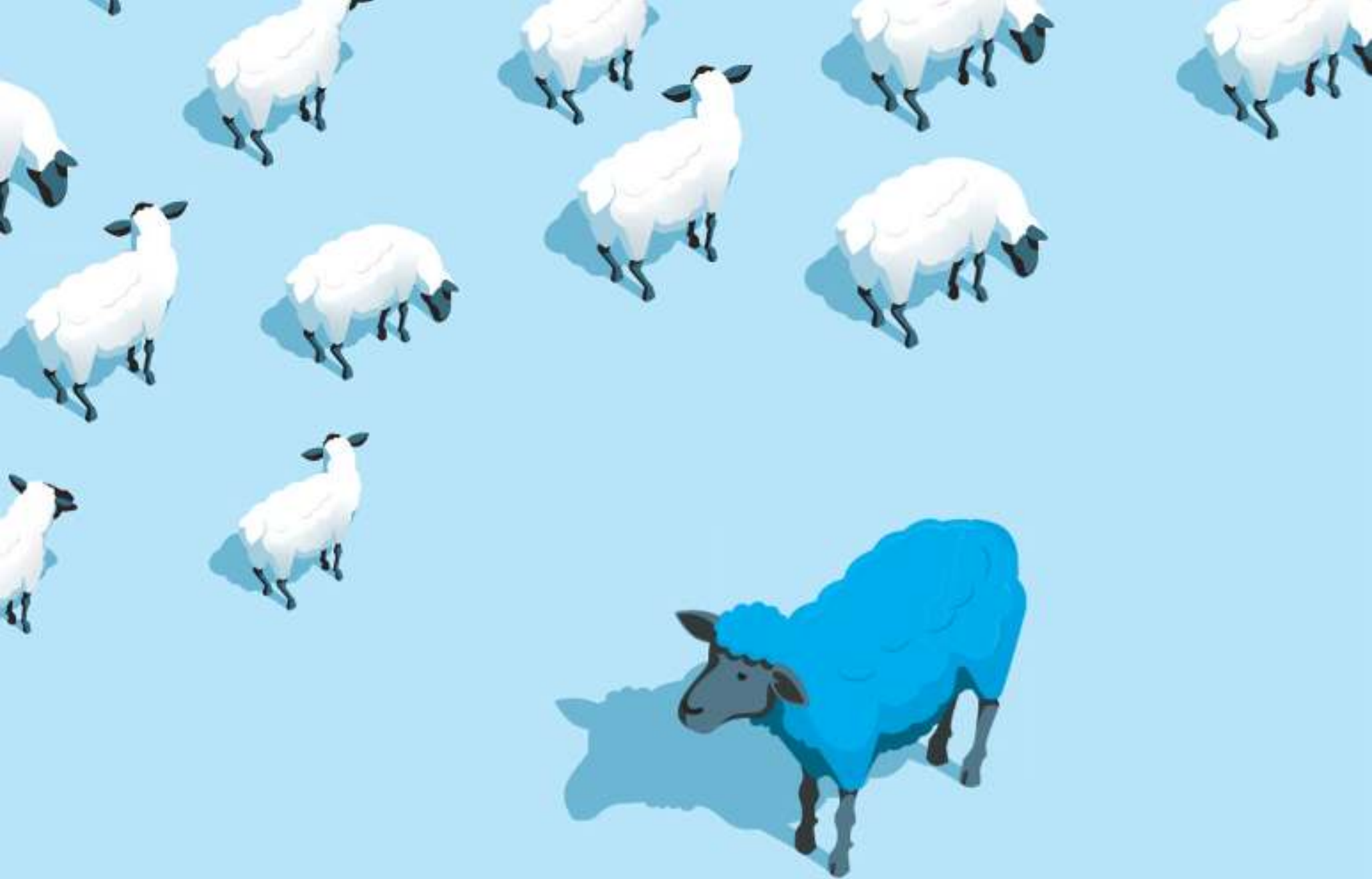
When you don't have a cold, the prospect of having one—or the news that someone else does—can seem like no big deal. That's why they call it the

Man Flu. It's a malady for whiners and wimps. But when you catch one—a genuine cold, not just some weak-ass sniffles or a performative cough—it can be a real hammer to the head. It gets your attention. You get to make your idling contribution to the tens of billions of dollars that the common cold costs the country every year, and to the billions earned by the purveyors of palliatives and placebos.

Amid the emergence, there have been other mini-plagues. Cicadas (though, in these parts, all but a scattering of Brood X perished prematurely beneath the soil), deer ticks (worse than ever, they say), nutty mayoral candidates. (Q: *What was your favorite concert?* A: *The one where Curtis Mayfield was paralyzed.*) But this cold, in the way its virality mimics the other virus that has ended and upended so many lives, comes off as some kind of sick joke, or joke sickness. It's like the overture to an opera or a musical—introducing, in brief, the greater themes—except it comes at the end. It's a dry run, after the fact. Flow out, flow out.

—Nick Paumgarten





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## FUNNY FRIENDS HAPPY HUNDREDTH



On a recent Wednesday, Bill Murray and Ivan Reitman, two old friends whose collaborations include “Meatballs,” “Stripes,” and “Ghostbusters,” reconnected, via Zoom, to observe some milestones. Reitman, cheerfully placid, sat in a tidy home office decorated with awards; Murray, white hair askew, angled his iPad from fireplace to ceiling fan, occasionally muting himself. “I could lie on the floor,” he said, helpfully. “I’ll call back.” His camera bounced toward a view of sky. Reitman smiled a little. “Seven movies,” he said.

“I can hear you,” Murray said.

This year, “Stripes” turns forty; that day, its cinematographer, Bill Butler, was turning a hundred. Butler, who lives with his wife in rural Montana, isn’t best known for his cinematography on “Stripes”—it’s often overshadowed by his work on “Jaws,” “The Conversation,” “Grease,” three “Rocky” sequels, “The Thorn Birds,” and “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” among others—but, in September, a new 4K Ultra HD Columbia Classics print will display it (tracking shots of drills at Fort Knox, a warmly lit mud-wrestling sequence with John Candy) in stunning clarity, along with reminiscences from Murray and Reitman.

Reitman got the idea for “Stripes,” in which a devil-may-care Manhattan cabbie (Murray) and his long-suffering friend (Harold Ramis) join the Army, in 1979, just before the Toronto premiere of “Meatballs.” “I was shaving and I thought, Oh, Cheech and Chong join the Army,” Reitman said. “Wouldn’t that be a funny idea?” Cheech and Chong didn’t work out. “We tried to get whatever was good from the Cheech and Chong draft and give it to Judge Reinhold—he played this druggie guy,” Reitman said.

While making “Meatballs,” Murray’s first starring role, Reitman, noting that Murray interpreted “all the beats in the script in a whole new original way,” had

learned to roll with it, to “take advantage of this remarkably powerful force.” The powerful force, now in a sunny kitchen, called out to a house guest (“You can talk and walk—this is not a monastery”) and reflected on memories of “Stripes”: leading a surprisingly competent drill routine (“The real generals who came to watch it, the real brass, were, like, ‘How?’ ‘What?’”); his stove-top-flirtation scene (“I think I said to the prop man, ‘I want bigger stuff—spatulas, utensils’”); the expert camerawork of Bill Butler. In a sequence where a basketball breaks two consecutive windows, “I said to the prop guy, ‘Don’t throw it to me—throw it through the window next to me,’” Murray recalled. “Bill had the camera in the perfect spot.”

Murray grew pensive. “What I remember most about the movie is watching ‘Monday Night Football’ and Howard Cosell saying, ‘There is some tragic news out of New York City: John Lennon has been killed,’” he said, paraphrasing. Reitman nodded. “It just took the guts out of you,” Murray continued. “You think about death: ‘Why am I still alive? Why is John Lennon dead and this makeup artist is still living? Why is Judge Reinhold still alive?’” On set, “it actually galvanized us all as a group, because we were all mourners,” he said. “John Lennon was dead, and somebody’s gotta do the work.”

A Zoom alert: Butler was in the waiting room.

“Are we going to see him?” Murray said.

“We’re going to *sing* ’im!” Reitman said.

They sang “Happy Birthday” as Butler, beaming, his hair neatly combed, appeared onscreen, from Montana, in a kitchen bursting with black, white, and silver balloons. Gold Mylar “100” numerals floated behind his head. “And one hundred more!” Murray sang.

“When I think about a hundred years—” Butler said. “I could bore you to death. People, as they get older, they have all these stories to tell. I can remember the day, listening to the radio, when they made a big announcement: they had just invented plastic!” Reminiscing about “Stripes,” he said, “The Teamsters were something else.” One day, en route to lunch, “Ivan and I are riding up the hill, and we look up, and

here’s his camper rolling down the hill into the lake,” Butler said, laughing. “Those drivers weren’t really friendly.”

“For Harold and I and Candy, too, to have you shooting the movie—you made us look good, Bill,” Murray said. “And you gave me a whole lot of encouragement from the first day. I remember you saying, ‘You can do what you’re going to do—I’ll find you with the camera.’”

“Making movies, to me, is so much fun that I don’t think I could do anything else in life,” Butler said.

“You are a good role model for those in the film industry,” Murray went on. “Don’t spend your money on alcohol and drugs, get yourself a nice place up there in nature. You’ll always be able to get your hands on some balloons—that’s obvious. You don’t have to spend all your



Reitman, Butler, and Murray

money on balloons *now*.” Murray threatened to visit (“I’m coming to stay for quite a while—you might want to start throwing out some stuff, clear a lot of extra space”), and Butler signed off. Murray and Reitman observed one last milestone: watching a clip from the forthcoming movie “Ghostbusters: Afterlife,” directed by Ivan’s son, Jason. The scene involved a supermarket, Paul Rudd, and a disturbance on a baking-goods shelf. “Marshmallows—look out!” Murray said. A mini marshmallow man emerged from a bag, smiled, and bit Rudd’s finger. Murray howled with laughter.

—Sarah Larson



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DEPT. OF EXPLORING  
A TWO-HOUR TOUR



One complication facing any expedition to Oyster Island, a speck of land about half a mile southwest of the Statue of Liberty, is that most of the time the island is not there. For this reason, perhaps, it is rarely marked on maps—another complication. One of the last charts to note Oyster Island by name was issued by the U.S. Coast Survey, in 1844, and since then it has been portrayed mostly as an underwater hazard—marked on maritime apps, for instance, as “foul area,” a mere navigational risk. It is a remnant of the oyster beds that surrounded Liberty and Ellis Islands through the late nineteen-twenties, by which time they’d been contaminated by sewage, industrial toxins, and dredging. Oyster Island is primarily a sunken island, but it returns occasionally when the moon is both full and especially close, as it was a few weeks ago, when an unusually low tide offered a two-hour

window during which a small group landed there to explore.

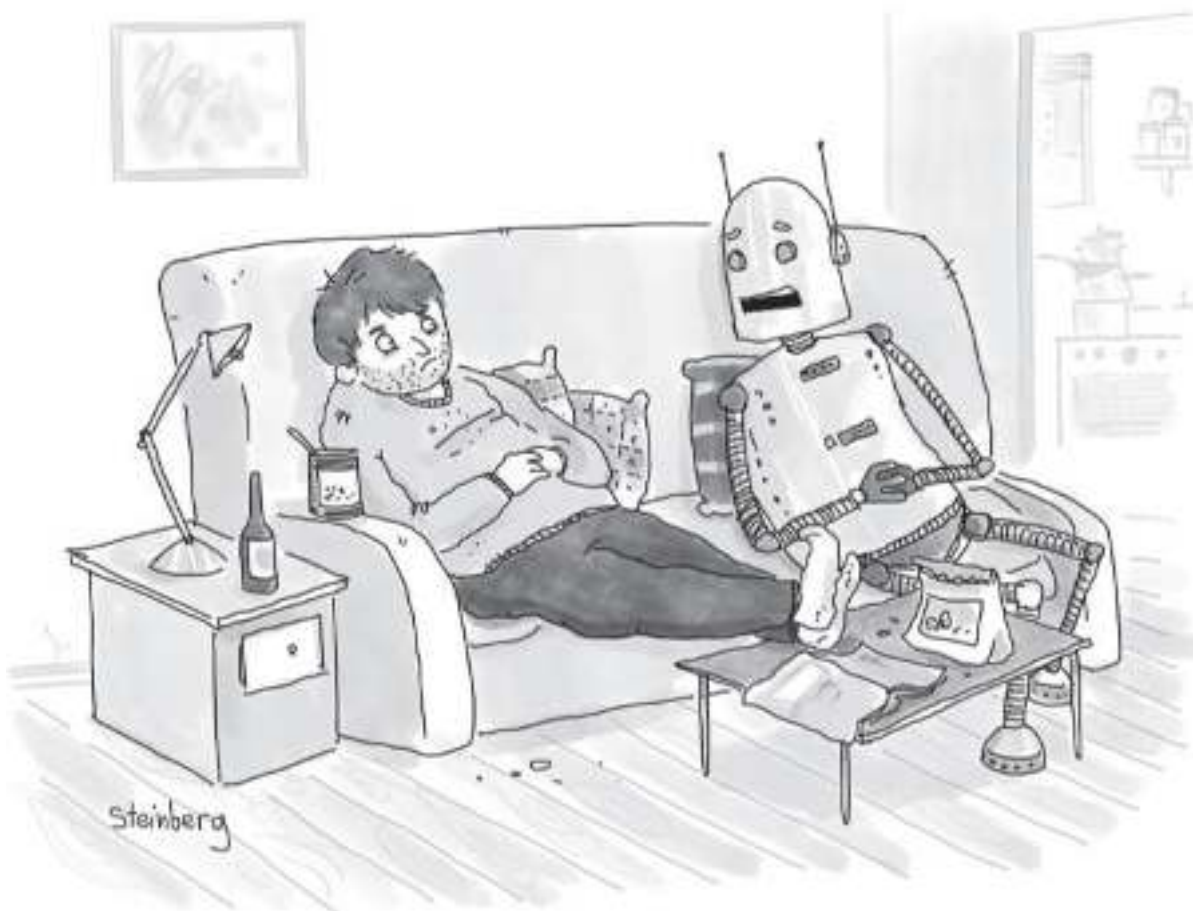
Six people arrived on the island’s west coast in two groups, the first from Brooklyn, via the East River, a few miles away; the second about twenty minutes later, via the North American mainland (New Jersey). For the second group, approaching from Liberty State Park, the island’s desperately low profile made the first group’s members appear as if they were walking on water. By the time the second group arrived, the islandness of the suddenly appearing landform was clear: a parenthesis-shaped beach, thicker and higher in the middle, with rocky bars tapering at each end. Within a few minutes—at just after 4 P.M., when the water level at the Battery was at negative half a foot, the lowest for the afternoon—a few measurements were made. The perimeter of the island was calculated at four hundred and eighteen feet; the distance across at its widest point was approximately thirty feet. Standing on one end of the island and looking at the other end was like standing toward the middle of a subway platform and waving at a friend at the end of the station. If Oyster Island were a subway train at rush-hour density, it might hold eight hundred standing riders.

More if they were willing to get their ankles wet.

A quick investigation of the island’s flora and fauna turned up razor clams; moon snails; lots of oyster shells without oysters; mussels, buried just beneath the surface of the island (seemingly held in place by large rocks, a possible geologic key to the island’s tenacity); a red-beard sponge, or *Microciona prolifera*; and, on the edge of the lee side, green seaweed that had colonized the inside of an automobile tire, a green harbor within a harbor. The surveyors debated the origin of the many miniature, toilet-plunger-shaped sand formations that were delicate and translucent when held up to the sun, eventually determining that they were the moon snails’ egg casings, called sand collars. In “Seashells of North America,” R. Tucker Abbott refers to moon snails as “among the most active of gastropod carnivores.” They can eat three to four small clams a day, holding the bivalves with their foot while drilling through the shell with the aid of a corrosive acid. Their abandoned shells resemble little modern man-made islands, concrete and impervious, though, like everything in the harbor, not.

After about an hour, the surveying of Oyster Island degraded into wading off its quickly disappearing shoreline, in water that, despite its bad reputation, was clear and pleasant and lovely. A picnic was laid out on a blanket on the island’s high point, at an elevation of maybe a foot above the water—though still technically below sea level. The view from what served briefly as Oyster Island Heights offered a panorama of the city: Todt Hill, on Staten Island; the hills of Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn; the Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg Bridges fighting to outdo one another over the East River; the newly constructed hills of Governors Island; and the glass towers of downtown Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Jersey City, all mingling like a single spiny creature.

The second of Oyster Island’s two hours of life above water went more quickly than the first, or seemed to. By five o’clock, the moon was bringing in the tide. There was a frenzy of movement among the temporary islanders.



*“I wouldn’t have taken your job if I knew  
I’d be working from home for a year.”*



The tide measured a negative quarter inch at the Battery, and a hurried second measurement of the perimeter came in at a hundred and twenty-three feet. Watching the island fade away was like getting a preview of New York City's future, each wave coming closer to the dry center, the tide creeping up. Inundation happens fast, or faster than you'd think, even when you are expecting it, and, if it's initially terrifying, once everything is safely stowed it becomes amazing again. Before you know it, you have returned to your boat, looking back at an island that has gone away.

—Robert Sullivan

## EATING OUT TRIAL RUN



On a sunny Monday morning not long ago, the chef Angie Mar stopped into the kitchen of her West Village restaurant to pick up provisions for an afternoon in the country: a cast-iron terrine of *pâté de campagne*, two suet-crusted pies, a pair of juniper-cured pheasants, and a long, parchment-paper-wrapped log of butter embedded with chopped hazelnuts and blended with rendered pheasant fat. Her excursion was part pilgrimage, part taste test. Mar was driving to visit her friend Jacques Pépin, the chef and cooking-show host, in Connecticut. Over lunch, she'd debut a dish intended for Les Trois Chevaux, the spot she's opening soon on West Twelfth Street.

Mar, who is thirty-nine, met Pépin on a food-industry panel a few years ago, when she was the chef and co-owner of the Beatrice Inn. "I had this bottle of water," she recalled, as she drove her black Mercedes G-Wagen up the West Side Highway. "He leaned over and goes, 'Is that vodka or gin?'" She was charmed, and Pépin ate many times at the Beatrice, which closed in December. Les Trois Chevaux will feature an entirely new menu, and Pépin had offered to be a guinea pig. Along with the pheasants, Mar was bringing a few more dishes, including a savory chicken pie.

She pulled up at Pépin's house, a restored brick factory built in 1920. Inside, the walls were decorated with abstract images and still-lives of fruit, mostly done by Pépin himself. Painting is just like cooking, he told his guest: "You add, you adjust, you add, you adjust. You say, 'Why did you put that color there?', or whatever. I say, 'It just felt good.'"

Pépin, who is eighty-five, with silver hair, had prepared a few dishes of his own: garlic-and-pasilla soup, *omelettes aux crevettes*, mushroom carpaccio with paprika and lemon zest. A pitcher of beaten eggs awaited a hot pan. Mar, who wore thick black eyeliner, tied an apron over her Kith cardigan and looked for something to do. (Pépin's apron was embroidered with an umbrella—*un pépin*, in antiquated French.)

Before the pandemic, some of Pépin's chef friends, such as Jacques Torres and Ming Tsai, would come over for a bite and a round of boules. Visitors had been scarce, but Daniel Boulud had stopped in a month earlier, with cassoulet and tripe. For Mar's visit, Pépin laid out pressed black caviar on thin crackers. He offered a shot of vodka, from a bottle stashed in the freezer near boxes of Eggo waffles.

Pépin moved around his kitchen as if hosting a cooking show. Mar assumed sous-chef duties, dolloping crème fraîche into soup bowls. The first course was Pépin's thick, pasilla-laden soup. "Classic French cooking," he said. It was time to cook the frothed eggs.

"When I was in school, my whole goal in life was to make the perfect omelette," Mar said.

Pépin explained that he'd learned the technique in Paris in the nineteen-fifties, a few years after postwar rationing ended. He worked at Maxim's and Fouquet's and, on his days off, at any kitchen that would have him. At Café de la Rotonde, in Montparnasse, he would see, out the window, Jean-Paul Sartre en route to La Coupole, across the street. "I worked for over a hundred restaurants," Pépin said. "Very often, at the beginning, the chef would say, 'Make an omelette.'"

Soon, Pépin was cooking for Charles de Gaulle. "I dealt with Madame de Gaulle, who called me Petit Jacques,"

he said. "I'd do the menu for the week on Monday, depending on who was there. I served Nehru, Eisenhower, Tito, Diefenbaker, who was the head of Canada at the time. There you deal with the protocol, because there are people who don't eat this or that. It has to be fast, it has to be slow, or maybe they had another dinner the night before and were served the same fish."

As they sat down to eat the omelettes, talk turned to Mar's new restaurant. The Beatrice Inn was done in during the pandemic by a looming rent increase



Angie Mar and Jacques Pépin

of forty per cent, she said. "Who was the landlord?" Pépin asked. "They wouldn't give you a break?"

"It's a real-estate firm," Mar said. "They're not from New York." The new restaurant is in the space next door. Pépin had helped inspire her choice of name. But would the food hold up? Finally, she brought out the pheasants. Each bird was cut into pieces, the burnished flesh permeated by the earthy sharpness of a two-day cure.

For a while, the two were quiet as they ate, each holding a slender pheasant leg. "The first time we had dinner, you ate with your hands," Mar said. "I was, like, 'Oh, thank God—I can eat with my hands, too.'"

Pépin delivered his appraisal. "Your cooking is very sincere, very straightforward," he said. "It's very honest in many ways."

Mar beamed and began to clear the plates. After a quick cheese course, she hopped back in the car. Pépin saved the *pâté* and the pies for dinner.

—Rachel Felder



# INVASIVE SPECIES

*How did a cockatoo from remote Australasia end up in a Renaissance painting?*

BY REBECCA MEAD



“**M**adonna della Vittoria,” by the Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna, must have looked imposing when it was first installed as an altarpiece in Santa Maria della Vittoria, a small chapel in the northern-Italian city of Mantua. The painting, which was commissioned by the city’s ruler, Francesco II Gonzaga, was completed in 1496, and measures more than nine feet in height. A worshiper’s eye likely lingered on its lower half—where the Virgin, seated on a marble pedestal, bestows a blessing on the kneeling, armored figure of

Francesco—instead of straining to discern the intricacies of its upper half, which depicts a pergola bedecked with hanging ornaments and fruited vines. In the late eighteenth century, Napoleon’s forces looted the painting and transported it to the Louvre, where it now occupies a commanding spot in the Denon wing.

When Heather Dalton, a British-born historian who lives in Melbourne, Australia, took a moment to examine the painting some years ago, during her first year of study for a doctorate at the University of Mel-

bourne, she was not in Paris but at home, leafing through a book about Mantegna. Although the Madonna image had been reproduced at a fraction of its true size, Dalton noticed something that she well might have missed had she been peering up at the framed original: perched on the pergola, directly above a gem-encrusted crucifix on a staff, was a slender white bird with a black beak, an alert expression, and an impressive greenish-yellow crest. Moreover, without the context of her own surroundings, Dalton might not have registered the bird’s incongruity. “If I hadn’t been in Australia, I wouldn’t have thought, That’s a bloody sulfur-crested cockatoo!” she told me.

The sulfur-crested cockatoo is a sizable bird, about twenty inches tall when full grown. It has mostly white feathers on its body and, atop its head, a distinctive swoosh of citrine plumage, which fans upward in moments of excitement or agitation—looking like the avian equivalent of a dyed-and-sprayed Mohawk. Cockatoos, a kind of parrot, are a familiar presence throughout northern and eastern Australia, where they live in parks and in wooded areas. To some people, the cockatoo is a squawking pest that can damage a building’s timbers with its beak; to others, the bird is a cherished companion. In captivity, sulfur-crested cockatoos can learn to mimic human speech, and some have been known to live for more than eighty years. There’s a national pride in the bird: it appears on the Australian ten-dollar bill.

Cockatoos are nonmigratory, and their native habitat is restricted to Australia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and the Philippines. Most of the twenty-odd species of cockatoo originate east of the Wallace Line—a boundary, established in the mid-nineteenth century by Charles Darwin’s sometime collaborator Alfred Russel Wallace, that runs through both the strait separating Borneo from Sulawesi and the strait dividing Bali from Lombok. In Wallace’s book “The Malay Archipelago,” about the studies he undertook there, in the mid-eighteen-hundreds, he wrote, “To the or-

*Andrea Mantegna’s “Madonna della Vittoria” was completed in Italy in 1496.*



dinary Englishman this is perhaps the least known part of the globe. Our possessions in it are few and scanty; scarcely any of our travelers go to explore it; and in many collections of maps it is almost ignored." Wallace noted the absence in Australia of pheasants and woodpeckers, birds common on other continents, and wrote that the area's cockatoos were among those species "found nowhere else upon the globe."

Although goods from these regions sometimes entered Europe in the centuries before Wallace's explorations, little was understood about their place of origin, or about how they moved westward. Even present-day scholarship of what is now called the Global Middle Ages—between 500 and 1500—has paid only glancing attention to Australasia, in part because of a dearth of written records of trade or other forms of cultural exchange with the continent. In a recent book, "The Year 1000," the scholar Valerie Hansen points out that the direction of ocean currents in and around Southeast Asia makes it much easier for boats to go south—as the archaeological record shows they did, to Australia, fifty thousand years ago—than to travel north. She writes that, before the fourteenth or fifteenth century, the people of Australia and Indonesia had very limited contact with people in continental Southeast Asia.

Before Dalton put down the Mantegna book, she asked herself, "How did a bird from Australasia end up in a fifteenth-century Italian painting?" After researching the question for a decade, she published a paper in the journal *Renaissance Studies*, in 2014, about the cockatoo's unlikely appearance. She argued that the bird's presence on Mantegna's canvas illuminated the sophistication of ancient trade routes between Australasia and the rest of the world, concluding that Mantegna's cockatoo most likely originated in the southeastern reaches of the Indonesian archipelago—east of Bali, perhaps on Timor or Sulawesi. The revisionist force of Dalton's work attracted attention from many news outlets, including the *Guardian* and *Smithsonian*. In Australia, one newspaper came up with the irresistible

headline "Picture Points to Renaissance Budgie-Smugglers." ("Budgie-smuggler" is the preferred local term for a Speedo.)

The Mantegna painting isn't the only image from the Renaissance that provides hints of at least indirect contact with Australasia. An ink-and-watercolor work by the Flemish artist Joris Hoefnagel, made around 1561 and now in the collection of the Getty, shows a furry gray creature seated on a gilded throne, gnawing on a branch. The work is titled "A Sloth," but Dalton speculates that it may depict a New Guinean tree kangaroo.

Dalton's work not only offers visual confirmation that the world has been interconnected for far longer than many people have supposed; it also offers a reminder of the value of a fresh eye. A historian interested in European art who lives on the opposite end of the earth from the Louvre saw a familiar object from an unfamiliar angle—and registered something that hardly any onlooker had registered before.

"Parrots are the nearest birds come to being little human beings wrapped in feathers," Richard Verdi, a former director of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, in Birmingham, England, wrote in the catalogue to "The Parrot in Art," an exhibition mounted at the museum in 2007. Parrots, which can be found across the globe but are not native to Europe, have been considered remarkable for millennia. Verdi's essay noted that Alexander the Great acquired one from the Punjab in 327 B.C.; the admiral of his fleet, Nearchus, declared that the bird's ability to speak was miraculous. The Greeks prized the beauty and the intelligence of parrots from India, which had established overland trade routes with Europe in antiquity; Aristotle remarked that the birds were good mimics, and noted that they were "even more outrageous after drinking wine."

Soon enough, parrots began showing up in European art. There are several representations of the bird in frescoes and mosaics found in the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, including in a painting that is now lost but was



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documented by an engraving made in the eighteenth century: it depicted a parrot harnessed to a chariot driven by a grasshopper, which held a set of reins in its mandibles.

Parrots were initially incorporated into European art mainly because of their exotic allure. But by the Renaissance parrots were appearing in Christian-themed portraiture because of symbolic links with Mary: among other things, the bird's improbable ability to talk was seen as comparable to the Virgin's ability to become pregnant. In the early sixteenth century, several years after Mantegna painted his altarpiece, Albrecht Dürer made an ink-and-watercolor study in which a parrot perches on a wooden post near the

Madonna and Child. Dürer was fascinated by parrots, and he eventually acquired some, on a visit to a trading hub in the Netherlands. "Madonna with Child and Parrots," a 1533 work by the German artist Hans Baldung Grien, shows Mary with a frowning infant Jesus at her breast. A green parakeet stands near Jesus' foot, and a gray parrot balances on Mary's shoulder, its mouth open. The composition suggests that Grien was less familiar with parrots than Dürer was: given that parrots eat nuts and have beaks with the biting force required to crack shells, the gray bird's beak is disconcertingly close to Mary's face.

Verdi included Mantegna's "Madonna della Vittoria" in his catalogue

essay, noting the presence of what he characterized as a lesser sulfur-crested cockatoo, and remarking on its estimable position in the painting, above the figure of the Virgin. But Verdi did not linger on the implications of the bird's geographical origin, even though the cockatoo species he named lives only in the southeastern islands of Indonesia.

When Heather Dalton started researching the Mantegna work, she found that other scholars had noted the peculiarity of such a creature appearing in a Renaissance art work—among them, Bruce Thomas Boehrer, a professor of English at Florida State University, whose 2004 book, "Parrot Culture," offers a lively popular account of "our 2500-year-long fascination with the world's most talkative bird." But it seemed that nobody had considered the larger resonances. What had a cockatoo signified to Andrea Mantegna, or to Francesco II Gonzaga, one of the most powerful men of his time? And what did the bird's presence reveal about the connections between an Italian city and distant forests that lay beyond the world known to Europeans?

Dalton, who was born in Essex, did not turn to academic history until she was in her forties. Her first degree, from the University of Manchester, was in American studies. She moved to Australia in the mid-eighties, having married a man from the country who had been working in The Hague. Before departing for the Southern Hemisphere, they took a road trip around Europe and stopped off in Mantua. Dalton visited the palace, which served as home to the noble Gonzaga family for nearly four hundred years. Its patriarch, Ludovico I Gonzaga, began ruling the city in 1328. Inside the palace, Dalton saw the works of Mantegna for the first time, and admired the lavish frescoes that he had executed for the Camera degli Sposi in the fourteen-sixties and seventies—his most important commission for the Gonzaga family, for whom he was the court painter.

In Australia, Dalton initially worked



in publishing and in journalism. To mark the 1988 bicentenary of the establishment of a British penal colony in Australia, she wrote a number of articles on Australian history, including one about the country's vigorous trade in *bêche-de-mer*, or sea cucumber. For centuries, the *bêche-de-mer*—which is a lumpy, sluglike creature related to the starfish—was harvested off the northern coast of Australia and then sold in Chinese markets, where it was regarded as a delicacy. In 2002, Dalton, by then a postgraduate student in history, returned to the subject. The fishermen, who had gathered sea cucumbers in shallow waters, had formed one end of a significant mercantile link between coastal Australia and Asia, but they had been largely overlooked in the narrative of Australia's national founding, which, she said, favored “the digger, the pastoralist, and the drover.” (The song “Waltzing Matilda” commemorates an itinerant sheep-station worker.) Dalton, for her dissertation, wrote about a Tudor trader, Roger Barlow, who travelled around England, Spain, and South America; in 2016, she expanded the work into a book, “Merchants and Explorers.” She told me, “I was very interested in the idea that *everything* is about trade and economics, and the idea that we make discoveries for some national reason is something that you claim afterward.”

The cockatoo in the Mantegna painting reminded Dalton of her work on the *bêche-de-mer*. Both animals were clearly part of a bustling, poorly documented trade in luxuries. The cockatoo in Mantegna's altarpiece, like parrots in other Renaissance art works, had a clear religious symbolism, but it also signalled the worldly matter of the Gonzagas' immense wealth—bling with feathers. The rarity of the bird can be deduced from its singular occurrence in the altarpiece: Dalton could not find another cockatoo in works by Mantegna, or in those of his contemporaries. Although she acknowledges that the cockatoo may be a representation of a representation—say, a copy of an image imported from parts east—she argues that the bird's detailed

appearance strongly indicates it was drawn from life. Old Master paintings of cockatoos from the seventeenth century onward typically show the bird in profile, with its crest maximally displayed, as a taxidermy specimen would be arranged. On Mantegna's canvas, the bird faces forward. It therefore holds the viewer's eye, just as a curious, intelligent bird that began life in a distant tropical forest might gaze at a painter standing before an easel.

An inventory of objects owned by one of Mantegna's sons made note of a large copper birdcage, but Dalton was otherwise unable to find any documentary evidence of either Mantegna or the Gonzagas having acquired a cockatoo. Yet it was plausible, she thought, that the parrot had arrived in Mantua by way of Venice, ninety miles east, where merchants were engaged in exporting glass and ceramics and in importing luxury items. In the *Renaissance Studies* essay, she noted, “Wealthy citizens of Italian city-states buying such goods may have appreciated their rarity, but understood little of their geographical origins.” Wares arriving in Venetian markets would have changed hands many times during their journey: “A parrot, like an artwork, may have had a succession of owners as it was traded West towards Europe.” Dalton cited a handful of Italian traders who, in the fifteenth century, ven-



tured as far east as Java and the Moluccas, where, she suggests, they might have encountered Chinese merchants plying established trading routes still farther east—and scooped up a prestigious parrot along the way. More likely, she thinks, the cockatoo may not have reached European hands until much closer to the end of its westward journey. Some birds travel very poorly: Barlow, the Tudor trader,

attempted to bring a hummingbird back to Europe from the Americas, and ended up transporting a corpse. But a sulfur-crested cockatoo, especially one accustomed to human company, would have been more resilient—and, as a valuable commodity, it would have been well cared for.

Dalton told me that she now believes the cockatoo was probably transported largely by sea—not in a single epic voyage across the Indian Ocean but in a series of trips in small boats which hugged the coast of India and Arabia. Yet it remains a mystery how, precisely, the cockatoo painted by Mantegna reached Mantua.

For good reason, Dalton expected her paper to be the final word on cockatoos in early European art. But, not long after its publication, she learned that her extraordinary discovery had been trumped. However Mantegna's cockatoo came to Italy, it was not the first bird of its kind to have made the crossing. It had been preceded by another cockatoo, two and a half centuries earlier.

In the late nineteen-eighties, Finnish researchers, led by a zoologist named Pekka Niemelä, gained unusual access to a rare manuscript in the collection of the Vatican Library, “De Arte Venandi cum Avibus,” or “On the Art of Hunting with Birds.” The book, attributed to Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor, was made between 1241 and 1244. The Vatican's manuscript, which is in two volumes, was compiled by Frederick's son Manfred more than a decade later, after the original work was lost during the Battle of Parma. The manuscript passed through the hands of several eminent noblemen and intellectuals before entering the papal collection, in 1622. Written in Latin, it contains hundreds of drawings of birds, and is of particular interest to scientists because it represents a strikingly early attempt at empirical zoology. Frederick II was a keen scientist, with a fascination for the animal kingdom and the human body. Reputedly, he once had a dying man sealed up in an airtight wine vat, in order to observe whether a person's soul perished along with his body. He is



also said, perhaps apocryphally, to have had surgeons cut open the bellies of two men who had been fed a large meal, to see if the one who had been made to exercise after eating had digested his food more efficiently than the one who had napped before being subjected to postprandial slaughter.

While looking at reproductions of “De Arte Venandi cum Avibus,” Niemelä had noticed the presence, among images of hawks, of a cockatoo with white plumage. The bird was featured in four of the manuscript’s illustrations. “It was really, really shocking to see them,” Niemelä told me. Thanks to the intercession of Simo Örmä, an academic at the Finnish Institute in Rome, Niemelä and a zoologist colleague, Jukka Salo, were granted permission to see the manuscript, under the watchful eye of the head librarian. The scholars concluded that the four images were of the same bird, and, by examining the remains of pigment on the ancient pages, they ascertained the original creature’s coloring. They could also make an educated guess at the cockatoo’s gender: female, as indicated by reddish flecks in the iris of its eye. The cockatoo, they surmised, was either a subspecies of the sulfur-crested cockatoo or one of its close relatives, the yellow-crested cockatoo. This narrowed the bird’s origin down to New Guinea or adjacent islands.

After the publication of Dalton’s paper, Niemelä sent her an e-mail. Dalton, who had received a lot of odd queries about her work, initially dismissed the message. “I saw the name Pekka, and my paper was about a bird, and I thought it was a joke,” she told me. Finally, she read Niemelä’s note, and contacted him with excitement. Niemelä, Salo, and Örmä had not managed to publish their findings, but now, in collaboration with Dalton, they set about exploring more definitively the provenance and the significance of Frederick II’s cockatoo. In 2018, they published a paper, in the medieval-studies journal *Parergon*, proposing that this bird most likely arrived in the cosmopolitan markets of Cairo after a journey

from China, to which it would have been traded from somewhere in Australasia.

Their deduction was grounded in more than speculation: unlike Mantegna’s bird, Frederick’s cockatoo has a contemporaneous paper trail. The text accompanying one of the cockatoo images comments on the appearance of various parrots in the royal collection, one of which was characterized as having “white feathers and quills, changing to yellow under the sides,” and was said to have been “sent to us by the Sultan of Babylon”—the ruler of Egypt, Al-Malik al-Kāmil. As Dalton and her co-authors wrote, al-Kāmil had extensive links with a network of traders extending from China and India across central Asia. Frederick’s text also observes that parrots can “imitate the human voice and the words they hear most frequently.” It’s tempting to imagine that the Emperor’s cockatoo learned greetings, or curses, in different languages during its journey; unfortunately, Frederick’s scribe failed to note any polyglot repertoire, which might have provided further clues about the bird’s path.

The cockatoo was one of many animals that Frederick and al-Kāmil exchanged during a period of years, with what appears to be ever-increasing effort to impress each other. One of Frederick’s first gifts to al-Kāmil, Dalton and her co-authors reported, was horses equipped with golden stirrups encrusted with gems. Al-Kāmil, in turn, sent Frederick an even more wondrous gift, an elephant. For a medieval monarch, maintaining a menagerie fulfilled a function similar to the one an art collection plays for a modern-day plutocrat: it was a show of power and prestige. A particularly rare beast—say, a white peacock or a white bear, both of which Frederick sent to al-Kāmil—provided much the same cachet that a prime Basquiat would today. Among al-Kāmil’s gifts to Frederick was a gyrfalcon, a splendid bird of prey that originates in the Arctic and North America, and likely came from Iceland, then almost at the northwestern edge of European exploration. A white cockatoo with a greenish crest would have repre-

sented an equally resplendent gift—a rare bird retrieved from an almost inconceivable corner of the world.

Unlike gyrfalcons, which can cover enormous distances at a high speed, the sulfur-crested cockatoo does not travel far, unless driven by drought or wrested from its home by human intervention. A bird born on one island typically stays on that island for the rest of its life. Sulfur-crested cockatoos are social and companionable creatures: in early adulthood, they select a mate, and partner for life. The Europeans who first beheld such a strange creature in their midst must have been astonished by it. One can’t help wondering how the bird experienced the encounter.

Jukka Salo, the zoologist, helped me imagine the bird’s-eye view of a journey across Asia. He reflected on what the cockatoo might have experienced as it was taken from its home and transported from one place to another. Most likely, he said, the cockatoo would have been removed from its nest—a hole in a tree in a forest—when it was only a few weeks old, perhaps along with one other chick hatched from the same clutch of eggs. The hand that grasped it probably belonged to a seasoned hunter, who would have known the bird’s value, and also would have understood the optimal age at which to steal it: when the bird was old enough to survive without parental care but young enough to adapt to human company. Older birds are far less amenable to captivity. Salo told me that a trip to Italy “would have been very stressful.” The cockatoo may have spent months at sea, in storage, or it may have travelled in a camel caravan across the landmass of Asia. Salo said, “It would have been harsh travel—the most difficult time of the bird’s life.” Frederick’s and Mantegna’s cockatoos may have achieved a pictorial immortality, but they themselves are not examples of what historians now call “material culture.” They were living beings from long ago, as difficult to imagine as a land beyond the land we think we know. ♦

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**On Second Thought Dept.**

*From the Denver Post.*

“We’ll kind of jump off the bridge when we get to it.”





## LESSER-KNOWN REJECTION STORIES

BY TAYLOR KAY PHILLIPS

Four high-profile monarchs passed on the Bible before King James agreed to publish it. Now it's the most widely read book in the world! It takes just one divinely appointed ruler who believes in your work.

Gretchen R. Kleenex got a D on a paper for her college geometric-engineering course called "The Perfect Size for a Facial Tissue—Also We Should Add Lotion."

Little Debbie worked in the back of Big Deborah's kitchen for years,

using her free time to bake cakes and cookies with the preservative runoff from the inside of the oven and the expired contents of the front-office first-aid kit. One day, Big Deborah caught her in the act and said, "You're wasting your time. People only want fresh baked goods made by adults. Go get a real, reliable job as a bread-slicer." Moral: You can't spell "preservatives" without all the letters in "persevere."

Hammurabi got kicked out of Law Codes School and got rejected by

multiple coveted carving-things-into-stone-slabs apprenticeships. Lesson: Get knocked down by a phallic rock seven times, stand up eight.

While all the other Sons of Liberty were dumping tea into Boston Harbor, Sam Adams dumped in a failed batch of his home-brewed beer. The next morning, more than two hundred fish were dead. Did he fail at making drinkable beer? Or succeed at making fish poison? It's all about perspective.

Burt had failed at creating partnerships with dragonflies, cicadas, and hummingbirds before he got his first meeting with bees. Now they're *his* bees! Remember, failures are not sinking stones, they're stepping stones—like the kind you made for your grandmother's garden when you were a kid by sticking your hands in wet plaster.

Vincent Elliot Hungry-Man once froze a batch of sloppy-joe meat wrong and killed an entire football team. Did he give up? No. Did he serve time? Also no. He was too busy serving his Hungry-Man Dinners. You are the waiter of your own destiny, and, yes, Life *would* like to hear the specials.

John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt had to introduce himself to each person in his town thirty-seven times (*very* forgettable face) before he could honestly say that, whenever he goes out, the people always shout, "There goes John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt!" Trust the passion. Trust the process.

Orville Redenbacher got fired from his job as a Colonel Sanders impersonator and was so devastated that he burned down his house for the insurance money. A known hoarder, he had amassed enough ears of Indian corn that they filled an entire room. His house went up in flames, but his name went down in history.

Aesop didn't get into the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Neither did Scheherazade. ♦



## CLOCK'S TICKING

*Can deadlines bring us to life?*

BY RACHEL SYME



I used to keep a Post-it note hanging over my workspace with the name Esther Murphy written on it in black Sharpie. I jotted down this warning-to-self sometime around 2012, when I was inhaling Lisa Cohen's exuberant triple biography, "All We Know," about three queer women of ample means who cavorted through the literary and fashion circles of Paris, London, and New York in the early twentieth century. Murphy, the daughter of a leather-goods mogul (and the younger sister of Gerald Murphy, whose house in the South of France was immortalized in "Tender Is the Night"), was a brilliant talker. She held

parlor rooms rapt with rollicking historical anecdotes and swaggering political soliloquies; her mind, a magpie's nest of knowledge, connected people to ideas and ideas to sweeping philosophies. "If you asked her a question," Cohen writes, "she would lean back, take several staccato puffs on her cigarette, say: 'All we know is'—and then launch into a long disquisition on the subject." But what Murphy could not do, despite her fierce intelligence and improvisatory éclat, was meet a deadline.

Murphy was "writing" a biography of Françoise d'Aubigné, a French noblewoman, religious fanatic, and

proto-feminist who secretly married Louis XIV but never became the official queen of France. For three decades, Murphy hemmed and hawed, insisted that the book was "about a third done," and failed to commit her grand theories to paper. Friends helped her make publishing connections, but Murphy blew past her delivery dates like a cyclone. Then, one day in 1962, at the age of sixty-five, while getting ready for a walk across the Seine, Murphy encountered the most literal deadline of all: she had a sudden stroke and died on the spot, leaving behind only a handful of manuscript pages and a cache of frustrated notes.

The name on my wall wasn't supposed to be encouraging; it was supposed to be menacing: *Don't end up dead and obscure near a riverbank with nothing to show for yourself.* But after a while the Post-it fell behind my desk, and—more than a little relieved—I never bothered to replace it.

My relationship to deadlines, like that of almost everyone I know, is full of contradictions. I crave them and avoid them, depend on them and resent them. Due dates form the rhythm of my life as a journalist, and there is some comfort in these external expectations. But a deadline is also a train barreling down the track, and you're the one strapped to the rails. The time-sensitive obligations that add both structure and suspense to our lives—tax returns, loan payments, license renewals, job applications, event planning, teeth cleanings, biological clocks—can inspire nauseating dread as much as plucky action.

As the last day to complete a task approaches, we all respond to the pressure differently. Some (well-adjusted, diligent) people jump in, figuring that the anxiety of an unpaid bill or an unfinished project is far more painful than the difficulty of sticking to a sensible schedule. But others, like me, live in blissful denial—at least until the last minute, when, fuelled by adrenaline, caffeine, and self-loathing, we bolt to the end, vowing that we'll do it all differently next time (we won't). And still others, like Murphy, dismiss deadlines altogether, believing them to be at best imaginary and at worst anathema to creativity. This laissez-

*We often lack the will to do our best work until the eleventh hour.*



faire philosophy doesn't quite jibe with a results-driven definition of success. One natural moral of Murphy's demise is that in shirking our responsibilities we shrink our potential. And so most of us keep making to-do lists and grunting through the finish line—if not to please others then to stave off the existential fear of what might happen if we don't.

In “The Deadline Effect,” the magazine editor Christopher Cox assures us that he is a true expert on his subject. “Professionally obliged to care about deadlines,” he has become a seasoned dispenser of constraints and expectations, and, in turn, a coxer and a cajoler of those who must meet them. You might think that after years of working deadline enforcement he'd have sworn off the stuff. But Cox is a zealous proselytizer of “the deadline effect”—the transformative work that happens at the eleventh hour.

Cox writes that his conversion to the cause of deadlines began on the job. Skeptics should consider the cautionary tale—and wondrous cure—of a features writer named John, who is “famous for blowing deadlines.” (Though we never learn John's last name, I remain haunted by this story; it is every writer's nightmare to have her editor write a tell-all.) Unlike Esther Murphy, John eventually turns something in, but it's always a trial for everyone involved, requiring “dozens of phone calls, countless emails, and a lot of anxious waiting.”

One day, Cox tries an experiment. He tells John that a major cover story is due, absolutely and without exception, a week before it really needs to be done. (This is not an uncommon trick of the trade: “No sane editor would ever tell a writer the actual deadline for a story.”) And then the miraculous occurs: the night before Cox's fake-out date, John starts dropping paragraphs into a Google doc. The piece is ready ahead of schedule, and Cox is chuffed with his wily scheme. Setting a “decoy deadline,” he writes, “promised, in essence, the productivity equivalent of the full-court press.”

To Cox, John is a small success with a big lesson. We often summon the

will to do our best work when we think we're down to the buzzer—but by then it's too late to actually do it. It's only by mentally manipulating ourselves to act early and often that we can ever do spectacular things. Cox tells us that all his subjects “have learned how to work like it's the last minute before the last minute.”

If you're the kind of person who sets the kitchen clock ten minutes fast and still shows up late for dinner reservations, you may doubt the efficacy of this approach. And Cox concedes that a single person can squirm out of any overhanging chore and still justify the delinquency. But a *group* of people, he argues, become entangled by their common goals—and the net of deadlines becomes harder to wriggle out of. In Cox's anatomy of organizations—where the price and profit of timeliness can be extreme—deadlines function a little like arteries: they're the structures that keep blood circulating at the right pace and the heart pumping on the right beat.

What does John's decoy deadline look like scaled up? Cox takes the example of the Telluride ski resort, in Colorado. Every year, Telluride's C.E.O., Bill Jensen, tells his staff that the slopes must open by Thanksgiving. The catch is that they don't *need* to open until the week after Christmas, which accounts for twenty per cent of skiing tourism for the year. Cox calls this trick “a soft open with teeth.” Soft because the real pressure is still a ways away, but toothy because it isn't just an exercise: the ski lifts really run and the snow guns really blow. This approach gives the staff a chance to converge, collaborate, and troubleshoot. Instead of epic meltdowns, you just get everyday mistakes. (You might say that the ski mountain becomes a molehill.) Jensen compares the early opening to wrapping Christmas presents. “For Thanksgiving,” he tells Cox, “all we had to do is get the present in the box. On December 8th, I'd like to have the box wrapped with some nice wrapping paper. Somewhere around December 18th to 20th, let's put the ribbon on that package and we're ready to go.”

The soft opening is a tried-and-

true tactic. Stores and restaurants often start with a “friends and family” run before welcoming the public. Cox argues that this approach can also help “pathologically tardy writers” and other solo actors struggling to hit personal targets. Soft deadlines, he writes, can become “a way of gaining the virtues of the deadline effect (focus, urgency, cooperation) with none of the vices (rashness, desperation, incompleteness).” And there's another piece to add to the Christmas analogy: ideally, you should get a reward—or a punishment—at the end. Some people are motivated by shiny things, others by shame.

I considered putting “soft deadline with teeth” on another Post-it—right around the moment I realized that this piece was due the next day and that I should probably put a pot of coffee on the stove instead. But if I was dubious about Cox's methods I was even more dubious about my own. And though Cox may have learned his tricks as a deadline enforcer, he knows better than to preach without practice. He carefully balances being the oracle who knows what's best for us—each chapter is summed up with M.B.A.-friendly catchphrases—and the grunt who's seen the worst.

To truly appreciate the stakes of deadline-setting, Cox embedded as a Best Buy salesperson at the most important—and most terrible—time of year: Black Friday and the pre-holiday rush. The chapter recounting his experience is chillingly titled: “Becoming ‘A Mission-Driven Monster.’” Cox takes the phrase from a Houston *Chronicle* article about the streamlined rollout of NASA's Apollo program. He admits that it may be “too grandiose” to compare selling discount DVD players to travelling to the moon, but both efforts, he writes, reveal “how even a giant corporation [can] remake itself to meet the challenge of one particularly important deadline.”

What he learns on the job, other than a lot of technical specs for flat-screens, is that Black Friday is not just a particularly rowdy time; it's also a radical one. For two days only, Best Buy stops tracking individual sales numbers. The “pooled-interdependence”



model (a term coined in 1967 by the sociologist James D. Thompson) is replaced by a “sequential-interdependence” mode—a glorified assembly line in which every transaction “passed through multiple hands, and no individual got the credit.” Cox was stunned to see how nimbly operations ran when employees were not competing for numbers: “This change opened the way for a division of labor that proved more efficient than the usual jockeying.” (For his part, Cox sold between thirty thousand and forty thousand dollars’ worth of televisions—an apparently pitiful figure compared with his co-workers’ totals.)

In this all-for-one-and-one-for-all scenario, deadlines aren’t just tools for individual achievement—they’re levers of collective accountability. This view of things doesn’t necessarily remove the pressure (no one wants to let the team down), but it can provide a more reliable source of motivation. Take the example of magazine writing, where Cox’s experience and

my own overlap. The writer, sweating over a deadline, and the editor, gently urging the writer to meet it, are only two links in a complex chain that ushers a piece from a first draft to the newsstands. There are copy editors, fact checkers, top editors, designers, Web-site managers, and many others who cannot meet their goals until the writer has words on the page. It can be useful, as Cox suggests, to think of your deadline not as a looming personal threat but as a puzzle piece that someone else is hunting for at this very moment. And don’t you want to be the person who helps complete the picture?

Still, there are some tasks and goals that no one but you will ever care about. When it comes to self-actualization, there’s only one person on the team. My solo endeavors (chipping away at a screenplay kept in a drawer, opening an I.R.A. by a tax deadline) are easy to ignore and even easier to feel bad about: there’s nobody to blame but me. In the absence of collaboration, ago-

nizing over productivity—whether by tearing your hair out or tearing through a book like Cox’s—somehow always feels self-defeating.

“The Deadline Effect” is part of a larger phenomenon that I like to call “time voyeurism.” Many of us are desperate to know how other people spend their days, and why theirs seem so much more capacious than ours. You see it in columns like *The Cut’s* “How I Get It Done,” where you can read about the C.E.O. of a sex-toy startup who guzzles apple-cider vinegar, meditates, bullet-journals, and works out, all before 6:30 A.M. (“If I try to do anything that’s just for me at any other time of the day,” she says, “I feel really guilty.”) In the *Times’s* “Sunday Routine” feature, the owner of a doggie day spa reports spending his off day grooming Pomeranians for V.I.P. clients, and the co-founder of Peloton advises militant hydration: “The first thing I do is drink 40 sips of water from my hand at the upstairs bathroom sink. It’s efficient. I drink until I feel like I’m going to throw up water.”

Mason Currey’s “Daily Rituals” books (which have been translated into more than half a dozen languages) impart the quotidian habits of creative types from Albert Einstein to Twyla Tharp. Benjamin Franklin started his day with “air baths”—reading and writing in the nude until he had something else to do—and Edith Wharton wrote longhand in bed, “on sheets of paper that she dropped onto the floor for her secretary to retrieve and type up.” All these glimpses into the lives of Highly Effective People can seem like recipes for success, but read enough of them and you may conclude that the secret ingredients are not much sleep and a lot of professional help.

The Internet, of course, offers even more windows onto how other people work, or at least claim to work: the #amwriting tag on Twitter; the r/Productivity subreddit; and a steady flow of social-media posts about finished dissertations, crushed tasks, and successful crowd-funding campaigns. There are at least a dozen apps for the popular Pomodoro Technique, which alternates twenty-five-minute periods of in-



*“You see, when two people are in love, in bed,  
and caught up on all their shows . . .”*



tense focus with short breaks. (Never mind that an egg timer would do the trick.) There are several Substack newsletters devoted to topics like “time blocking” and “accountability challenges.” One commitment app, called stickK, lets you place a bounty on your own head: when you set a goal, you also put money or other meaningful collateral on the line. If you don’t meet it, you have to pay up.

Everywhere you look, people are either hitting deadlines or avoiding them by reading about how other people hit deadlines. This may seem like a sly way of marrying procrastination with productivity (you’re biding your time learning how to better manage your time), but, no matter what, it’s an exhausting treadmill of guilt and ostentation, virtue signalling, and abject despair at falling behind. As Cal Newport, a computer scientist and a productivity expert, has observed, deadline fetishization hardly works for anyone. Some engage in so-called “misery poker,” a competition for the dubious prize of being the most stressed out. Others practice the “quack” method: on the surface they glide placidly along, while underwater they are paddling like hell to keep up. In both cases, deadlines seem like little more than traps.

Cox wants to demystify deadlines in order to defang them, to assure us that if we just tilt our heads we can see our demons as our friends. I can appreciate the benefit of this reimagination, at least when it comes to working with others to reach a greater goal. If someone else is depending on you, then making a deadline, and doing it so early that nobody has a heart attack, or even a palpitation, is a skill worth studying. But I wonder if we might be asking too much of individuals by heralding time constraints—one of the most potent currencies capitalism has for perpetuating itself—as moral guides.

Searching for a different ethical framework isn’t always easy. Perhaps part of why we buy in to the deadline-industrial complex is that the alternative is so uncharted as to be unimaginable: do we just sit around and wait for the axe to fall? Seen in the least generous light, such a meditative slow-



down might be called slacking. One option is to simply reclaim the term, to embrace the ruminative rewards of slacker culture (if nineties fashions are back, can the nineties lackadaisical affect be far behind?). Another is to seek something like a middle ground, and that’s trickier: to turn off the constantly blaring alarm clock without sleeping till noon.

This mellow approach comes in many guises. “Leave time for exposing yourself to randomness,” Newport suggests. Jenny Odell, an artist and an educator, has become one of the most popular fonts of time-management wisdom, perhaps because of her distinctive blend of aesthetic, political, and personal arguments for, well, chilling out. Odell’s “How to Do Nothing” (2019) was a potent manifesto for stopping to smell the roses (literally: she suggests routine floral appreciation), and her new short book, “Inhabiting the Negative Space,” based on a virtual commencement speech she gave at Harvard’s design school last year, brings us more exhortations to slow down.

Odell has her moonier moments, and she isn’t always stating revolutionary ideas. Her goal is to bring back patience, which she sees as our most neglected and underappreciated virtue. Still, she has a surpris-

ingly fresh rationale: being patient isn’t just about changing how we do things, it’s also, more fundamentally, about changing how we see things. Breaking the “cycle of reactions” we’re usually beholden to, she explains, opens a “gap through which you can see other perspectives, temporalities, and value systems.” If the common fear is that a lack of productivity will narrow the possibilities of our life, Odell is here to tell us the opposite. With our eyes always fixed on a prize, we’re missing the bigger picture. What good is “the deadline effect” if it’s blinkering us, keeping us from a more expansively defined potential?

Odell warns us that this new perspective isn’t easy to adopt: “You will need time to adjust your eyes.” And correcting our vision will allow us, but also force us, to see more. Maybe the thing we’re trying not to look at is the ultimate deadline—the only one that matters, the one that’s coming for us all. Life is one long soft opening. We might as well experiment, stumble, fail, and sometimes not even finish. Esther Murphy met her final deadline without a masterpiece to show for it, but her friends always remembered her stentorian speeches, and the fact that she gilded every dinner she ever attended with her presence. I still think about her now. Did she hit her mark? ♦



## AMERICAN VIGILANTE

*After Kyle Rittenhouse killed two people in Kenosha, opportunists turned his case into a polarizing spectacle.*

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS

**T**he proliferation of digital video has exposed abuses of power that in the past often remained hidden. It has also allowed people to watch shocking footage and make pronouncements about it on social media before knowing all the facts. Last summer, Americans were still reeling from the excruciating sight of a Minneapolis police officer slowly killing George Floyd when another violent encounter unfolded, with seemingly similar clarity. On the afternoon of Sunday, August 23rd, three police officers tried to arrest a man outside a fourplex in Kenosha, Wisconsin. A neighbor started recording on his phone when he saw the officers, who were white, scuffling with the man, who was Black. The confrontation began behind a parked S.U.V., so initially the neighbor couldn't see everything. Then the man broke free, went around the vehicle, and opened the driver's door. One officer grabbed him by his tank top and shot him seven times, from behind.

Kenosha did not equip officers with body cameras, and so the neighbor's footage was the primary visual documentation of the shooting. The victim, Jacob Blake, survived, but the incident was instantly seen as another grim example of an urgent problem: according to a recent Harvard study, Black people are more than three times as likely as white people to be killed during a police encounter. The comedian Kevin Hart tweeted, "What's the justification for 7 shots?????"

After Floyd's death, Kenosha was among the scores of American cities where citizens marched in protest. Hundreds of people now assembled for Blake, a lanky twenty-nine-year-old who had been staying at the fourplex with his fiancée, Laquisha Booker. They had several sons, and the shooting had occurred on the eighth birth-

day of the oldest, Izreal. Blake had decorated the apartment for a party, and was cooking hot dogs when he and Booker started quarrelling. Blake left in the S.U.V.—Booker's rental car. "Me and my sisters just saw him skirt off in it," Booker told a 911 dispatcher. Blake returned, but when the police arrived he was leaving again—this time with the children. His sons witnessed the shooting from the back seat.

The protesters gathered outside the Kenosha County Courthouse, a limestone building facing Civic Center Park, an area surrounded by businesses and residences. Many people marched peacefully and held signs. But, that night and the next, rioters hurled bricks and fireworks at law-enforcement officers. Looters smashed shop windows, and a Department of Corrections building was burned down. When an older man with a fire extinguisher confronted rioters, someone struck him with a hard object, splitting his nose and breaking his jaw. President Donald Trump had been highlighting the destructive aspects of such protests in order to malign the Black Lives Matter movement. At a Papa John's, a man stood behind a shattered window and yelled, "Are they *trying* to get Trump reelected?" A demonstrator replied, "These people don't represent our movement!" But, at another moment, when a man told protesters, "What y'all don't fucking understand is that people have their *lives* in these businesses," a woman screamed back, "So *what*?"

Right-wing news outlets packaged the fieriest images as evidence of ruinous policies in Democratic-run cities, and criticized the mainstream media's refusal to acknowledge the violence. Joan Donovan, the chief of research at Harvard's Shorenstein Center, identified One America News Network, Glenn Beck on BlazeTV, and Fox

News—particularly the hosts Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity—as promulgators of "riot porn." Writing in *MIT Technology Review*, Donovan said that such footage, designed to "overwhelm the sense-making capacity" of viewers, inspired militias and vigilantes to "live out fantasies of taking justice into their own hands."

**A**fter Kenosha's march for George Floyd, on May 31st, Kevin Mathewson, a former city alderman who had sometimes brought a handgun to city-council meetings, decided that the police needed civilian reinforcements. He started the Kenosha Guard, which was less a militia than an impulse with a Facebook page. But on August 25th, as the city braced for a third night of protests in the wake of Blake's shooting, Mathewson, who is a private investigator, posted a call for "Armed Citizens to Protect our Lives and Property." He invited "patriots" to meet him at the courthouse at 6 P.M., to defend Kenosha from "evil thugs."

Mathewson's post caught the attention of Kristan Harris, a streamer whose work included conspiracy content of the Pizzagate variety. All summer, he had been live-streaming protests, calling himself a "citizen journalist." Harris wrote a blurb about the Kenosha Guard, which got picked up by Infowars. On Facebook, thousands of people indicated interest in joining Mathewson at the courthouse. Mathewson posted an open letter to Kenosha's police chief, calling himself the "commander" of the Kenosha Guard and warning, "Do NOT have your officers tell us to go home under threat of arrest."

Mathewson's "Armed Citizens" post elicited such comments as "kill looters and rioters." Facebook allowed the page to stand even after receiving well over four hundred complaints. A crowd





*Police let Rittenhouse—who was openly carrying a rifle—leave the scene, underscoring a racial double standard.*



was building when Mathewson, in a Chuck Norris T-shirt, showed up at the courthouse with a semi-automatic rifle. He soon went home, but throughout the evening others used his Facebook page, or similar ones, to spread rumors. One commenter predicted that if armed “untrained civilians” got scared, “someone’s getting shot.”

That night in Kenosha, as at many racial-justice protests, the crowd was a confusing *mélange*: B.L.M. activists, antifascists in black bloc, right-wing extremists in camouflage. Across factions, people carried guns, some more visibly than others. It was often challenging to tell friend from foe.

South of the courthouse, a group of libertarians flanked the gas pumps of the Ultimate Convenience Center. Dressed in camo, they were heavily armed, if not necessarily experienced: one member mocked another for holding his rifle wrong.

Harris, the “citizen journalist,” had shown up, to live-stream. He praised militias as “cool,” but not everyone shared his enthusiasm. A muscular man from Chicago told Harris, “These dudes are LARPer.” “LARP” refers to “live-action role-playing” games. The guns, though, were real.

Private militias and paramilitary organizations are illegal in every state, but throughout 2020 militia types inflamed about B.L.M. protests and pandemic lockdowns had been increasingly showing up armed on urban streets. Last June, a group called the New Mexico Civil Guard appeared at a protest in Albuquerque and “defended” a statue of a conquistador. According to the district attorney, the group’s members had trained in combat tactics and presented themselves at the protest as “indistinguishable from authorized military forces.” An armed man joined the militia in trying to drive protesters away, and then shot and injured one of them.

Mike German, a former F.B.I. special agent who once worked undercover to expose neo-Nazis and is now a fellow at N.Y.U.’s Brennan Center for Justice, told me that domestic extremists have learned that they can receive more “aboveground” support by calling themselves patriots and peace-

keepers. Yet, German emphasized, “you can’t just *nominate* yourself as a security provider.” He compared this approach to tactics in prewar Germany, “when Nazi thugs rallied where they knew they had political opposition—they could attack and get media coverage, and gain a reputation for being tough and scary.”

Militias often outfit themselves with variants of the AR-15, a high-velocity rifle that has become both a popular sporting gun and a favored weapon of mass shooters. Since 2017, such firearms have been used in at least thirteen mass-casualty incidents. Only a handful of states prohibit citizens from openly carrying AR-style weapons. Even the National Rifle Association once called it unsettling to “see someone sidle up next to you in line for lunch with a 7.62 rifle.” This observation was published on the N.R.A.’s Web site in 2014, at a moment when Texans were ordering coffee at cafés while carrying battle-grade firearms. Two years later, a sniper in Dallas shot and killed five police officers during a B.L.M. demonstration. The city’s police chief publicly reiterated the reason that so many law-enforcement officials oppose open-carry laws: the profusion of visibly armed civilians complicated the task of quickly identifying the shooter.

An Army veteran named Ryan Balch, who lived near Milwaukee, heard about the Blake protests and decided that he was needed in Kenosha. The Kenosha Guard ap-



peared frivolous to him, so on August 25th he drove to town on his own, equipped with an AR-type rifle. Balch later said that he and some friends had to “infiltrate” the city by circumventing roadblocks: “We were sittin’ low, trying to get past the cops, to get in there and do what we needed to do.”

Balch spotted a small group of armed volunteers at Car Source, a dealership whose main sales lot was now a landscape of smoldering metal. Despite an eight-o’clock curfew, the volunteers planned to guard the dealership’s two nearby mechanic shops. As Balch later explained in detail online, he “inserted” himself as a “tactical” adviser. He claimed that a Car Source owner “deputized” the group, but civilians have no such power, and law-enforcement agencies don’t grant that authority. (“What a scary, scary thought,” Kenosha County’s sheriff, David Beth, has said.)

Balch and several others positioned themselves at one of the mechanic shops, a low, flat-topped building. Men with rifles set up on the roof. Balch, who described himself as “anti-establishment,” had been immersed in far-right circles on social media. He seemed to view the police as the enemy, and said that “the cops wouldn’t have been able to defend themselves” against some of the weapons on the roof. According to him, when a police officer stopped and remarked on all the “friendly guns,” he replied, “We’re not here to be friendly to *you*.”

After dark, the crowd streamed away from the courthouse, where the police were firing tear gas and rubber bullets. As armored vehicles herded the protesters toward the mechanic shop, one of them said, “We in Call of Duty!”

Harris and other live-streamers had been chatting on camera with Balch and a member of his cohort: a talkative teen-ager in a backward baseball cap, with a semi-automatic rifle slung across his chest. A videographer said, “So you guys are full-on ready to defend the property?” The teen-ager, whose name was Kyle Rittenhouse, replied, “Yes, we are,” adding, officiously, “Now, if I can ask—can you guys step back?”

Rittenhouse’s chubby cheeks and high, arched eyebrows gave his face a bemused, childish quality. A first-aid kit dangled at his hip. He explained that he planned to provide first aid to anyone needing it, and said that his gun was for self-protection—“obviously.” He wasn’t old enough to be a certified E.M.T., yet



he shouted, “I am an E.M.T.!,” and proclaimed, “If you are injured, come to *me!*” Adopting the language of first responders, he told a streamer, “If there’s somebody hurt, I’m running *into* harm’s way.”

Rittenhouse’s intentions may well have been lost on demonstrators. In addition to the rifle, he wore an Army-green T-shirt and the Sport Patriot style of Ariat boots: part camouflage, part American flag. For all anyone knew, he or others at Car Source were among the Facebook users who had made such threats as “I have my suppressor on my AR, these fools won’t even know what hit them.”

According to a theory of social psychology called the “weapons effect,” the mere sight of a gun inspires aggression. In 1967, the psychologists Leonard Berkowitz and Anthony LePage wrote, “In essence, the gun helps pull the trigger.” Their methodology had flaws, but later studies verified their premise. In one U.K. study, people were more inclined to assault a police officer who was visibly armed with a Taser. Brad Bushman, an Ohio State researcher who served on President Barack Obama’s committee on gun violence, told me, “We’ve found that it really doesn’t matter if a good guy or a bad guy is carrying the gun—it creates the bias to *interpret* things in a hostile way.” Citizens who openly carry firearms “think that they are making the situation safer, but they are making it much more dangerous.”

In front of the Ultimate Convenience Center, protesters set a dumpster on fire. After a member of the group at the gas station put it out, a demonstrator hurled a flagpole like a javelin. A man in a “Black Lives Matter” mask racked his pistol; another man said, “I say we jack them and take they guns.”

Protesters pushed the dumpster down the street and approached the mechanic shop, where the figures on the roof presented a menacing image: heavily armed white guys at a Black-justice demonstration, positioned like snipers. One protester decried the “pussies on the roof,” and the dumpster was soon burning again. One of the shop’s armed “guards” ran to ex-



*“You could have just said, ‘Nice risotto.’ You didn’t have to pipe in the crowd noise.”*

tinguish the fire, screaming at the protesters, “You guys wanna fuck around and find out?”

Demonstrators were complaining that someone on the roof had pointed a “green laser” at them; a laser sight can be attached to a gun, to improve aim. Protesters lobbed stuff at the men on the roof. Rittenhouse stepped before Harris’s camera and claimed that demonstrators were “mixing ammonia, gasoline, and bleach together—and it’s causing an ammonia bomb!” One guard said that he wanted to “pump some rounds,” but someone talked him out of it.

Videos captured what was happening with surprising thoroughness: multiple angles, decent clarity. Among the crowd was an agitated bald guy in his mid-thirties, with a ginger goatee and an earring. He was wearing a maroon T-shirt, and had brought a plastic shopping bag containing socks, underwear, and deodorant. The man, who suffered from bipolar disorder, had recently been charged with domestic violence, and then had attempted suicide. Hours before the protest, he had been discharged from a psychiatric hospital. He apparently

had wandered into the melee on the street, where it was difficult to perceive anything but his rage. At the Ultimate Convenience Center, he confronted the armed men, screaming both “Don’t *point* no motherfucking gun at me!” and “Shoot *me!*”

A man yelled, “Somebody control him!”

During the chaos, Rittenhouse moved down the street toward Car Source’s second mechanic shop, where rioters had been smashing car windows. He crossed paths with the angry bald man, who chased him into the shop’s parking area. The man now wore his T-shirt as a head wrap and face mask, leaving his torso bare. Screaming “Fuck you!,” he threw his plastic bag at Rittenhouse’s back. Rittenhouse, holding his rifle, reached some parked cars just as a protester fired a warning shot into the sky. Rittenhouse whirled; the bald man lunged; Rittenhouse fired, four times. The man fell in front of a Buick, wounded in the groin, back, thigh, hand, and head.

The nearest bystander was Richie McGinniss, the video chief at the Daily Caller, the online publication co-founded by Tucker Carlson. McGinniss,



who had been covering protests all summer, had been following the chase so closely that he had nearly been shot himself. He removed his T-shirt and knelt to compress the man's wounds. Dying, the man breathed in a horrifying growl.

Rittenhouse stood over McGinniss for half a minute. Amid the sound of more gunfire, he didn't stoop to check on the injured man or offer his first-aid kit. "Call 911!" McGinniss told him. Rittenhouse called a friend instead. Sprinting out of the parking lot, he said, "I just shot somebody!"

Demonstrators were yelling: "What'd he do?" "Shot someone!" "Cranium that boy!" Rittenhouse ran down the street toward the whirring lights of police vehicles. To those who had heard only the gunfire and the shouting, he must have resembled a mass shooter: they tend to be heavily armed, white, and male.

A demonstrator ran up behind Rittenhouse and smacked him in the head. When Rittenhouse tripped and fell, another man executed a flying kick; Rittenhouse fired twice, from the ground, and missed. Another demonstrator whacked him in the neck with the edge of a skateboard and tried to grab his rifle; Rittenhouse shot him in the heart. A third demonstrator approached with a handgun; Rittenhouse shot him in the arm, nearly blowing it off.

He rose from the asphalt and continued toward the police lights. A man screamed, "That's what y'all get, acting tough with fucking guns!"

Rittenhouse tried to flag down armored vehicles that were now moving toward the victims, but they passed him by, even after witnesses pointed out that he'd just shot people. Next, he approached a police cruiser, but an officer inside apparently told him, "No—go."

Two men were fatally shot. A third was maimed. Everyone involved in the shootings was white. The astonishing fact that Rittenhouse was allowed to leave the scene underscored the racial double standard that activ-

ists had sought to further expose: the police almost certainly wouldn't have let a Black man pass.

Clips from Kenosha immediately went viral. Footage of a teen-ager looping around self-importantly with a gun was juxtaposed with video of the second set of shootings. In other

posts, he could be seen bragging about his medical bona fides or accepting bottled water tossed from the hatch of an armored law-enforcement vehicle. Officers inside had offered the water just after authorities had gassed the area around Car Source, and before the shootings occurred, with one of them

saying, via loudspeaker, "We appreciate you guys."

Internet sleuths quickly identified Rittenhouse, and revealed that he was seventeen and lived with his family in an apartment in Antioch, Illinois. His social-media accounts—Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram—showed him handling long guns, cheering for Trump in the front row at a campaign rally, and participating in a Police Explorers program for teen-agers. He ardently supported Blue Lives Matter and wore a T-shirt from 5.11 Tactical ("gear for the most demanding missions").

The Facebook posts about the Kenosha Guard led some of the sleuths to misapprehend Rittenhouse as a militia member. (He belonged to no such group.) Because he lived in Illinois, people assumed that he had travelled some distance, for nefarious purposes, and had "crossed state lines" with his rifle. (The Rittenhouse apartment was a mile south of the Wisconsin border, and Rittenhouse had been storing his gun in Kenosha, at the house of a friend's stepfather.) Rittenhouse's age led some to conclude that his mom had "dropped him off" at the protest. (He drove himself to Kenosha.) One widely shared image showed an armed, camo-clad woman, captioned "terrorist Kyle Rittenhouse's mother." (Some other lady, some other place.)

The day after the shootings, Ayanna

Pressley, a Democratic U.S. representative from Massachusetts, tweeted that the shootings had been committed by a "white supremacist domestic terrorist." This characterization stuck, even after the Anti-Defamation League scrutinized Rittenhouse's social-media accounts and found no evidence of extremism.

After years of deepening political polarization, Americans were primed to see whatever they wanted to see in the Kenosha clips. It was beyond question that Rittenhouse had inserted himself into a volatile situation with a gun that he was too young to legally own. The footage also made clear that he'd killed and wounded people. But many liberals went further, characterizing Rittenhouse as someone who'd gone to the protest intending to harm others.

This view was buttressed when another kind of video surfaced. Weeks before the shootings, Rittenhouse had been hanging out with other teen-agers on the Kenosha waterfront when an argument erupted involving the younger of his two sisters, McKenzie. Reese Granville, a rapper who happened to be cruising past with a friend, filmed the altercation with his phone. (In the video, Granville and his friend could be heard debating what would happen if the police arrived: "It's all white people, boy. We Black—we goin' to jail.") When a girl started to fight with McKenzie, Rittenhouse punched her, repeatedly, from behind. Bystanders broke it up by turning on Rittenhouse: "Don't put your hands on a female!"

Conservatives largely ignored the waterfront video. The protest footage had convinced them that Rittenhouse was a patriot who, after months of destructive unrest in U.S. cities, had finally put "Antifa" in check by bravely exercising his Second Amendment rights. Carlson, on Fox News, declared, "How shocked are we that seventeen-year-olds with rifles decided they had to maintain order when no one else would?"

The glorification extended, weirdly, to Rittenhouse's street instincts. Gun users praised his "trigger discipline," noting that he'd fired only when "attacked." A sportsman in Washington





State blogged that Rittenhouse had “accomplished” the feat of hitting “several moving ‘targets’ closing in from multiple angles, throwing things at you, kicking you in the head, and hitting you in the head.” Another fan concocted a macabre “Kyle Drill” at a shooting range. On YouTube, a survivalist praised Rittenhouse’s “mind-set” during “urban warfare.” The worshipful tone intensified when Rittenhouse’s admirers learned more about Joseph Rosenbaum, the first man he’d killed. Rosenbaum wasn’t an antifascist, but he’d spent more than a decade in prison for child molestation. (As a boy, Rosenbaum himself was sexually abused.) After the shooting, someone tried to set up a GoFundMe account related to Rosenbaum, and a user commented, “YOU WERE A PREDATOR & A PIECE OF SHIT REST IN PISS!!!!”

Shops began selling T-shirts that depicted Rittenhouse with his gun and bore slogans like “Fuck Around and Find Out.” Online, memes spread—“Oh, I shot a pedophile? My bad”—and people declared that Antifa types and other troublemakers deserved to get “Rittenhoused.” The sudden notoriety made a line in one of Rittenhouse’s TikTok bios stand out: “Bruh I’m just tryna be famous.” He’d written the motto as a joke, for an audience of twenty-five.

There was more to Jacob Blake’s case than the viral video revealed. In 2012, police had charged him with battery and with endangering the life of a child after he had allegedly tried to choke Laquisha Booker and she fell while holding her baby, a son from a previous relationship. “Alcohol abuse appears to be the defendant’s primary problem,” a court document noted, explaining that if Blake “doesn’t drink he tends not to get into trouble.”

In May, 2020, Booker returned from a party and went to bed. According to police, she awoke to find Blake standing over her; he reached between her legs, sniffed his finger, and said, “Smells like you’ve been with other men.” Then he left, taking her car. Booker called 911. The responding officers found Booker “visibly shaken” and humiliated. She

said that Blake assaulted her about twice a year, and that he had her keys. A felony arrest warrant was issued, charging Blake with domestic abuse and sexual assault.

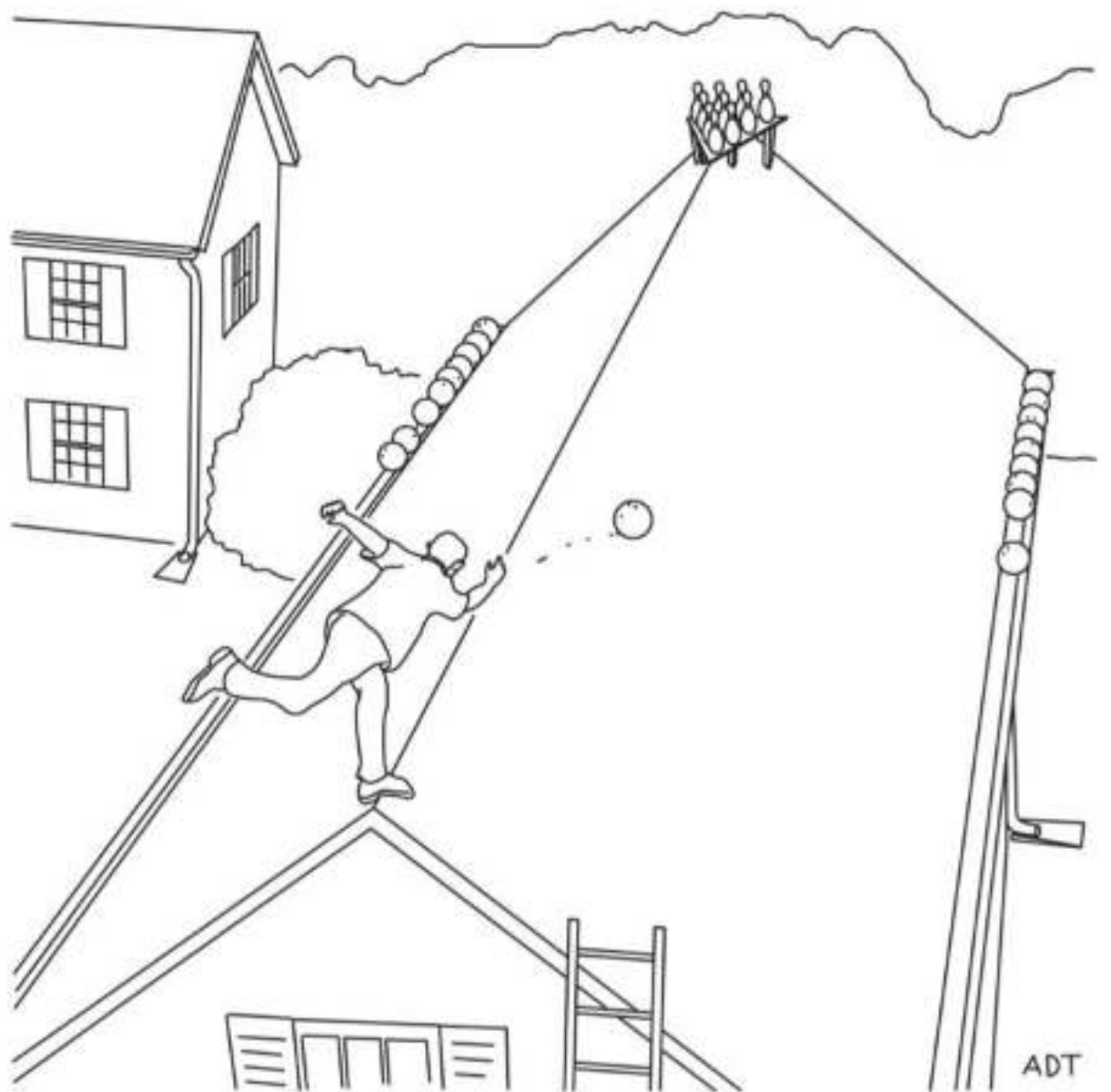
This warrant was active on the day of Izreal’s birthday party, and the officers responding to Booker’s 911 call learned of it en route. The Kenosha Police Department’s policy was to detain anyone wanted on a felony warrant. According to an investigation by the Wisconsin Department of Justice, Blake repeatedly refused to be detained. (He told state investigators that he didn’t want his sons to see him handcuffed.) The officers Tased him multiple times, but the shocks had no visible effect.

Then one officer screamed, “Knife!” The officers drew their guns, yelling, “Drop the knife!” By now, the neighbor was recording the confrontation. The officer nearest to Blake was Rusten Sheskey, who later told investigators that he was determined not to let Blake leave, and was asking himself, “Will we have to pursue the vehicle with a child inside of the car? Is he going to hold the child hos-

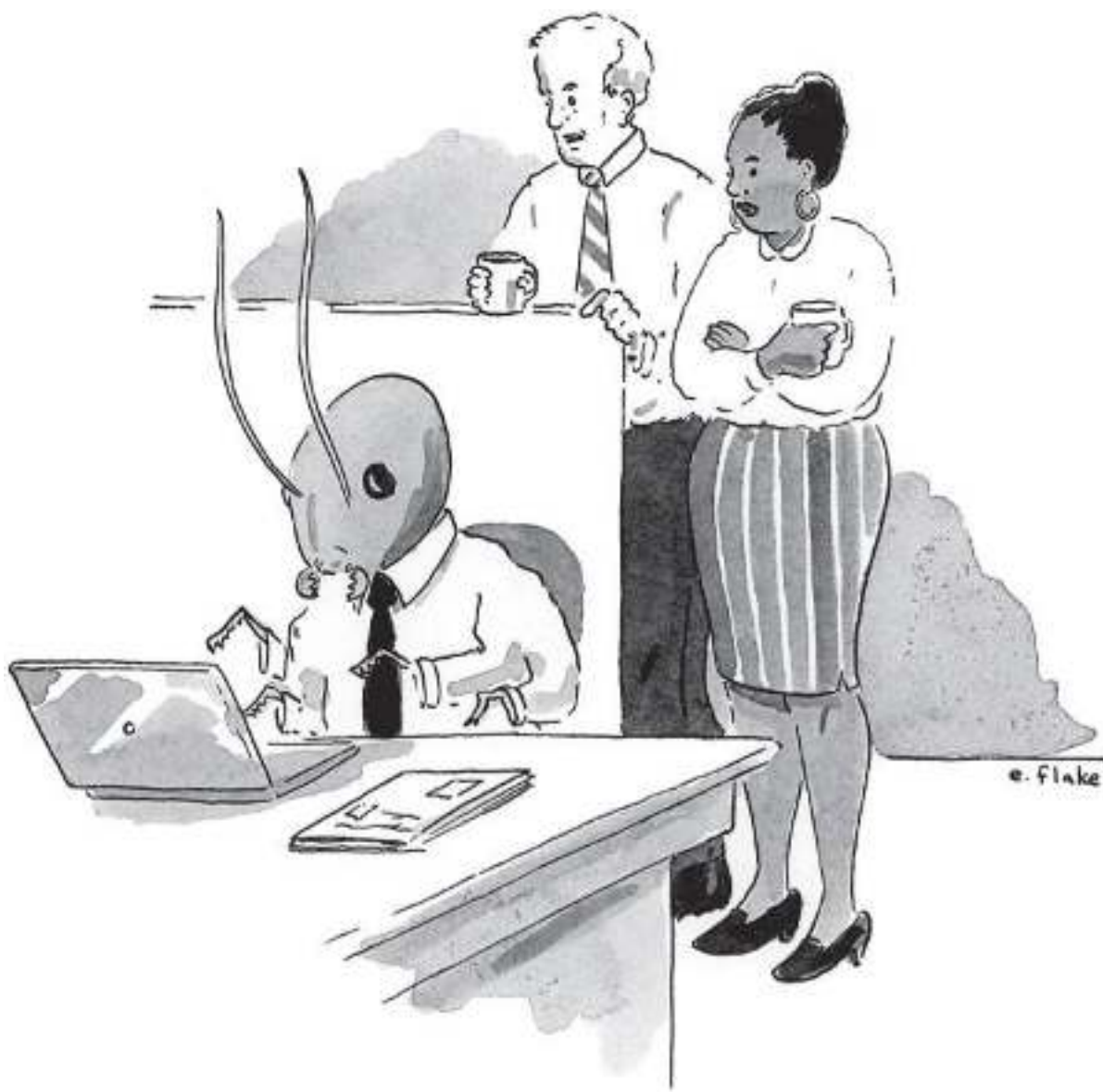
tage?” In a report summarizing the state’s findings, the district attorney, Michael Graveley, said that Sheskey had fired after Blake whipped around, “driving the knife towards Officer Sheskey’s torso.”

Scrutiny of the neighbor’s video footage confirmed that Blake was holding a knife. The location of Blake’s wounds—four in the lower back, three in the left side—corroborated Sheskey’s claim that Blake was hit while turning toward him. Sheskey had been trained to shoot until a threat was neutralized, and didn’t stop firing until he saw Blake drop the knife. Advocates of criminal-justice reform argue that such protocols do not make keeping a suspect alive a top priority. Kirk Burkhalter, a law professor at N.Y.U., told the BBC that resisting arrest “happens often” and does not offer “carte blanche to use deadly physical force.”

Blake was hospitalized for six weeks. Prosecutors dropped the domestic-violence charge after investigators had trouble getting Booker to cooperate. Sheskey was not charged: Graveley concluded that the state could not prove







*"They say he can do twenty times his weight  
in mindless administrative tasks."*

the officer hadn't acted in self-defense. He also noted that, in 2010, Blake had waved a knife, "in a slashing motion," at police who had stopped a vehicle he was in.

These revelations meant that an incident partly captured on video had been characterized without being fully understood. But they did not change the broader truth that police shootings of Black Americans occur with appalling frequency.

Blake can no longer walk. In March, he filed a civil lawsuit against Sheskey. His lawyers declared that "the hail of gunfire fired into the back of Mr. Blake in the presence of his children was excessive and unnecessary."

Lately, gun-reform advocates have stressed the importance of focusing on the "how," not the "why," of gun violence. Instead of exploring sociological or personal factors that may have contributed to a shooting, they

want to concentrate on shutting down the mechanisms that let guns fall into the wrong hands. But when an event becomes a distorted media spectacle, as Kenosha did, it can be useful to clarify both the "why" and the "how," even if the latter is ultimately more important.

Kenosha, an old automotive city of a hundred thousand people, is on the western shore of Lake Michigan, between Milwaukee and Chicago. The lake is the main attraction: boats on the horizon, storm waves thundering at the riprap. The first time I visited, in January, buildings in the protest zone remained patched with plywood and tagged with optimistic graffiti ("Heal the World!").

Just south is Lake County, Illinois. Rittenhouse's parents, Wendy and Mike, got married there in February, 2000, and their daughter Faith was born six months later. The other two Rittenhouse children were born in

2003: Kyle in January, McKenzie in December. When the children were small, Wendy and Mike worked various jobs, including machine operator, housekeeper, and cashier. Mike, who struggled with alcohol addiction and sometimes experimented with drugs, was unemployed for a couple of years. When Kyle was four, Mike was charged with domestic battery after allegedly punching Wendy in the stomach. (He denies this; the charges were dismissed.) Twice, Wendy and the children briefly lived in a shelter.

Wendy and Mike eventually split up. (Mike says that he has been sober for years and wants to repair his family relationships.) Wendy had become a certified nursing assistant, but she continued to struggle financially. The family was repeatedly evicted.

Wendy sometimes felt too overwhelmed to help her kids navigate difficulties. In 2017, when Kyle was fourteen, she tried to resolve a conflict between him and two classmates, twins named Anthony and Jonathan, by seeking restraining orders. In a handwritten petition to the court, Wendy, who has dyslexia, wrote, "Anthony calls Klye dumb stupid say that going to hurt Kyle. Anthony follows Kyle around to take picture of Klye and post them on soical media."

That fall, Rittenhouse, a pudgy ninth grader in dark-framed glasses, joined the Explorers program at the Grayslake Police Department, near Antioch. The police chief viewed the program as a way to "teach self-discipline, responsibility and other appropriate 'life lessons'" to youths who "may have a challenging home, social, or school life." Rittenhouse participated in a similar cadet program through the Antioch Fire Department. Jon Cokefair, the fire chief, told me, "Most of the kids that are doing this, they don't play football, they're not cheerleaders—*this* is their focus."

Jeff Myhra, the deputy chief who ran Grayslake's Police Explorers program, told me that participants trained with harmless replicas of service weapons. Explorers wore uniforms and often helped manage parade traffic. Rittenhouse went on police ride-alongs, a practice that may impart a false sense



of competence, or authority. One brochure declared, “Like Police Officers, Explorers must be ready and willing to encounter any emergency situation such as first responders to accidents or injuries.”

In 2018, shortly after another eviction, Wendy filed for bankruptcy. She developed a gastrointestinal bleed that required hospitalization, and Faith was also hospitalized, after an attempted overdose involving over-the-counter painkillers. To make money for the family, Kyle worked as a fry cook and a janitor while attending school online. He also became certified as a lifeguard and found part-time work at a Y.M.C.A. Eventually, he hoped to graduate from high school and become a police officer or a paramedic.

In January, 2020, Rittenhouse, now seventeen, tried to join the Marines, unsuccessfully. Shortly after the pandemic arrived in America, the Y furloughed him. He applied for another lifeguard position, and while awaiting word he hung out with his sister McKenzie’s new boyfriend, Dominick Black, who was eighteen.

Rittenhouse had always wanted a brother, and he became close to Black. They camped and fished and attended car meets. Black’s family lived in Kenosha, but he often stayed in Antioch with the Rittenhouses. Upstate, where the Blacks owned property and liked to hunt, the boys practiced shooting at bull’s-eye targets and bottles.

Wendy had let her kids play with Nerf and paintball guns, but she didn’t allow actual guns in her home. Rittenhouse wasn’t old enough to buy a firearm, but he wanted one anyway. Black owned a Smith & Wesson M&P15—an AR-15-style rifle. In 1994, after a series of mass shootings, Congress banned many assault weapons. A decade later, the ban expired, and these firearms flooded the market. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, before 1994 there were an estimated four hundred thousand AR-15s in the U.S.; today, there are twenty million AR-15s or similar weapons.

In 2019, a Marquette University Law School poll revealed that Wisconsin residents overwhelmingly supported expanding background checks to in-

clude private sales. Yet Wisconsin’s lawmakers had been resisting stricter measures, and went so far as to remove a mandatory forty-eight-hour waiting period for handgun purchases. In many cases, an eighteen-year-old could legally buy a semi-automatic rifle without a permit or proof of training, and openly carry it almost anywhere, even at street protests.

In early May, 2020, Black bought a Smith & Wesson for Rittenhouse at an Ace Hardware in northwestern Wisconsin, using money that Rittenhouse had given him. Black’s stepfather insisted that the rifle be kept in a locked safe at his house in Kenosha. (Black, who faces felony charges related to having provided a weapon used in homicides, declined to comment, and his stepfather couldn’t be reached.) Rittenhouse had told his mother that he intended to buy a gun, but she assumed he meant a hunting rifle or a shotgun, like her father and brothers had owned. According to Wendy, when Rittenhouse told her what he’d bought, she responded, “That’s an *assault* rifle!” But she didn’t make him get rid of it.

Rittenhouse had just started a new lifeguarding job when Blake was shot. On the second night of the protests, he finished his shift at around 8 P.M., and hung out with Black at Black’s stepfather’s place, two miles west of the courthouse. On social media, people were spreading false rumors that rioters planned to attack residential neighborhoods. The teens watched live streams of events that were unfolding so close to home that, when they stepped outside, they could smell smoke and hear screams.

The next day, Rittenhouse and Black cleaned graffiti in the protest zone, then offered to help guard what remained of Car Source. The business was insured, but one of its owners, Anmol Khindri, said to reporters that it was devastating when the police “did nothing” to stop rioters.

Black kept his rifle disassembled in the trunk of his car. On the second day of the protests, the stepfather had removed Rittenhouse’s rifle

from the safe, to keep it handy, he later told police. The gun was fetched from the stepfather’s house. Black later told a detective that this made him uncomfortable, but added that if he’d objected Rittenhouse “would have threw a fit.” The night of the shootings, the rifle was equipped with a thirty-round magazine and hung from a chest sling that Rittenhouse had bought that afternoon.

At dusk, Black was on the roof of the mechanic shop while Rittenhouse and others stayed on the ground. It was Black whom Rittenhouse called following the first burst of gunfire. After the second round of shooting, Black came down and found Rittenhouse sitting in a chair inside the shop, “all shaken up.” Rittenhouse had placed his rifle on the flatbed of a truck.

Black later told a detective that he drove Rittenhouse home to Antioch, where Wendy gave her son two choices: turn yourself in, or leave town. Around 1 A.M., she drove him to the police station in Antioch. They waited together for more than two hours, Kyle crying and vomiting. Finally, two Kenosha police detectives, Benjamin Antaramian and Martin Howard, took them into an interview room. When Antaramian explained that he needed to read a police form aloud, Rittenhouse asked, “Is it Miranda?”, and then said, “I know how Miranda works.” He did not know how Miranda works. He both wanted a lawyer and to talk—incompatible desires. The detectives halted the interview.

Rosenbaum, the man who had chased Rittenhouse into the parking lot, was dead. The man who had struck him with the skateboard, Anthony Huber, a twenty-six-year-old demonstrator from Kenosha County, was either dead or dying. The third man shot—the one with the handgun—was also a twenty-six-year-old demonstrator, Gaije Grosskreutz, who lived near Milwaukee. Videos were already starting to make their way online: Rosenbaum taking his final breaths; Huber clutching his chest and





collapsing; Grosskreutz shrieking, his right biceps mangled.

Messages from strangers were appearing on Wendy's phone: "Your son is a white supremacist murderer bitch. You and your family need to count your fuckin days"; "We going to make your home look like Beirut." They knew where she lived. Wendy told Kyle, "We can't go back."

When Rittenhouse learned that he was being arrested, he exclaimed that someone had hit him "with a fucking *bat!*" (Widely circulating videos show no such attack.) Antaramian explained that the charges could "range anywhere from reckless injury to reckless homicide to second-degree homicide." Wendy wailed, "*Murder?*"

Rittenhouse, who had been speaking with the detectives in a familiar manner, requested a favor: "Can you guys delete my social-media accounts?"

On August 27th, the Kenosha County D.A. charged Rittenhouse with Wisconsin's most serious crimes, among them first-degree intentional homicide, the mandatory punishment for which is life in prison. Other felony charges included reckless homicide, and he was also charged with a misdemeanor: underage possession of a dangerous weapon. Thomas Binger, the assistant district attorney assigned to the case, has said, "We don't allow teens to run around with guns. It's that simple."

Conservatives denounced the homicide charges as political, noting that both Binger and Graveley, the district attorney, are Democrats. Criminal defendants who cannot afford a lawyer are typically appointed a public defender, but so many conservative and far-right figures rallied around Rittenhouse that private counsel was all but assured.

Among the attorneys who stepped forward was John Pierce, a civil litigator in Los Angeles, who believed that, in the digital age, lawyers needed to "gang tackle, swarm, and crowd-source." His firm, now known as Pierce Bainbridge, had reportedly received nine million dollars from a hedge fund, Pravati Capital, in what *The American Lawyer* called possibly "the first pub-

lic example of a litigation funder investing in a law firm's portfolio of contingent fee cases." The firm would bring cases against big targets, and Pravati would receive a cut of any damages. Critics have called forms of this practice "legal loan-sharking."

Pierce secured a few high-profile clients, including Rudolph Giuliani and Tulsi Gabbard, who sued Hillary Clinton for saying that the Russians were "grooming" Gabbard to run as a third-party Presidential candidate. But, by the spring of 2020, Pierce Bainbridge

reportedly owed creditors more than sixty million dollars.

Last August, Pierce launched a charitable nonprofit, the #FightBack Foundation, whose mission involved raising money to fund lawsuits that would "take our country back." A Trump supporter, he was hostile toward liberals and often expressed his views crudely. One Saturday, during an argument with his ex-wife, he unleashed a stream of increasingly threatening texts, including "Go watch an AOC rally. Fucking libtard"; "I will fuck u

## WHY

you ask me  
again—why  
putting your tiny hand on  
the not yet

unsheathed  
bud on the  
rhododendron  
and I see

I need to be sky  
I need to be soil  
there are no words  
for why that I

can find fast  
enough, why  
you say at  
the foot of the cherry's wide

blossomfall  
is it dead now why  
did it let go, *why*,  
tossed out

into what appears  
to be silence  
when I say  
let's run the

rain is starting—why  
are we lost why did  
we just leave  
where we just

were why is  
everything  
so far behind  
now as we go on I



see you think  
when you reach  
me again to ask  
why when I say

are you coming now &

you say no,  
I want to stay, I want  
things to stay, I do  
not want to come

away from things—what  
is this we are  
entering—me taking yr  
hand now to speed

our going  
as fast as we can in this suddenly  
hard rain, yr  
hand not letting go

of the rose pebble u found  
feeling the first itching of  
personal luck as  
you now slowly

pocket it thinking  
you have taken  
with you a piece of  
what u could not

leave behind. It is  
why we went there  
and left there.  
It is your why.

—Jorie Graham

and ur kind up”; and “People like u hate the USA. Guess what bitch, we ain’t goin anywhere.” Not for the first time, she obtained a restraining order against him.

#FightBack was registered in Dallas, where one participant, a lawyer named Lawson Pedigo, had joined Pierce in representing the former Trump aide Carter Page. Pierce and Pedigo were also working with Lin Wood, a well-known defamation attorney. When the Kenosha protests began, #FightBack leaped into the

fray, declaring that “law-abiding citizens have no choice but to protect their own communities as their forefathers did at Lexington and Concord in 1775.” The Rittenhouse shootings gave the foundation a face for its cause.

The Rittenhouses never returned home. Wendy and her daughters were staying with friends when Pierce tweeted an offer to represent Kyle, who had been transferred to a juvenile detention center in Illinois: “Will

fly up there tonight and I will handle his defense with team of best lawyers in USA.”

The Rittenhouses’ experience with the criminal-justice system was limited to Mike’s history, and to a battery charge against Wendy: the month before Kyle was born, she pleaded guilty to spitting in a neighbor’s face. Pierce’s Harvard law degree impressed them, and, on Twitter, the family could see him discussing Kyle alongside elected officials such as the Arizona congressman Paul Gosar, who tweeted that Rittenhouse’s actions had been “100% justified self defense.”

Pierce met with the Rittenhouses on the night of August 27th. Pierce Bainbridge drew up an agreement calling for a retainer of a hundred thousand dollars and an hourly billing rate of twelve hundred and seventy-five dollars—more than twice the average partner billing rate at top U.S. firms. Pierce would be paid through #FightBack, which, soliciting donations through its Web site, called the charges against Rittenhouse “a reactionary rush to appease the divisive, destructive forces currently roiling this country.”

Wisconsin’s ethics laws restrict pre-trial publicity, but Pierce began making media appearances on Rittenhouse’s behalf. He called Kenosha a “war zone” and claimed that a “mob” had been “relentlessly hunting him as prey.” He explicitly associated Rittenhouse with the militia movement, tweeting, “The unorganized ‘militia of the United States consists of all able-bodied males at least seventeen years of age,’” and “Kyle was a Minuteman protecting his community when the government would not.”

Wendy often appeared with Pierce as a “momma bear” defending her son. “He didn’t do nothing wrong,” she told an ABC affiliate. “He was attack by a mob.” She publicly threatened to sue Joe Biden for using a photograph of Rittenhouse in his campaign materials, promising, “I will take him *down*.”

Such partisan rhetoric rallied support among conservatives convinced that liberals were destroying American cities with impunity. As donations streamed into #FightBack’s Web site, other contributions were offered



directly to the family, for living expenses. Certain donors further yoked Rittenhouse to the militia movement: in September, the group American Wolf—self-appointed “peacekeepers” in Washington State—presented Wendy and Pierce with fifty-five thousand dollars in donations, after having taken a twenty-per-cent cut.

If Pierce seemed erratic and incendiary, he was more than matched by Lin Wood. A civil litigator in his late sixties, Wood rose to prominence in the nineties, when he won defamation suits on behalf of Richard Jewell, the security guard who was wrongly implicated as the Centennial Olympic Park bomber. Wood often went on TV to defend clients. In 2006, he told the publication *Super Lawyers*, “A media appearance is really a mini-trial. You may be advocating to a jury of millions.” After Wood represented the family of JonBenét Ramsey—the six-year-old girl murdered in 1996—observers characterized the family’s flurry of defamation lawsuits as “legal vigilantism.”

After Donald Trump was elected President, Wood’s work became noticeably ideological. He represented Mark and Patricia McCloskey, the white couple in St. Louis who pointed guns at B.L.M. protesters marching past their house. He represented Nicholas Sandmann, the Kentucky high-school student who sued various publications for their depictions of an interaction that he had, while wearing a MAGA hat, with a Native American activist in Washington, D.C. (Sandmann eventually fired Wood.)

People close to Wood noticed troubling changes in his behavior. According to a recent lawsuit by three lawyers who worked with him in Atlanta, Wood asserted that Chief Justice John Roberts would be exposed as part of Jeffrey Epstein’s sex-trafficking ring, and that Trump would name him Roberts’s successor. (Wood denies making these statements.) The lawyers, who were suing to cut their business ties with Wood, cited repeated “abusive” behavior. In a voice mail, Wood called one of the lawyers, Jonathan Grunberg, a “Chilean Jewish fucking crook,” and on another occasion he allegedly assaulted him in

an elevator. (Wood has called the lawsuit “frivolous.”)

Wood, who became #FightBack’s C.E.O. on September 2, 2020, attempted to turn Rittenhouse’s legal case into a cultural battle, calling him a “political prisoner” and comparing him to Paul Revere. He tweeted, “Kyle Rittenhouse at age 17 warned us to defend ourselves.” Wood implied that patriots were needed for an even bigger fight—a looming “second civil war.” His Twitter bio included the QAnon slogan #WWG1WGA—“Where we go one, we go all”—and he became a leading promoter of a conspiracy theory claiming that a secret group of cannibalistic pedophiles has taken control of the United States.

In the first few weeks of #FightBack’s campaign, Wood announced, some eleven thousand people donated more than six hundred thousand dollars. The foundation paid Pierce and produced a publicity video, “Kyle Rittenhouse—The Truth in 11 Minutes,” which framed the case as one with “the power to negatively affect our lives for generations.” A narrator intoned, “This is the moment when the ‘home of the brave’ rise to defend ‘the land of the free.’” Wood called the case “a watershed moment” for self-defense; Pierce tweeted, “Kyle now has the best legal representation in the country.”

Pierce was a civil attorney, not a criminal-defense lawyer. A double homicide was “not the fucking case to



learn on,” one experienced defense lawyer told me. In Wisconsin, a homicide case requires representation by a local lawyer. Rittenhouse hired two criminal-defense attorneys in Madison, Chris Van Wagner and Jessa Nicholson Goetz, who had the understanding that #FightBack would cover their legal fees. The Madison lawyers quickly concluded that the

#FightBack arrangement wouldn’t work for them. Van Wagner told me, “When you have crowdfunding of a criminal defense, they take over—they have their own political agenda.” He recalled that one #FightBack conference call began with “Hello, patriots!”

The defense attorneys also found Pierce and Wood’s media presence compromising. On September 7th, they e-mailed Wood: “Almost all of the news today about Kyle’s case centers not on the case itself but on the two lawyers who have publicly identified themselves as his lawyers, as well as on the ‘cause’-oriented Foundation.” They reminded Wood that a “proper defense” of Rittenhouse should be the “lone objective.”

Around this time, Pierce announced that he was stepping away from #FightBack’s board, and tweeted that he wanted to “avoid any appearance of \$\$ conflict.” But, in the e-mail, Van Wagner and Goetz told Wood that they could not proceed unless the foundation addressed “financial questions swirling around” Pierce. They asked Wood to deposit the Rittenhouse donations into a conventional bank-trust account “under the sole control of Kyle’s mother along with a bank trustee.” This would “ensure that the funds are used solely for the purposes for which people donated them.”

These demands were not met, and the Madison lawyers left the case.

#FightBack’s Web site noted that contributions could be channelled to associated law firms, “for other purposes.” The foundation had announced a fund-raising goal of five million dollars, for bail and other costs, and at first the site displayed a progress bar—\$1.9 million on September 23rd; \$2.1 million on October 1st. The ongoing tally was then replaced with a simple “Donate Now” button.

On October 30th, Rittenhouse was extradited from Illinois to Wisconsin. His first Kenosha County court appearance was scheduled for a few days later. Wood tweeted that #FightBack needed to “raise \$1M” before then. Wisconsin is a cash-bail state: a defendant must pay the full amount in order to await trial outside of jail. The court had set



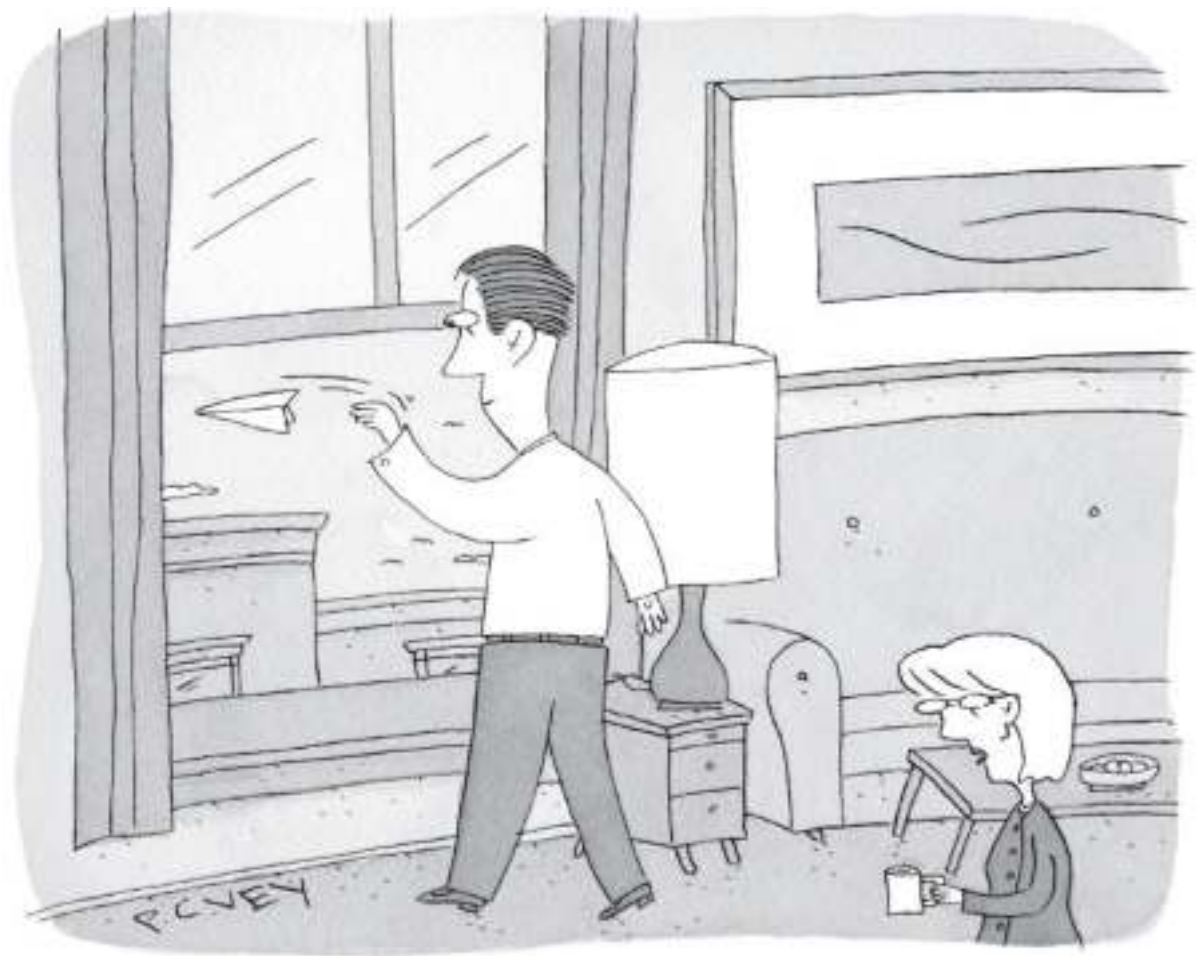
Rittenhouse's bail at two million dollars. Given that #FightBack had supposedly reached that benchmark weeks earlier, Wendy wondered if the #FightBack lawyers were leaving Kyle in jail as a fund-raising ploy. (Wood calls the notion "blatantly false.")

In mid-November, Wood reported that Mike Lindell, the C.E.O. of MyPillow, had "committed \$50K to Kyle Rittenhouse Defense Fund." Lindell says that he thought his donation was going toward fighting "election fraud." The actor Ricky Schroder contributed a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Pierce finally paid Rittenhouse's bail, with a check from Pierce Bainbridge, on November 20th—well over a month after #FightBack's Web site indicated that the foundation had the necessary funds.

The fact that a suspect in a double homicide could raise so much money and get out of jail struck many people as another example of an unfair system. The minister Bernice King, the youngest child of Martin Luther King, Jr., tweeted that Kalief Browder "was held at the Rikers Island jail complex, without trial, for allegedly stealing a backpack." (Browder spent three years at Rikers, and later hanged himself.)

Moments after Rittenhouse was released, he jumped into an S.U.V. driven by Dave Hancock, a former Navy SEAL who now worked in security. Hancock told me that he started working for Wood in March, 2020, and became #FightBack's executive director that September, but found Wood's volatility untenable. "He has no filter, and no bottom," Hancock told me. One night in October, during an argument, Wood grabbed Hancock's handgun from his holster. Hancock and Wood parted ways.

Hancock was still on decent terms with Pierce, though, and had said yes when Pierce asked him to "extract" Kyle from Kenosha. In the S.U.V., Hancock gave Rittenhouse new clothes from Bass Pro Shops and an order of Chicken McNuggets, then drove to Indiana. Pierce, a Notre Dame graduate, had relocated Rittenhouse's family to a "safe house" near South Bend. The arrangement astonished one attorney, who later said, "Why does Wendy Rittenhouse think she's enti-



*"I wish you wouldn't vote that way."*

tled to a free lawyer and free housing? Because John Pierce and Lin Wood told her she was."

The night of the family's reunion, Ricky Schroder showed up. Rittenhouse happily posed for a photograph with him and Pierce, who was staying nearby. Rittenhouse wore a T-shirt, bought by Hancock, that bore the image of a gun's crosshairs and the words "Black Rifle Coffee Company," a roaster that sells a blend called Murdered Out. The photograph wound up on Twitter. The family of Huber, the man shot in the heart, had released a statement decrying attempts to celebrate "armed vigilantes who cause death and chaos in the streets." Black Rifle soon declared that it "does not have a relationship" with Rittenhouse.

The Rittenhouses had accepted #FightBack funds without hesitation, but they were growing uncomfortable with Pierce. They say that he drank excessively in front of Wendy's kids; called Faith, who supported Bernie Sanders, a "raging liberal"; and billed the family for time spent shopping for a shirt to wear on Tucker Carlson's show. Pierce also appeared determined to monetize Rittenhouse's

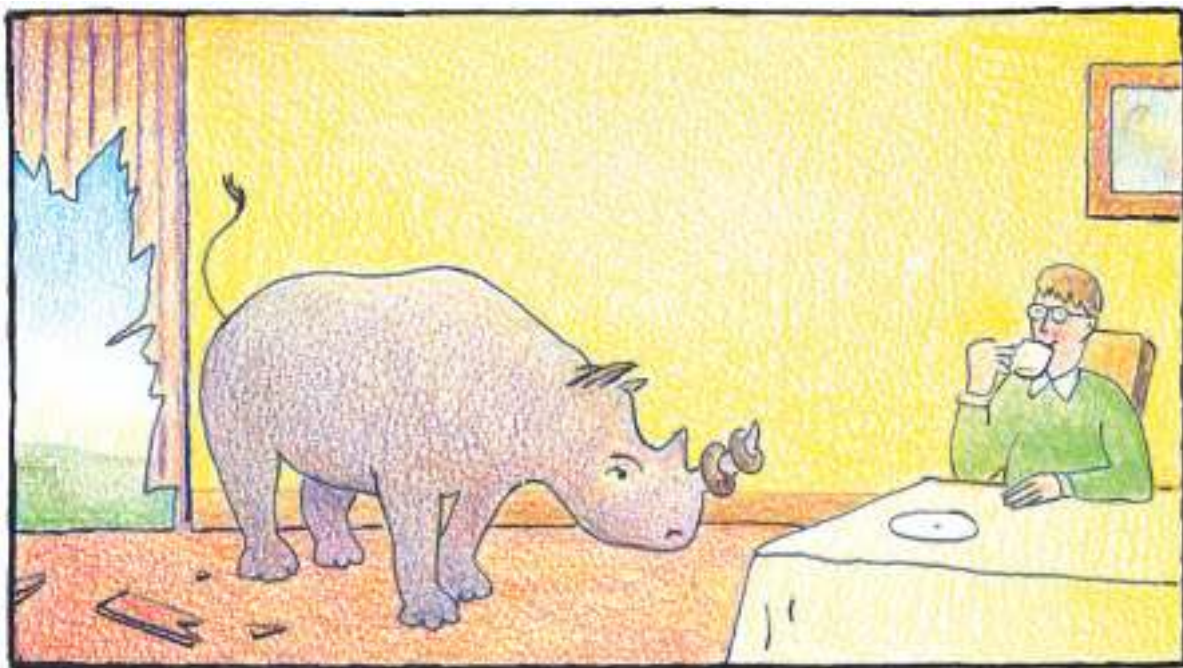
story, and had been exploring book and film deals.

Hancock, who expressed concerns that Pierce was exploiting the family, was sensitive about financial impropriety. In 2012, he'd been accused of mismanaging an online fund-raiser that he'd established to support SEAL families. Hancock showed me documents indicating that, after an investigation by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, the U.S. Attorney's office declined to prosecute.

Wood, for his part, now seemed preoccupied less with Rittenhouse's case than with exposing "election fraud." #FightBack was asked to stop featuring Rittenhouse in its fund-raising efforts. Wendy says that she has pressed both the foundation and Pierce for a comprehensive accounting of donations and expenditures, but has not received the information. (Pierce refused to answer questions from this magazine.)

Last fall, Pierce sought a formal place on Rittenhouse's criminal-defense team. #FightBack had hired Mark Richards, a veteran defense lawyer in Racine. Richards didn't tweet and considered it "unethical as hell"





HAVING A RELIABLE BAGEL-DELIVERY SERVICE  
DID MAKE LIFE A TOUCH MORE TOLERABLE

Glen Baxter

to discuss cases on social media; he saved his arguments for court. Richards was also a liberal Democrat. He'd told conservatives involved in Rittenhouse's case, "You and I *aren't* going to be going to the same parties on Election Night."

Courts routinely grant out-of-state lawyers pro-hac-vice status, allowing them to practice "for this occasion." But the Kenosha prosecutors objected to Pierce's petition to join the defense team. On December 3rd, they argued in a motion that the combination of his substantial debt and his connection to #FightBack—a "slush fund" with "unregulated and opaque" finances—offered "ample opportunity for self-dealing and fraud." (#FightBack eventually must disclose certain financial details to the I.R.S., but there is no immediate avenue for public oversight.)

Pierce then abandoned his attempt to join the case and announced that he was "taking over all civil matters for Kyle including his future defamation claims." He would also be "orchestrating all fundraising for defense costs." On Newsmax, he said that the defense was "going to need millions of dollars" to litigate "probably the most important case, honestly, in the history of self-defense in the Anglo-American legal system."

The Rittenhouses, with Hancock's help, launched their own Web site and raised money by selling "Free Kyle" merchandise, including a \$39.99 hoodie and a \$42.99 bikini. The merchandise featured a slogan said to have been uttered by Rittenhouse: "Self-Defense Is a Right, Not a Privilege." The attorney for Grosskreutz, the third man shot, complained to a Wisconsin news channel that Wendy was "trying to profit off of these tragedies," adding, "It's frankly vile."

Eventually, the two million dollars in bail money could be returned to Pierce Bainbridge. A former client of Pierce's recently heard about this possibility and posted an admonishment on YouTube: "You're trying to boogie with his money, bro." In June, Pierce announced that he had launched another nonprofit, the National Constitutional Law Union, as a counterpart to the A.C.L.U. The organization's Web site noted that a "substantial amount of funds raised" would be "paid to a law firm owned and/or controlled by the founder."

Throughout the pandemic, Rittenhouse's pretrial hearings were held on Zoom. He usually sat silently in a mask next to Richards, in Richards's office. One hearing occurred on

January 5th, two days after Rittenhouse turned eighteen. His mother joined him, along with Hancock, who now oversaw the family's safety and wore a handgun at the small of his back. Several volunteer lookouts, whom Hancock says that he met through Pierce, stood watch outside Richards's building.

Afterward, Hancock drove the Rittenhouses to lunch. One of the lookouts also went to the restaurant, and was joined by friends. The group ate at another table and then offered to take Rittenhouse out for a beer. When Hancock balked, Rittenhouse pointed out that, in Wisconsin, someone his age can legally drink at a bar if a parent is present. Wendy agreed to go.

Hancock drove the Rittenhouses to Pudgy's, a bar near Racine. Outside, Rittenhouse vaped. He had changed out of his dress clothes and into a backward baseball cap and a T-shirt bearing the message "FREE AS F--K." When his drinking buddies arrived, they wanted photographs with him. Rittenhouse posed with a hefty guy in a Brewers cap, flashing a thumbs-up. A bearded man in a gray hoodie stepped up next, and made the "O.K." sign. Rittenhouse noticed, then did the same.

Inside, the bartender handed him the first of three beers. Customers came up to Rittenhouse and shook his hand. Someone on the far side of the room surreptitiously took photographs, and these images soon surfaced online. To detractors, Rittenhouse, with his "FREE AS F--K" shirt and alcohol, looked like he was trolling.

Binger, the prosecutor, obtained the bar's surveillance footage and could see that Rittenhouse's group ultimately consisted of about ten people, all but two of them men. The party stayed at Pudgy's for nearly two hours. Rittenhouse appeared unfamiliar with his hosts yet pleased to be there. Wendy, drinking Mike's Hard Lemonade, hovered off to the side with Hancock.

At one point, five of the men started singing: "I've been one rotten kid/Some son, some pride and some joy." The larger group eventually took a photograph with Rittenhouse in which most of them made the "O.K." sign. Both



the gesture and the song—“Proud of Your Boy,” from the stage production of Disney’s “Aladdin”—are hallmarks of the Proud Boys. The organization, which originated in 2016 as a club for “Western chauvinists,” with a logo of a rooster weathervane pointing west, has become a home for right-wing extremists who embrace violence. The Southern Poverty Law Center lists the Proud Boys as a hate group, and in Canada they are considered a terrorist entity. Associates are known to wear T-shirts that say “6MWE”—“Six Million Wasn’t Enough,” a Holocaust reference—and “Pinochet Did Nothing Wrong!” The “O.K.” sign can be code for “white power.”

After the Kenosha shootings, the Proud Boys had made Rittenhouse an extension of their pro-violence message. At a far-right rally attended by many Proud Boys, the crowd had chanted “Good job, Kyle!” The group’s chairman, Enrique Tarrio, was photographed wearing a T-shirt that said “Kyle Rittenhouse Did Nothing Wrong!”

Hours before the Pudgy’s outing, Pierce texted Wendy, “Just got retained by Chandler Pappas.” Pappas had been charged, in Oregon, with macing six police officers during an assault on the state capitol, in protest of COVID-19 restrictions. He was a supporter of the far-right group Patriot Prayer, and had appeared at a Proud Boys rally with Tarrio, who had been charged, in Washington, D.C., with property destruction and firearms-related offenses. In a tweet, Pierce gave the impression that he was representing both defendants.

The Rittenhouses say that they didn’t know who either Pappas or Tarrio was at the time. Hancock, who has become one of the family’s advisers, says that neither he nor the Rittenhouses grasped the meaning of “Proud of Your Boy” or the “O.K.” gesture, and didn’t realize that any of the men at Pudgy’s were Proud Boys. Though Hancock is a security professional, he told me that he hadn’t learned the names of the men who had volunteered as lookouts or invited Rittenhouse to the bar. Explicit clues about the men’s affiliations existed in plain sight. When I examined the Pudgy’s surveillance footage, I no-

ticed “Proud Boy” tattooed on one man’s forearm; another man had a tattoo of the rooster weathervane from the Proud Boys logo.

The insurrection at the U.S. Capitol occurred the next day. Federal authorities have charged numerous presumed Proud Boys, including one alleged organizer, Ethan Nordean, who had publicly praised Rittenhouse as a “stud.” Lin Wood had tweeted that Vice-President Mike Pence should be executed by firing squad, and would later call him a “TRAITOR, a Communist Sympathizer & a Child Molester.” On the morning of the attack, Wood tweeted, “The time has come Patriots.”

Six days after the Capitol assault, Rittenhouse and his mother flew with Pierce to Miami for three days. The person who picked them up at the airport was Enrique Tarrio—the Proud Boys leader. Tarrio was Pierce’s purported client, and not long after the shootings in Kenosha he had donated a hundred dollars or so to Rittenhouse’s legal-defense fund. They all went to a Cuban restaurant, for lunch.

The Rittenhouses would not say what was discussed at the meal. Hancock, who wasn’t there, clearly understood that it didn’t look good. He insisted to me that the Rittenhouses were uncomfortable with the meeting, and blamed Pierce for orchestrating the encounter and exposing Rittenhouse “to elements that hurt him.” Hancock, who told me that the Proud Boys are “fucking losers,” said that Rittenhouse initially “may have thought it was kind of cool to see people fighting for him, but when he learned what they were all about it didn’t sit well with him.” He added, “He’s just as horrified by the white-supremacist part of it as anybody.”

The Miami lunch did not become publicly known. But the next day the prosecutors in Kenosha filed a motion—based on the surveillance footage from Pudgy’s—asking the court to make it a condition of Rittenhouse’s bond that he avoid contact with “known members of any violent white power/white supremacist groups.”

The Rittenhouses stayed at a Courtyard Marriott in Coral Gables.

According to Hancock, the family didn’t see Tarrio again. The court soon accepted the modification to Rittenhouse’s bond agreement, and also restricted him from possessing or consuming alcohol.

Rittenhouse fired Pierce, via FaceTime, on February 1st. Since then, Hancock told me, he has advised the family to reject overtures from other extremist figures and to stop appearing on right-wing media programs. Meanwhile, he was battling Wood, who had accused him of hacking #FightBack’s network and taking the donor list. The police chief in Yemassee, South Carolina, where Wood lives, recently issued a felony warrant against Hancock. Hancock denies any wrongdoing.

The Kenosha prosecutors’ petition calling #FightBack a “slush fund” has led Hancock to establish a more conventional trust for the Rittenhouses, modelled on the arrangement that Van Wagner and Goetz described in their e-mail to Wood. According to Hancock, it has so far raised nearly half a million dollars. He told me that most donations are between twenty and fifty dollars, but, citing privacy concerns, he wouldn’t release a list of donors. He also wouldn’t discuss details of his payment agreement with the Rittenhouses. He said of the #FightBack debacle, “It was never meant to become this grossly political B.S. that morphed into ‘election fraud’ and militias adopting Kyle. The point was to fund his criminal defense.”

After breaking with Pierce, the Rittenhouses left Indiana. In April, I met them at their new place, whose location I agreed not to disclose. My request for an interview had repeatedly been refused, but Hancock had facilitated a meeting. There were substantial restrictions: the Rittenhouses would answer questions about their family history, and about such figures as Pierce, but—as is common with homicide defendants—we could not directly discuss the case.

When the Rittenhouses fled Antioch, they abandoned most of their possessions. Donors re-outfitted them: their current place had a new sectional sofa, a Keurig coffeemaker, and bed





*"I'm ready to leave whenever you are."*

linens from Walmart. Each family member had a bedroom. All three siblings, including Faith, who is twenty, were back in high school, online, and using new computers that Hancock had provided.

Before I arrived, Wendy set out platters of deli meats, and made a dip of cream cheese and canned chili. Rittenhouse was in his room, but Wendy took me to meet him briefly. He had on a dark-blue hoodie and black Lululemon slacks. Behind him were PlayStation controls and a desktop computer. He had been researching where to apply to college, and said that he hoped to go into pediatric nursing. He later explained, "Seeing how my mom and her co-workers work with their patients, and how they treat their families—those people are having the worst day of their lives, and they need somebody to fall onto and rely on. That's something I want to do."

In the den, Wendy and Faith sat to-

gether on the sofa and Hancock perched at one end. The family clearly hoped to distance themselves from some of the people who had surrounded them. Wendy said of the Rittenhouses' decision to break with Pierce, "Kyle was John's ticket out of debt." She was pressing Pierce to return forty thousand dollars in donated living expenses that she believed belonged to the family, and told me that Pierce had refused: "He said we owed *him* millions—he freed Kyle."

The Rittenhouses, with considerable input from Hancock, described Kyle as selfless ("He has this nature to protect people") and ideologically open-minded ("huge Andrew Yang fan"). The Rittenhouses did not see themselves as particularly political, but Faith considered herself an ardent advocate of Black Lives Matter. I was told that Kyle liked Trump because Trump liked the police.

They insisted that Kyle was not racist, and made a point of explaining that

the Rittenhouses have Black relatives. The whole family agreed that the Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin had murdered George Floyd, and Faith said that she had attended a march protesting the killing. She had actively disapproved of her brother's support of Trump, especially given Trump's misogyny, but said that Rittenhouse knew "how to respect women." I raised an obvious discrepancy: the punching incident. Wendy said, "I told Kyle, 'Never hit a girl.' I also told Kyle, 'Always defend your sisters.'"

The Rittenhouses told me that Kyle used to travel with a combat-grade tourniquet tucked in his boot, and that he had distributed tourniquets to his family. When I asked what he had kept in his first-aid kits, Hancock called him out of his bedroom, and Rittenhouse instantly provided a list: airway kits, tourniquets, QuikClot hemostatic gauze, gloves, splints, bandages, cotton swabs, tweezers, C.P.R. masks—"not the cheap ones." His determination to appear prepared, or strong, suggested an adolescent's need to prove himself. At the Antioch police station, he had said, "I'm not a child anymore."

The night of the shootings, Wendy had a bad feeling, and called Rittenhouse. "I'm doing medical," he told her. The gunfire started moments later. "That day, I felt a part of me die," Wendy told me. Faith said, "Because Kyle had to defend himself? And, if he didn't, *he* would have died?" Wendy said, "Yeah." She started to cry: "He didn't *want* to kill them!"

Faith overtly acknowledged the deaths. "I'm sorry to the families—we *all* are sorry," she said, adding, "We think about it—a lot." Wendy remained stuck on the idea that if Kyle "didn't have that gun he'd be dead." She seemed unwilling to grasp that if a bunch of civilians hadn't been carrying rifles that night, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

In 2017, Dwayne Dixon, an anthropologist at the University of North Carolina, heard about an upcoming Ku Klux Klan rally in Durham. He showed up to counter-protest with a semi-automatic rifle. Dixon belonged to Redneck Revolt, whose members believed in arming themselves in self-



defense against white supremacists.

The rally never materialized, but the sheriff's department charged Dixon with two misdemeanors: "going armed to the terror of the people" and carrying a weapon to a demonstration. There was precedent. In 1968, during the civil-rights movement, the North Carolina Supreme Court had upheld the need for restricting loaded weapons, noting, "In this day of social upheaval one can perceive only dimly the tragic consequences to the people if either night riders or daytime demonstrators, fanatically convinced of the righteousness of their cause, could legally arm themselves." Public safety was jeopardized when firearms were "ready to be used on every outbreak of ungovernable passion."

But times had changed. The first of Dixon's charges was dropped, and a judge ultimately dismissed the count of "carrying a weapon," citing Dixon's First Amendment and Second Amendment rights.

After arresting Dixon, the sheriff had declared that he could not "ignore the inherent danger that comes with untrained individuals operating as a self-appointed security force in our streets." The climate has only worsened since then. The Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence recently began compiling a list of demonstrations that attract visibly armed protesters or counter-protesters. Throughout 2020 and early 2021, there were more than sixty such events, in twenty-four states and in Washington, D.C.

Many state laws supersede city ordinances, making it impossible for cities and towns—even those with rising gun violence—to set constraints on guns. Not long ago, officials in Boulder, Colorado, banned "assault weapons" and high-capacity magazines, but in March a judge blocked the ban, saying that the local government had no control over the extent to which people can be armed in public. Ten days after the judge intervened, a shooter killed ten people at a Boulder grocery store.

In May, Washington State banned civilians from openly carrying firearms at permitted demonstrations. The ban's primary sponsor, Patty Kuderer, has said, "The purpose of bring-

ing a weapon to a public demonstration is not to protect yourself, it's to intimidate." Other states, however, are moving in the opposite direction. Texas, later this year, will allow people to carry handguns without a permit, and in California there are new legal challenges to long-standing bans on AR-15-style weapons and large-capacity magazines. The availability of guns correlates with gun violence. During the ten years of the federal ban on assault weapons—1994 to 2004—the number of mass-shooting events diminished. Last year, the U.S. broke records for gun sales and reached the highest level of gun homicides in decades.

Thirty states have adopted "stand your ground" laws, further institutionalizing civilian use of lethal force. Robyn Thomas, the Giffords Law Center's executive director, told me that such laws urgently need to be repealed, because, among other things, they distort the notion of civic responsibility: "You have this misconception of a hero with a gun being the *answer* to public safety, when it's exactly the opposite." Armed civilians assume that they are "doing good" partly because "the system propagates that mythology, by passing laws that allow for it."

In Wisconsin, determining if someone acted in self-defense involves the question of who initiated the aggression. But, as in many states, there is no clear definition of provocation. As John D. Moore explained in a 2013 article in the *Brooklyn Law Review*, in some parts of the country a person forfeits the privilege of self-defense merely by having shown up at a "foreseeably dangerous situation." Moore argued that the varying standards make it harder for citizens to "fairly distinguish between the vigilant and the vigilante." Wisconsin's law favors someone who "in good faith withdraws from the fight," yet there is not always a duty to retreat. At Rittenhouse's trial, which is scheduled to begin on November 1st, the jury may need to find only that when he pulled the trigger he reason-

ably feared death or great bodily harm.

Many people in Wisconsin expect the jury to determine that the D.A. overreached when he imposed the charge of intentional homicide. Yet Rittenhouse could still go to prison if jurors hold him accountable for the deaths. The Harvard law professor Noah Feldman recently wrote that, though Rittenhouse presumably will claim that he feared having his gun wrested away and used against him, it's only "the presence of Rittenhouse's own weapon" that gives him "the opportunity to claim that he was in fear of bodily harm." Thomas told me that if Rittenhouse hadn't concluded that it was his responsibility to venture, armed, into a "hot environment," he "wouldn't have been in harm's way, and he certainly wouldn't have hurt anyone else."

In a recent hearing, Bruce Schroeder, the judge who will preside over Rittenhouse's trial, stressed the importance of sticking to "the facts and the evidence." He demanded "a trial that's fair to the defendant, which is his constitutional guarantee, and to the public, which is my responsibility."

But, thanks to the opportunists who have seized on the Rittenhouse drama, the case has been framed as the broadest possible referendum on the Second Amendment. No other legal case presents such a vivid metaphor for the country's polarization. Many of Rit-

tenhouse's supporters have described the shootings almost in cathartic terms, as if they were *glad* that he killed people. If a jury appears to sanction vigilantism, it seems likely that more altercations between protesters and counter-protesters will turn deadly.

Thomas sees the case as "a bellwether," putting "guns at the forefront of the stability of our democracy." Protecting citizens' safety "is a primary function of our government," she said. "Yet it's gotten to the point where this idea that you have a right to carry a loaded weapon is starting to literally overtake other rights—the right to express your vote, the right to assemble without fear." ♦





## TOGETHERNESS

*The traditional home is being reinvented. Amid division, people are looking for meaning in groups.*

BY NATHAN HELLER

Kate Green was in bed one night when she heard somebody trying to break into her home. This was 2017. Her apartment, in the Hollywood Hills, was a well-appointed studio. Green heard footsteps, and saw a stranger peering through the full-length glass by her front door. For a moment, she was paralyzed; then she dove for cover in her closet. By the time the police arrived, the unknown intruder had disappeared.

Green, who is in her mid-thirties, was the right hand to a celebrity chef at a Michelin-starred restaurant, and had a reputation for being unflappable at work. Yet, in the months that followed the intrusion, she lost her equilibrium in life. Again and again, she found herself staying out until dawn. Eventually she realized that she was avoiding going home.

In February, 2020, Green left her apartment and went to live at Treehouse Hollywood, a space for community living, where people of many ages and from many walks of life eat together, spend time together, and conduct their lives largely in common view. She moved into her unit—one of sixty at Treehouse—and fell asleep in a building filled with strangers. It was the first time she had gone to bed with the lights off in more than two years.

Joe Green—no relation—left his house in San Francisco on the Saturday morning after the 2020 election, taking me along so that he didn't have to drive down to Los Angeles alone. It was clear out, with taffy wisps of cloud. Green, who is in his late thirties, crammed a few last bags into the trunk of his Volvo convertible and dropped the top.

"O.K., I think we're ready," he said.

Green co-founded Treehouse Hollywood, which opened in the weeks just preceding the pandemic. I first encountered him several years earlier, when I interviewed him about an immigration lobby that he'd started with Mark Zuck-

erberg. Back then, Green had arranged to meet me in an airport food court while he waited for a flight to D.C., the better to streamline the logistics of his life. He'd sported a mop of curly brown hair and a dark blazer, and had looked tired. Much had changed since then. The Trump Administration nullified the work of liberalizing immigration. Green started psychedelic therapy, and a nonprofit to promote it. The mop of hair had turned into a coif, and the clothes had become loud. In the car, Green wore pink floral trousers and a toast-colored Cowichan sweater. He said that vulnerability was now his lodestar, and talked about the content of his therapy and a nascent romance with a woman in New York.

"It really crystallized recently for me that humans evolved with interdependence, but technology has made us independent," he shouted while the Volvo mewlingly gained speed.

I had come along because I'd noticed communities like Treehouse springing up across the country. Community living had a famous American moment in the late sixties and early seventies, but many communes of that period came to be associated with squalor, cults, dispiriting group sex, and lentils, and the fashion faded. Now it's back.

As we crested through the mountain passes near Castaic, which were unfrozen and lovely, Green told me, "So many people I know of different circumstances say what they really want is houses next to each other with ten of their friends." In 2016, when Treehouse raised five million dollars from individual investors and venture-capital funding, twelve per cent of co-living communities were housed in buildings made for that purpose, according to a study conducted by a group of architects in Paris; within two years, the number had more than doubled. Though some communities dissolved during the pandemic, many reported an uptick in applicants.

I wanted to learn what people found so absent from traditional home life that, during a pandemic, they were rushing into life in groups. Green exited onto the 101, and we slowed into residential Hollywood: dingbat houses, stucco buildings, the Netflix towers, and, across the freeway overpasses, tents.

Prophet Walker woke that morning in his room at Treehouse Hollywood around four, as usual, and prepared his normal breakfast in the pre-dawn dark: orange juice, chicken sausage, sliced tomato, boiled eggs, and an avocado rained on by ground pepper. Walker grew up in Watts, in South L.A., with a mother who was addicted to heroin. At sixteen, he broke a guy's jaw and stole his CD player, and was sentenced to six years in prison. Inside, Walker lived next to the Skid Row Slasher and earned his G.E.D.; when he got out, he studied engineering at Loyola Marymount. At twenty-six, he ran unsuccessfully for the State Assembly. The next year, he was a special guest at President Obama's State of the Union address.

All along, he'd had an idea for a community centered in one building. "My belief was that the world should be connected, but that urban design, like many other things, failed to bring us together," he said. He and Joe Green were put in touch by a mutual friend on the theory that they thought similarly. They did: Walker is Treehouse's other founder. Green doesn't live there—he has a pied-à-terre in Beverly Hills—but Walker does, with his fifteen-year-old daughter. That Saturday afternoon, he headed to the café in the entryway of Treehouse, to find out the latest from everybody else.

Alex Rafaelov had been in the café for much of the afternoon, working on an iPad, steaming lattes, and watching the foot traffic as it passed. Rafaelov was nineteen, with a jut of





*At Treehouse, residents of many ages and from many walks of life conduct their lives largely in common view.*



blond hair and a bright demeanor. They identify as queer, and are undergoing a gender transition, which had caused tension at home. They'd enrolled at a community college, getting meals from a food bank at one point, and loved the range of people they met at school. Seeking more of the same, they arrived at Treehouse last February, moving into one of its six below-market-rent rooms, for two hundred dollars a month. Other units average twenty-two hundred dollars, which roughly matches other new apartments on the block. Most people live in five-person suites, with separate bedrooms and bathrooms, built off a shared kitchen; studios are available for more than three thousand a month.

Rafaelov, who works as an illustrator, was wiping down the steam rod when Green and I appeared in the café. We'd arrived at the building, a five-story forest-green tower trimmed with blond-wood balconies, in the late afternoon, parking in an underground garage and coming to the café through a bamboo-lined courtyard.

"Alex," Rafaelov said, introducing himself with a wide smile.

Walker crashed in. He is tall, with

a mid-length beard and the posture of a well-hugged stuffed animal. He took his favorite spot, at a small table with a chessboard. Another resident, Michele Esquivel, appeared with her fourteen-year-old daughter. They had been on their own since 2014, when ICE picked up Esquivel's husband as he walked their daughter to school, and deported him to Mexico. Then Myra Hasson, a resident who serves as Treehouse's community manager, showed up with a Polaroid camera. She took a picture of Green and put it under the glass of the coffee bar, where other portraits were already fixed.

That evening, Joe Biden was delivering his acceptance speech in Wilmington, Delaware. A wide-screen TV was wheeled in, and Kate Green squeezed onto the couch. A zero-gravity-robotics engineer named Seth Berger, whom residents call the Mayor of Treehouse, approached. (During most of the pandemic, Treehouse operated masklessly, as an enormous pod; visitors like me were let in with a negative test result.)

Joe Green perched near the group and surveyed the room. He grew up in L.A., and went on to Harvard, where

he connected with Zuckerberg, then declined an offer to drop out and help build Facebook. Walker was accepted to Harvard, too, but couldn't go because of his parole, and Green likes to see them as two restive L.A. boys, dispatched by different circumstances, who collided in entrepreneurial adulthood. For a few weeks that summer, he had forgone his usual Beverly Hills pad and joined Walker as a resident at Treehouse. "I went from three-quarters of an acre, a forty-five-hundred-square-foot house, to two hundred and fifty square feet, and I was so much happier," he said. (Then he went back.)

On the TV, Kamala Harris appeared to announce "a new day for America."

"Work that suit, Kamala!" Kate Green exclaimed, applauding.

"COVID started days before Kamala Harris was going to come here," Walker said. Previously, the mayor of Los Angeles, Eric Garcetti, had praised the community; in an odd way, Treehouse has emerged as one of the places in America where power is settling in a new form. One resident described it as the most diverse environment that he'd ever seen, "in every way you can measure diversity"—a notable feat, given that rooms are filled almost entirely by word of mouth, with a simple questionnaire by way of application.

Biden had come onscreen to say, "That is what America, I believe, is about. It's about people." Jazmine Williams, another resident, slipped into the room with her daughter, Maliyah, who wore a princess dress and boots.

"It's her birthday," Williams explained. "Well, two days ago. She's five."

"Oh, my God, happy birthday, Maliyah!" someone cried. Maliyah smiled the tight, mortified smile of too much adult attention, and stepped behind her mother's leg.

Biden was saying, "If we can decide not to cooperate, then we can decide to cooperate—"

"Yes!" Kate Green chimed in from the couch.

Then there were fireworks, and "Dancing in the Street" came on, and Maliyah started dancing with the space engineer, and everyone—the hospitality manager, the deported immigrant's family, the tech founder, the formerly incarcerated entrepreneur, the queer



*"Can you stop thinking about work for, like, two seconds?"*

teen-ager—watched while onscreen the old stronghold of power fell toward a new one.

In the recent book “Brave New Home,” Diana Lind describes the single-family home as ill-suited to modern life. If many nineteenth-century houses seem large by today’s standards, it’s because they were meant for intergenerational living, boarders, and staff—communities unto themselves. At the turn of the century, families shrank, staffs winnowed, and streetcars (later, cars) allowed for greater distances between home and work. Also, more immigrants arrived. This was when single-family living went into heavy promotion, via the Department of Commerce’s “Own Your Own Home” campaign. Lind argues that this drove the better-off into single-family homes, and helped pull a more diverse, mixed public physically apart.

Lind herself found “a clear connection between the loneliness I experienced and the amount of time I spent at home.” By contrast, she notes, people in intentional communities could “live their lives to the fullest.” Lind is fortyish, and her idea of life fully lived will strike some as millennial in its aspirations: creative-type careers, nomadic roving, and what she calls “outsourced housework.” There are economic factors, too. Entry-level home prices are climbing; generational wealth is not. For many, a single-family home is not a realistic part of the dream.

Yet financial constraints alone can’t explain the communal-living rush, because, at least in coastal cities, communities tend to be full of prospering people. “Part of it might just be appetite for risk, and willingness to do something together,” Gillian Morris, who co-edits the community-living newsletter *Supernuclear*, told me. Phil Levin, *Supernuclear*’s other editor, who co-founded an Oakland community called *Radish*, said, “Our built environment is getting more isolating over time. More houses in the suburbs, more luxury apartments in buildings where you don’t know your neighbors.” Punctilious types often distinguish among “co-housing,” which involves distinct units on a compound; “co-living,” which involves sharing more space; and “co-ops,” which have still more deeply enmeshed intentions. But many communities, like *Treehouse*, are hybrids,

and part of the point is coloring outside the lines. Commitment to nontraditional living arrangements also sometimes involves polyamory or co-parenting. Marriage rates in the United States are the lowest they’ve been since the period following the Civil War, when data were first collected. As life spans increase, so will the proportion of time one spends outside the nuclear family, which means that, at some point, for most Americans, the alternative to different ways of being together will be being alone.

Digital life was supposed to bring greater connection. Gideon Dominick, a software engineer, told me that he’d done “the digital-nomad thing” for seven years, but now was seeking community as a stay against what he called “atomization” in public life—a loss of shared reference points and experience. Technology, he thought, was changing people’s social expectations. “There’s a lot of editing now in how we’re trained to perceive other people,” he said. “We have fewer exchanges of uncertainty where we’re waiting to see how they resolve.”

A cluster of people at *Treehouse* showed me to my room. It had a platform bed, a big window, a private bathroom, its own climate control, and soundproofed walls. There was a pillow-laden window seat, I supposed for wistful gazing. Also, it being Los Angeles, there was a healing crystal and a diffuser stocked with lavender oil. This I ran constantly, at full blast, like a power generator at the corner of my bed.

Outside my room was a shared kitchen, with an oblong table that could fit seven or eight people at a squeeze. My suitemates were two men in their thirties: Jon Carpenter, an entrepreneur, and Devan Dmarcus, a personal trainer.

“During the week, I’m very heads-down,” Carpenter alerted me.

“And I’m usually down in the gym. So we catch each other at the kitchen table,” Dmarcus said.

Carpenter wore a Bay Area young professional’s uniform—ankle-hugging trousers, pristine sneakers—and said that he couldn’t remember how many businesses he’d started over the years. He’d been living by himself in San Francisco, but had worried about becoming lonely during the lockdown, so he’d sublet his place and come to *Treehouse*. “I work

with a business coach slash therapist, and she’s, like, ‘You have to do this,’” he told me. Dmarcus, with billowing athletic clothes and a mane of dreadlocks, had recently come to Los Angeles from Atlanta, where he co-founded an organization called *Black Men Smile*, which sought to redefine Black masculinity through outreach and art.

Some rooms in the building were designed for particular purposes—a laundry room that doubles as an art studio, a screening lounge with a bar—but residents often end up exerting their own vision and control over a space, and Dmarcus had taken over an area at the edge of the parking garage, where he added gym equipment and started booking appointments. Kate Green, who knew wine, had taken it upon herself to keep the bar stocked; another resident, who knew food safety, kept the communal refrigerator’s contents fresh. The building originally used a cleaning service, but, when residents realized that the best cleaner was underpaid, *Treehouse* hired her away and doubled her wage. The maintenance man lived in the house next door.

The kitchen that I shared with Carpenter and Dmarcus opened onto a motel-like outdoor corridor, with a treehouse-style staircase, which had cost a million dollars to construct. Most of the other challenges of building *Treehouse* had been regulatory; for instance, Los Angeles requires new parking spaces for every rental unit built. (*Treehouse* agreed to provide more affordable housing and bike parking instead.) “Zoning is modelled for traditional families, and it hasn’t made the adjustment for situations like this,” Nicole Comp, a partner at *THE CALIFORNIA OFFICE*, which designed *Treehouse*, told me. Jeff Soler, the firm’s co-founder, said that ambiguous regulations seemed to invite abuse; some co-living projects sought to pack people into a minimum of space. “I don’t want to be building tenements,” he said. Like most co-living communities, *Treehouse* is lobbying for a new zoning category.

I wasn’t the only new face in *Treehouse* that weekend; a woman named Karen Diaz was moving in. Her arrival coincided with a change in practice concerning unfamiliar faces. Now all guests were introduced on Slack, along with a



snapshot. Slack was also where open invitations were posted (“anybody here looking for lunch? i made some turmeric-y vegetable soup”), along with minor grievances about unemptied laundry machines or used-up coffee beans. Offline, there’s a weekly check-in-and-logistics talk, and a list of “commitments”—a shared-values document—but otherwise the community tries to avoid top-down rules.

Diaz came to the U.S. from El Salvador as a child, seeking asylum. She was the first person in her family to finish high school in this country, and she went to business school before landing a job at I.B.M. Yet “the pathway to success” had made her miserable, so she quit her job and backpacked around the world looking for enlightenment. “Before, I was having panic attacks from anxiety, but now I have love attacks!” she said.

Diaz offered to train me in something called the Kundalini breath, one of the tools in her arsenal of joy. As she explained it, the key was to exhale with such great force that you felt “something pop” in your head.

“You’re giving yourself brain surgery with your energy,” she told me. She suggested that if I were doing it right I would turn bright red and look constipated. I felt a bit shy. Instead, I asked her how she had come to live in community.

She’d been staying in a Venice studio with big windows. “I used to tell people I was living in a tree house,” she said. But when the pandemic hit she felt disconnected in both life and work, so she started searching. Treehouse—the name, the concept—rang true.

“My friends all said, ‘Oh, you’re moving to a cult!’ So I read a cult book,” she told me. “Just to be sure.”

San Francisco, 1967: Irving Rosenthal, an editor who was unsuccessfully tried for obscenity after publishing bits of William Burroughs’s “Naked Lunch,” had the idea to start a publishing commune in an old Victorian. The community, called Kaliflower, produced a widely circulated newsletter and became a center of joint decision-making, “group marriage” (sex among members), and queer culture. (It was also a home to the Cockettes, an avant-garde theatrical troupe known for such works as “Journey to the Center of Uranus.”) Rosenthal looked to the nineteenth-century Oneida Community, in

## BOOGIE-WOOGIE

You shout from the other room  
You ask me how to spell boogie-woogie  
And instantly I think what luck  
no war has been declared  
no fire has consumed  
our city’s monuments  
our bodies our dwellings

The river didn’t flood  
no friends  
have been arrested  
It’s only boogie-woogie  
I sigh relieved  
and say it’s spelled just like it sounds  
boogie-woogie

—Adam Zagajewski (1945–2021)

(Translated, from the Polish, by Clare Cavanagh.)

New York, which embraced a devotional notion of free will and a bureaucratized notion of sexual adventurism, and to the Diggers, in the Haight-Ashbury, who sought to phase out commerce. Residents at Kaliflower were encouraged to cut ties with friends and family, donate their savings to the common pot, and work only for the collective. The idea was to realize one’s nonconforming nature in a like-minded community: to find togetherness by standing apart.

Today, the Bay Area remains the United States’ conceptual capital of community living. “There have *always* been other ways to live,” Zarinah Agnew, a British neuroscientist and one of the founders of a San Francisco community called the Embassy, told me. “Each generation starts again.”

The Embassy, founded in 2012, occupies a Classical Revival mansion with a basement bowling alley, and is home to fourteen people and a communal dog. It belongs to a local network of houses called the Haight Street Commons, as well as a global association that includes communities in Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Costa Rica, London, and Vancouver. Agnew, who is in her late thirties and has lilac-blond hair, is the leader of these interlocking alliances, although she’d hate that description, because she does not believe in imposed hierarchy. She told me,

“I think this house is, if you’ll forgive the disgusting language, a bit of a sociopolitical incubator for little ideas, which start and fly off into the wind like seeds.”

An applicant to the Embassy must hang out, more than once, with every resident, and is let in only with unanimous enthusiasm. The Embassy has a reputation for being one of the most serious communities in San Francisco, and for having some well-heeled residents. People have founded companies with ten-figure valuations.

“When I tell my family I live in a community, they’re, like, ‘Oh, you hippie!’” Taylor Ferrari, a design researcher and strategist, who lives at the Embassy, said. We were sitting in the community’s garden, near a large twirl of pink jasmine. “Separateness is ingrained in our architecture, our laws, and our media.”

Seth Frey, another resident, added, “In digital life, you don’t have to *share*”—so much so that the word has a different meaning in digital culture. Frey is a cognitive scientist and a professor of communications at U.C. Davis, where he studies coöperation and self-governance. “The need to share is a source of conflict, which is a source of conflict resolution,” he said. According to the theory, that resolution process builds real intimacy.

The figurative rule book at the Embassy is constantly updated through group

discussion. Residents see this process as a way to break away from arbitrary constraints, though it imposes strictures of its own. Frey used to live in a house with a wife and a child. He decided that he preferred community and separated from his wife, but his son has not yet spent time with him at the Embassy. The current members haven't reached a consensus about kids.

A few blocks from the Embassy is another community that Agnew helped start, to address the needs of formerly incarcerated people, called Template House. Residents from the two places share their door codes, and pop over for neighborly cups of sugar, but, owing to their distinct processes of self-definition, each community remains tuned to a wavelength of its own.

**D**id you watch any of Biden's speech?" Joe Green asked Khamal Iwuanyanwu.

"I've been in the studio," Iwuanyanwu said.

The studio was lit club pink, with egg-crate foam on the walls and a booth at the far end. Iwuanyanwu, who was twenty-two, was at the console, with a comb and white-rimmed sunglasses set into his hair. He put on a track he'd made called "Mamacita," a paean to playing the field—or, as he put it, to people not "committing to each other too early."

Iwuanyanwu grew up in Reseda, a low-income neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley, and failed every English class until the tenth grade. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, he gold-medalled in speech at an academic decathlon, and a teacher invited him to join an extra-credit writing group. "We started to learn how to talk and say things—which led to a desire to say things with greater precision," he told me. By the time he finished high school, he'd become a mentor with the Get Lit program, where he teaches at-risk young people to write poetry. Another mentor told him about Treehouse.

Iwuanyanwu played a different track in progress, called "Life." "I wrote it the day after a family friend was shot in the back while babysitting," he told me. "I'm anxious every day that I'm going to lose everyone I love, one way or another."

Upstairs, in the dining hall, which has an open kitchen and a view of down-

town, Kate Green was helping Royce Burke, a chef and restaurateur who lived at Treehouse, pull together a feast: butternut-squash soup, shepherd's pie, chickpea salad, and a peach galette. A portion of Treehouse rent goes to a community fund for weekly dinners and happy hours, but residents often host on their own, too. Carpenter appeared, then Iwuanyanwu. Jazmine Williams and Maliyah sat down. Soon, about thirty residents were gathered, and they raised their glasses toward Burke for a toast.

He said, "We're starting to feel a change in weather today, and it's just been fucking emotional—" His gaze fell on five-year-old Maliyah. "It's been a bit of a roller coaster for *everybody*, so we were, like, Let's do something really fun and comforting." A chorus of whoops echoed from the tables.

Later, he and Kate Green led a small group up to the roof garden for cigars and red wine. It was a mild, breezy night, with the heat lamps on. "Coming Down," by Jeshi, prickled through the speakers. Burke, who was thirty-three, grew up in the Bay Area, in a conservative Christian household. By fourteen, he was working as a security-cleared aide to a Republican state senator; by thirty, he had experienced a political conversion, married, bought a house, worked for a San Francisco developer, burned out, divorced, and opened a Los Angeles restaurant. After moving to Treehouse, he started a pandemic takeout company



called Secret Lasagna ("The secret is that we help each other"), which donated part of what it cooked to struggling families. He and Kate Green were friends, though there wasn't a huge amount they had in common. Green grew up in Modesto, an agricultural city to the north. Treehouse, she said, was the first place she'd lived where she was not "the only Black person I knew."

"The greatest thing about Treehouse and the worst is the same," she told me

at one point. "We all come from *really* different backgrounds."

Bridging that divide had not always been easy. On May 25, 2020, a group much like this one had gathered on the roof, playing rap over the stereo while other residents were trying to have a quiet night. The next day, a message went out over Slack: Would people not play such loud music—with words like "bitch" and "ho," and racial epithets—in the shared space?

May 25th was also the day when George Floyd was murdered. The Slack message appeared around the same time that the video of Floyd's killing began travelling across social media. The message, sent by a white resident, was confusingly phrased and spelled out the N-word. Some took it as a pointed effort to degrade and suppress Black culture at an especially appalling moment.

For nearly a week, there were private talks among small groups and ill will in shared spaces. Finally, Myra Hasson, the community manager, convened a building-wide meeting. "I wrote on the chalkboard two things—for people to express how they're feeling and what they need," she said. Discussion went around the room. Then everyone shared tacos.

By some accounts, the real turning point happened at the weekly community dinner, held every Sunday by a rotating group of residents. The host that week was one of several Black residents who had responded in umbrage on Slack. To prepare the dinner, she brought in a chef from a local Black-owned restaurant. Books by Black authors were displayed on the tables. At the start of the meal, the host stood up. "I may not understand all of you, but I love all of you," she told the group. That uneasy resolution seemed enough to keep crisis at bay.

**I**n 2017, a sociologist at Duke, Chris Bail, started a "Polarization Lab," to study why Americans seemed so atomized and adversarial. In a new book, "Breaking the Social Media Prism," he offers a surprising theory about polarization and life online, drawn from "hundreds of millions of data points that describe the behavior of thousands of social media users over multiple years." There's a widespread belief that social media traps people in bubbles by serving limited or wrong information from the outside in. But Bail thinks that the



polarizing influence of social media works from the inside out: people project identities into the digital landscape, like sonar pings, and refine their sense of self and of the world according to the response that they get back.

In one experiment, on Twitter, Bail and his colleagues had Democratic and Republican users follow bots whose tweets ran counter to their political views. The expectation was that positions would grow more moderate as the users were exposed to voices outside their echo chambers. Instead, the opposite happened. Liberals became more liberal, and conservatives grew more conservative. (Other studies got the same result.) Bail attributes this to a battlefield mentality: wider exposure gives you a keener sense that there's "a war going on," and that you have to choose a side. Most people caught in the crossfire simply dig in where they are.

At first, these results make no sense. Isn't the whole premise of liberalism—the salons, the universities, the free press—that people become saner when they engage with different views? Bail zeroes in on a feature of social media that, he thinks, distinguishes it from regular old interaction: it allows us to present ourselves in bits. "Our ability to hide certain aspects of our identity and highlight others is highly constrained in real-life interactions, but social media gives us much more flexibility to present carefully curated versions of ourselves," he writes. We see what comes back, and we adjust. Bail's findings point to an interesting conclusion for the building of society: when it comes to bridging differences, in-person contact really helps.

The morning after Burke and Green's feast, Carpenter texted to ask whether I wanted to go out for breakfast. On our way, we ran into another resident, Chirangi Modi, who decided to come along.

"Ugh, I was so tired last night," Modi, who had been up late with friends, said. "But I really wanted to hang out."

Modi was thirty-four, with blond-highlighted hair. She grew up in New Jersey and had lived in New York, where she designed makeup displays for drug-store aisles. Early in 2020, she requested a remote year at work, and, when the pandemic cancelled a six-month group tour

of Europe that she'd been hoping to take, she thought, Why not go out to California and join a community?

We sat down at a leafy café patio on Hollywood Boulevard. "I've realized I can be more consistently extroverted than I thought I was," Carpenter said. "I used to think I needed large amounts of time on my own."

The previous day, Modi had gone to Joshua Tree. Two guys at Treehouse were also free, so they joined her, which was how plans there usually took shape. Maybe you were twenty-three and having a wild Friday night downtown. Maybe you were forty-one and throwing a dinner for some friends. Maybe you were fifteen and babysitting some kids in the building. Then maybe all of you converged the next day at a book club someone had organized or a yoga class that another resident was teaching. Little social units constantly came into being, then vanished, because everyone was on hand and enmeshed.

That social flow, Modi told me, had made her realize how airless and stiff normal structures were. "Before, I was always following the trend," she said. "You know: you're single, you're in a relationship, you settle down, you move into a single-family home—"

"Two point five beers every weekend," Carpenter said. "Shoot me in the face."

It was a bright and breezy day, and Modi, whose family was originally from India, had a hankering for fresh chai, so she invited us back to her place for a mug. By the time we arrived, she had also invited the guys with whom she'd gone to Joshua Tree: Tristan Neumann, a twenty-five-year-old coder who grew up in France, and Cody Miller, a twenty-three-year-old production assistant aspiring to be a film producer.

Modi's suite looked like Carpenter's and mine. We sat at her kitchen table, and Modi put a saucepan of water on the burner. She grated ginger into the pan, then added masala, pepper, fresh basil, sugar, and bags of Wagh Bakri tea. Neumann told us about the science fiction he was working on in a novel-writing club, organized by one of the other residents.

Modi added milk to the boiling tea and strained it into mugs. She put out some banana bread, with a little pot of ghee.

"What is that?" Neumann asked, interested.

"Ghee!" Modi said.

"What is that?" Neumann repeated.

The tea was hot, spicy, and marvelously rich. Miller swallowed with delight, and said, "This is the best weekend I've had in a long time."

"He doesn't want to say this," Neumann said, deadpan, "but it's because he spent so much time with me."

Up in the roof garden, meanwhile, Myra Hasson was picking basil with another resident. She grew up in South Central, and, in her twenties, trained to be a sprinter in the 2012 Olympics. One day while lifting three times her body weight, she realized that this trajectory no longer brought her pleasure or pride, so she quit and became a d.j., a job that carried her into contact with all kinds of people.

"I realized what really mattered when my mom passed last year—a lot of bullshit fell off," Hasson told me. What mattered wasn't being an extraordinary self alone but being a thread woven into the fabric of shared human experience.

Sean Knibb, who designed the building's garden and interior, happened to come by, and he showed Hasson how to snap the flowers off the basil plants to keep them growing low and full. He had many clients with expansive gardens, and he'd been the interior designer for high-end hotels. Yet it seemed to him that people in communities like Treehouse lived more freely than most billionaires.

"You get a big mansion," he explained. "You'd better have a great big staff. And, if anything happens, you'd better have the right people to take care of it, because, chances are, you're not going to be anywhere near your neighbor—you have to *buy* your neighborhood." At Treehouse, neighbors were always on hand, and not always the ones you'd expect. How many twentysomethings enjoyed the harvest of a garden designed by a landscaper to the ultra-wealthy?

"What makes you rich?" Knibb went on. "An environment to call your own. It doesn't have to be all mine. It can be yours *and* mine." He grew up in Jamaica, and his wife is half Danish. "These ideas about community living are there," he said. "How can we Americanize them?"

Scandinavia is frequently cited as a

model for large-scale co-living arrangements—perhaps because it’s easier for upwardly mobile Americans to imagine the appeal of an apartment in, say, Stockholm’s empty-nester Färdknäppen community, with its weaving room, woodworking studio, and sauna, than to imagine working the fields at a traditional kibbutz or waiting for the shower in an American S.R.O. What can be a deliberate life-style decision in strong social democracies is a financial necessity in much of the world; the “intention” in intentional community reflects some luxury of choice.

It’s telling, though, that new styles of community life are taking root even in places with more traditional structures. Chinese society is noted for its intergenerational family living, but, by some accounts, that model has begun to change. Chengyao Shen, a Chinese engineer who now lives in California, is a remote volunteer for 706 Youth Space, a nine-year-old community that started in Beijing and has branches in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Dali, and many other cities. In a twenty-first-century China increasingly open to international flows of information, residents “want deep connection, but not necessarily in the ways advocated by mainstream society,” Shen told me. “People like us are getting ideas from around the globe about how to lead a better life.”

I was spending so much time at Treehouse that it was decided I should give something back, a prospect that filled me with un-communal feelings and dread. People, I was told, sometimes delivered workshops based on useful knowledge and skills: a talk on podcast editing, or starting a business. By practical measures, I had no useful knowledge or skills. Eventually somebody suggested that my hidden talent might be chopping vegetables. For that week’s Sunday dinner, a resident was bringing her mother and her aunt to help make Filipino food for the group: chicken adobo, lumpia, sinigang, sweet-and-sour snapper, flan. I remembered helping my grandmother, who was from Manila, make adobo, and I was told that the kitchen window onto Treehouse might be revealing. Thus can I exclusively report: when you are chopping vegetables in community, many people come to talk to you, possibly out of pity. Also, if at any

point you think you’re finished chopping vegetables, there are always, somehow, lots more vegetables to chop.

For my second feat of belongingness, I spoke to a group about some of my recent reporting. We gathered in the library, a two-story room with climbing bookshelves and a lofted mezzanine of workspaces. Neumann, the coder, sat among the shelves, with his laptop. Joe Green wore a rainbow-embazoned sweater. The conversation kept going after I’d finished, and people slowly dispersed.

“So, I have a question for everyone,” Jason E. C. Wright, who was forty and served as the community’s librarian, called out. He usually had a stringent, fastidious manner. “Can you all start squirreling away five or ten dollars, and I’ll take a collection to buy Maliyah a gift card to the Disney Store?”

A murmur of accord crossed the room.

He added, “Because, like, who else in your life wears princess dresses?”

Later, in the empty library, he told me that, before arriving at Treehouse, he’d been living in Studio City, recovering from a rough breakup. “I realized I was hiding from the world,” he said. “It’s probably better to live in a cabin in the woods than in a condo metroplex where the only people who know you’re home are the doorman and the postman.” Last summer, he heard about an opening at Treehouse from Hasson, a friend.

“I’ve never been big on family,” he said. “Very much an isolationist, a loner. But I would *fight* for this community.”

For Wright, the crucial ingredient wasn’t the strength of the bonds involved but their looseness, their flexibility. “Many people, the last time they had a community experience was in their twenties, but a truly independent person can be part of a community, too,” he said. For now, older demographics are underrepresented at Treehouse—as they are at all communities I visited. Most baby boomers haven’t yet been displaced from their homes.

Wright found it a missed opportunity. “I think co-living is good for people in their forties but even better for people in their fifties or sixties,” he told me. Far from enabling protracted immaturity, he said, this way of living requires a patient, mature kind of knowledge: how to make a world of fragments into a shared whole.

Traditionally, the places to seek wholes made out of fragments have been cities. In a dense urban environment, the thought goes, many types of people collide through common infrastructure, mutual dependencies, and weak ties. By such standards, the function of a place like Treehouse in a city like L.A. ought to be redundant.

But this doesn’t seem to be how connections in cities actually work. In 2015,



*“I’ve warned your mother, Jeffrey—this is absolutely the last time!”*





researchers based at M.I.T. analyzed the cell-phone data of more than twenty-five million people in France, Portugal, and Spain, tracing their contacts. The results, published in *Nature*, were surprising. For a long time, it has been known that contact networks tend to form in clusters, according to geography. The researchers found that, in urban settings, this pattern broke down. Within a city, people weren't really dealing with those around them: social proximity—being friends of friends, or part of an affinity group—not geographic proximity, was the best predictor of who connected with whom. People in cities don't mix, in other words; they sort. They deal with others in their social stratum or network like swallows calling to other swallows, crossing the woods of human variety to connect with a familiar world.

One popular solution to this problem is education—especially elite education, which makes enough promises to attract students across the wealth-and-access spectrum and mix them together. That model works, but, in a sense, it works too early: Yale's admissions roster may reflect some measure of American social variety, but its alumni association doesn't.

Another possibility is that—Americans being what they are—you can force interaction through consumer opportunity.

Since 2016, Timothy Phillips, an architect and a former developer, has run a Brooklyn community called Lightning Society: a seventeen-bedroom building, with two shared kitchens, a screening lounge, and, as at Treehouse, a roof deck. It's also a business. Phillips, who makes a good income from its operation, is considering taking on investors, and plans to expand to the woods upstate, to L.A., and to Miami. Keeping a city home, a country retreat, and a place by the ocean is beyond the means of most New Yorkers, he points out, but keeping a room in Lightning Society, a bed in a community manor house, and a spot at a beach-side villa? More feasible, and maybe more appealing. "When I first started bringing people together, artistic friends were worried my business friends wouldn't like them, or they wouldn't have things in common—they were all living in these realms of preconception that prevented them from connecting," he said.

Co-living has already been tried as a scale business. Companies like Common—the WeWorks of co-living—have

grown across the country at a clip. WeWork itself at one point launched WeLive, which flopped. "What those companies are designing is not a life style—it's a scarcity model based on a lack of time or money," Phillips insisted.

Many of the community-living theorists in the Bay Area speak of commercial communities with ambivalence verging on disdain. "If a for-profit company wants to come and scale something up, that's cool, but you can't profit off community, which is the architecture of interaction," an original Embassy resident told me.

Yet Treehouse, too, is designed to generate big returns. Green and Walker's investors include Alexis Ohanian, the husband of Serena Williams and a co-founder of Reddit. Next year, a second Treehouse is scheduled to open, in Los Angeles's Koreatown, and land has been purchased for a third, in Leimert Park, a historically Black area. The floor plans for the third site are more family-friendly, and its ground level will feature commercial shops, with leases favoring local businesses. According to Walker, this commercial income, plus the efficiencies of co-living, will allow half the residential units to be below market rent. He envisions expanding to other West Coast power cities, and eventually to New York. There will be reciprocity among buildings, and Treehouse will also open to nonresident members. Like a hotel, it will be a known entity in amenities and standards; unlike at a hotel, everyone will be part of the same family of members from the start.

This plan depends on the Treehouse community being able to grow *as* a community. Leimert Park has recently seen more and more seven-figure house prices. "There's massive development growth as well as gentrification, and people are really nervous about it," Walker told me. He thinks that supporting local businesses and offering below-market-rate units will let Treehouse merge into the community, rather than invade it. In a city, though, that kind of togetherness would be new.

For several years, I've lived in the Bedford-Stuyvesant district of Brooklyn. A lot of the houses in my neighborhood are very grand; they were built around the turn of the twentieth cen-

tury and became home to the Black bourgeoisie. By the sixties, owing in large part to redlining, Bed-Stuy had become one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. This is the area that Jay-Z rhapsodized about in his early work, and where Spike Lee set "Do the Right Thing."

More recently, its demographics have changed. I moved here in part because the area felt like a real neighborhood. Many families on my street had been there for decades. They brought up their children together, beautified the block with flowers, and looked out for one another. When I arrived, there were two or three really good restaurants within walking distance, frequented by both longtime residents and interlopers like me.

Since then, the sidewalk traffic has grown whiter, which, in a historically Black neighborhood, is one visible mark of change. Some of the businesses where neighbors mixed together have shuttered, and sorting has begun. It has become impossible not to notice, as you walk past two equally delicious, always crowded, not-cheap restaurants a couple of blocks from each other, that one is usually filled with a majority of Black people, ranging in age, while the other is packed with a majority of young whites. Three years ago, when a young man was killed at the end of my block, I walked down to the police tape and asked a neighbor what happened. "Oh, a boy got killed there—kids, you know," he said. He sounded dismissive, and I realized that I was the one being dismissed. Not your loss, he was trying to tell me; not your world. Bed-Stuy is held to be one of the most diverse, progressive, culturally mixed places in New York. And yet, for all that mixing, there's more sorting, with the result less of community than of co-location.

The dynamics I saw at Treehouse, in its current, small-scale incarnation, were different. The residents weren't just sharing space; they were woven into one another's lives. The whole broke into groups, but the groups were overlapping, flexible, and always changing. Walker's message to friends at the start had been less conceptual than personal: Join me; we're trying something. And his idea of a fitting resident was broad. It was as if his trajectory—Watts, prison, construction, politics, tech—had helped him to see American society in cross-section, and had taught him what anyone who travels so

widely knows: that, all across society, the same repertory company of people shows up over and over, cast into different roles by circumstance and acculturation.

What emerges from a small community like Treehouse, then, is a theory of togetherness that might inform a larger community. First, it's important to have a wide range of identities represented, but it's not important to say who's meant to represent what. Is Kate Green a farm-town native, a Black woman, or a metropolitan restaurant person? All of the above, of course, and more, and she connects with different people using different aspects of her self. (Carpenter told me, "One of my very first conversations here, with somebody who had a very, *very* different background from me, was stumbling upon that we had both lost a parent in the past year.") Second, constraints of physical structure are more important than big ideas, or even shared intent. Carpenter, a confirmed introvert, found that he had a high threshold for interaction; Wright, the loner librarian, became a custodian of the Treehouse social bonds. Their views of themselves weren't challenged by new concepts. Instead, they were changed by daily contact as they moved through space.

Last, cohesion comes not from inward focus but from looking outward, in many directions. Khamal Iwuanyanwu wanted to make music from his life. Jon Carpenter wanted to build a business. Chirangi Modi wanted to find a soul mate. Whether a community, as it grows, will find unity in variety or become a shrapnel bomb depends on whether individuals are forced to confront, and then accept, the peculiarities of their paths as seen through others' eyes. It is easy to get lost in the norms, anxieties, and vanities of one's own orbit. What togetherness ultimately offers is the hardest of all human revelations: how and why to share pride in the smallness and the strangeness of each self.

Kate Green left Treehouse a month ago, with a complaint that it embraced big notions at the cost of more mundane care—it was a community, yes, but also a building. "There's a big difference between having a grand idea

and executing it in the property-management department," she told me tartly. She'd worked in operations at restaurants, and the "lack of systems" at Treehouse drove her a little nuts. Still, the parting had been bittersweet. "Treehouse was there for me when I needed it—not having to be in the same isolation as everybody else during COVID was a positive from a mental-health point of view," she said. "But it was time for me to go." Community had once seemed like her future, but it was now another chapter of her past.

For others, changes happen in place. Jazmine Williams met me one morning in the laundry room while her daughter played with V.R. goggles in the lounge. Williams is thoughtful and quiet, with an air of motherly exhaustion, as if the days and the nights, the joy and the crises, had been in the wash together for the years of Maliyah's life and their colors had blurred. She's a freelance brand strategist and writer, and she works with the Get Lit program, where Iwuanyanwu volunteers. She used to live nearby, but during lockdown being a mother in a small home became hard. Maliyah would ask, "Is every stranger dangerous?" and that broke her heart. Iwuanyanwu told her about Treehouse.

Williams was not a new arrival in L.A. Her family has lived in Venice for nearly a hundred years. But she was twenty-two when she had Maliyah, and that network of support, though strong, could not be everything when a person sought to shape her life and her child's in her own way and in her own time. Maybe she didn't know just where she was headed, and maybe she loved that; and maybe, living in community, she knew that there were always people with her on the way.

Maliyah had reached a new milestone. She was five now: princess dress and boots. That night, as everyone else ate and worked, she got ready for bed, a year older and a year more certain, and invented a birthday prayer for her world and the way she'd seen it change. "Thank you," she said, her hands clasped tightly. "Thank you for making my mom smile." ♦





Sam  
Lipsyte

*My  
Apology*



My apology, Leffler informs me, is tone-deaf and insufficient. “But that’s O.K.,” Beekman says. “There is still time to revise.”

“But not much time,” Leffler says. “It’s too late to get out in front. But you can still come abreast.”

“But, of course, there are better ways to say that nowadays,” Beekman says to Leffler.

“But of course, but of course,” Leffler says.

Is there ever laughter in an office that isn’t at least a little nervous?

“So,” I say, “as you are both my bosses, not to mention my mentors, do you have any tips on how to best approach this apology revision?”

“Be less tone-deaf,” Beekman says.

“Be more sufficient,” Leffler adds.

I spend the evening on my apology.

Near midnight, my daughter leans into the kitchen.

“Still up?” she says.

“Yes. Just catching up on stuff.”

Sophie glides in, takes a seat at the table. “What are you working on?” she says.

“Oh, nothing important.”

“You always used to tell me about your job.”

“You were always asking. I guess you had a boring life back then.”

“Dad . . .”

“Just kidding. But you’re a teen-ager now. So much going on at school, with your friends. . . . I can’t imagine my work could be that interesting to you.”

“It’s not,” Sophie says. “But your apology sure is.”

“Mom tell you?”

We’re divorced, Melissa and I, but we still talk, at least about Sophie, or things related to Sophie. We keep each other in a cold loop.

“What are you going to do?” Sophie asks, and with her new acrylic fingernail scoops out a sliver of banana bread from the still cooling pan, pops it in her mouth. Whenever we have bananas that are about to turn, and I feel especially vexed, I bake a loaf.

“Well,” I say. “I’m going to apologize. Don’t really have much choice.”

“Aren’t you sorry for what you did?”

Sophie has recently dyed her hair its original color. It’s disconcerting.

“I’m sorry people were offended,” I say.

“Isn’t that a cop-out?”

“Is it?”

“I don’t know,” Sophie says. “Can I borrow twenty dollars against my allowance?”

Beekman says the new draft shows promise.

Less deaf. More depth.

“Still,” Leffler says. “It’s missing something crucial.”

“What is it missing?”

“That crucial element known as remorse.”

“Believe me,” I say. “I’m full of remorse.”

“Maybe,” Beekman says. “But it’s not coming through in the apology. Do you understand that what you did was wrong?”

“To be honest,” I say, “not completely.”

“Not completely, he says,” Leffler says.

“At least he’s being honest,” Beekman says.

“Look,” I say. “I can understand how, if one does not have all the facts, or a sense of the context, one might perceive—”

“So this is it?” Leffler says.

“This is what?” I say.

“The hill,” Beekman says.

“What hill?”

“The mound, or monticule, upon which you yearn to greet your demise.”

“There’s no hill,” I say. “There is just a misunderstanding.”

“Very well, then,” Leffler says. “I would suggest a complete overhaul. Apology two point oh. There is still time, I think.”

“But not much,” Beekman says. “It’s already too late to come abreast— to come to the side of it. But we can still maybe take this thing from behind.”

“Beekman,” Leffler says.

“I mean catch it. That’s all. Before it’s completely out of the barn. Before we’re sitting here trying to put the horse poop back in the toothpaste tube. And you’re dead on your hill.”

I get cracking on my newest version, try to craft something a bit more remorse-centric.

Marco, my ex-brother-in-law, who is also a lawyer, calls.

“Melissa filled me in,” he says. “I hope you’re not apologizing.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Big mistake. The worst thing you can do is apologize.”

“How can that be?”

“Because it will never be enough,” Marco says. “And it won’t change the outcome, either. They’ve already made up their minds about you, trust me. It’s just assets and liabilities. The morality stuff is a smoke screen. Maybe they feel they’re paying you too much. Maybe you’re not as productive as you used to be. Here’s a chance for them to make a change. And they can look good while still earning their profits. Nothing important has been altered to make the lives of ordinary people better. But your bosses can keep coasting along, the pigs. Meanwhile, if you apologize, you’ll get nothing from them in court, down the line, because you will have already admitted you did something wrong.”

“But I just want to tell my side of the story.”

“There are no sides of a story,” Marco says. “There are just different stories. People either believe yours or the other one. Usually the other one.”

“So, what should I do?”

“Got any bananas?”

“You know me well,” I say.

Thing is, I am sorry and I am also not sorry. It’s all so nuanced. The nuance itself is highly nuanced.

Melissa calls to tell me that some of Sophie’s classmates have teased and bullied her.

“Because of me?”

“No, but it could have been. Next time it could be. Look, I know my brother encouraged you to do otherwise, but can’t you just get this over with? Move on?”

“Move on to where?”

“To wherever people like you go after these sorts of things.”

“I don’t want to move on! I want to stay on!”

“Then I guess you’d better do what they’re asking.”



## Whistler's Goddam Cat



"I'm trying," I say. "It's just not always clear what that is, precisely."

"Figure it out. For your daughter's sake."

Beekman and Leffler have given me the remainder of the week to refine my apology.

The problem now is all one of nuance. From a certain distance, the nuance is complex, but coherent. Close up, it splinters into myriad fragments of subtle distinction.

The events themselves—the words, the acts, the intent—are a blur, a frantic smear. A certain phrase, once quite common and, by my lights, benign, was uttered, I admit, by me. Its lesser-known and brutal associations, to which I was not privy at the time, choked the office like a poison gas.

Currents of history pushed this gas, herded it, prevented it from dissipat-

ing or exiting through vents. My history seeped into that of the offended party, which collided with the history we'd all been taught in school, as well as the revision of *that* history we knowing people knew, as well as the revision of that revised history, which had recently gusted in with the force of a reckoning.

Also, it should be noted with appropriate candor that after I uttered the aforementioned phrase and suffered an onslaught of verbal abuse from my co-workers—no doubt unmooring me from my usual sense of decorum—I did, in fact, in plain view of all, urinate on my offended colleague's desk.

That part was wrong (though I guess I can thank stage fright and my middle-aged prostate for the fact that hardly more than a trickle was produced), and I am deeply, hauntingly remorseful, especially since the colleague, a recent addition to our team, had be-

come something of a protégé to me.

Probably anybody else would have been fired on the spot. Or been taken into custody. End of story. Or stories. But with me there are mitigating circumstances. That's what maybe seems to shock my colleagues the most: I opened my fly and made water on my mentee's desk after uttering a phrase that I still insist wasn't always noxious but must have turned so, like a banana, at some point in the recent past, and yet I remain, at least nominally, here at the Beekman/Leffler Group, formerly known, back when Oates was with us, as the Beekman/Leffler/Oates Group, or, to industry insiders, BLO.

But my colleagues are not aware of another history, one I share with Beekman and Leffler.

I was one of their first hires, after all.

I know where the bodies are buried, metaphorically speaking.

Someday, of course, these bodies—including that of Oates—will turn to dust and it really won't matter where they are buried. But, while these metaphorical corpses remain scraps of flesh and bone and curled fingernails and parched hair, it does matter.

Still, it's clear that I do need to apologize. I'm just not sure why I find it so difficult.

Doubtless there are reasons—intellectual, philosophical, ethical—why I find it so difficult, but here in my kitchen, with another loaf of banana bread in the oven, and Sophie in her room attacking her schoolyard tormentors with brief, retaliatory videos recorded on her phone, they elude me.

I encouraged Sophie to make the videos, and, as her uncle Marco counselled, to apologize for nothing, despite the fact that her behavior at school has been, according to the latest e-mail from her vice-principal, less than ideal.

"If you apologize," I told her, "you just make it worse. They've already made up their minds."

"Those stupid gatekeepers," Sophie said. "I hate them."

I wasn't exactly sure to whom she was referring, but I concurred. "I hate them, too," I said.

"Wait," Sophie said. "Are we gatekeepers?"



"If we are," I said, "it's a tiny gate, way off on the edge. It's not a gate that opens to much."

"Cool."

Perhaps the main reason I find it difficult to compose what I'd have to call my apology five point oh or maybe six point oh is the absence of . . . what's the word I'm looking for?

Reciprocation, maybe?

By which I mean, who the fuck has ever fucking apologized to me?

Did my father apologize for deserting us when I was seven?

Did my mother apologize for subsequently marrying Cleon Teitelbaum, M.D.?

Did Coach Castellano apologize for cutting me from the varsity bowling squad?

Did Professor MacInnes ever apologize for falsely accusing me of plagiarism in my final paper for Medieval Thought and Belief, and thereby causing the university to rescind my scholarship? (She did, sort of, on her deathbed, much too late.)

What about Eddie Kim, my roommate, who slept with Violetta Mendoza while I was home on Christmas break?

What about Violetta, who, before she slept with Eddie, promised me that she would never sleep with Eddie?

What about Aunt Dolly, who refused to pay me—a broke kid who'd dropped out of college after he lost his scholarship—for painting her goddam house while she lay on a beach in Barbados? She said that I'd eaten up my fee with the lavish lunches and dinners I charged to her account at the gourmet delicatessen. Tell me, precisely how many smoked-salmon-and-caviar platters (never beluga, by the way) and filet-mignon hoagies equal a professional-grade sanding, assiduous application of primer, and two beautiful coats of semi-gloss paint on a rambling Victorian plus detached garage? Not so easy to deduce, is it? Maybe it's more complicated than some loathsome burst of snap self-righteousness can adjudicate.

What about Melissa, my ex, who, if you are one of those people who hold the decidedly not medieval but more modern belief that opening one's fly and micturating on an already of-

fended colleague's desk might be a sign of sickness, long ago forsook her vow to have and to hold me in sickness as in health, seeing how it's not the first time my behavior has hinted at unwellness, at least according to the confusing—and ever-shifting—mores of our times?

I mean, what about Melissa? Was it not she who actually uttered the words "you are a sick piece of shit who needs serious help," after that contretemps with the unquestionably sight-challenged Uber driver? (Nota bene: Melissa never even clocked the amused grin on the driver's face after I said, "Does your mother have any children who don't suffer from severe visual-spatial impairments, or did they all get crushed to death pushing you and your worthless garbage life out of the way of oncoming traffic?" *He* got it.) If I was indeed so sick, why didn't she continue to at least have, if not actually hold, me, as sworn before a majority-her-friends-and-family gathering?

Did my so-called life partner ever apologize for exiting my life?

Point is, I don't need her to apologize. I don't need anyone to apologize. Not even my mother, who, when I was eleven, took Cleon's side after he stumbled, plastered, into my room after midnight, shook me awake, and chewed me out for basically existing, as well as for stealing and breaking his brand-new transistor TV. Cleon's spittle flew



everywhere, and he proceeded to open his fly and urinate all over little old me and my Luke Skywalker sheets.

"When you mishandle my electronics," he bellowed, "you piss on me. So, back at you, turdball!"

My mother, God bless her, just dragged Cleon out of the room, scrubbed me down, and dried me off. She gave me a nice glass of warm milk and a piece of her famous banana bread. Cleon really loved me, she assured me,

and everything would be O.K. And it was O.K., as long as I locked my door and steered clear of my stepfather after, say, 9 P.M. Look, it's a tough world. It's no place for some hypersensitive formation of crystallized ice, that's for damn sure. When life hands you lemons, you've got to throw those citrusy yellow bad boys smack back into life's cretinous mug and say, "Keep your lemons, fuckface! I'm making orange juice!" That's what my father taught me before he joined the snake cult, and that's what I plan to impart to my child. This is why I support her campaign of terror against her classmates. It's also why context and nuance matter, now more than ever.

Still, don't get me wrong: I get it. I realize this is, as Beekman put it, a culminating incident, if not a hinge moment or inflection point, and it's certainly not the first time I have caused harm in the workspace. But you'll just have to trust that I really do understand, at this juncture, that there is no ironic way to throw an Aryan Brotherhood gang sign in the break nook. I also know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the Jews don't exercise total control over the banking industry. It's not Barclaysstein, after all. Or CitiFarb.

Cleon, of the Hebrew faith himself, barely had enough to retire on, even after years as a Mob doctor who once, my mother told me, did a hip replacement in a sterilized shipping container.

I want to do better. I have to do better.

•

Beekman stares at me before speaking.

"Snake cult?"

"I can elaborate on that if you like."

"Maybe not," Leffler says. "Although the shipping-container story is interesting."

"What exactly is this supposed to be?" Beekman says, shakes the paper in the air.

"My apology."

"Are you joking?"

"Not really."

"Just say you're joking, admit to us now it's a tone-deaf joke that's nearly as tone-deaf as your initial apology, and we'll give you one more chance."

"But not because you deserve it,"



Leffler says. "Only because . . . well, because of your longtime service."

"To honor the memory of Oates," Beekman says. "Rest in peace."

"Not that Oates is actually dead," Leffler says.

"Do you have any suggestions for the revision?" I say.

"The part where you say you'll do better," Beekman says. "Keep that. Scrap the rest."

"But you really have to nail it now," Leffler says. "Many here grow restless. It shocks them that we haven't fired you yet. The fact that we control their wages and access to health care is all that prevents total revolt."

"There's still time," Beekman says. "If not to actually catch it from behind, to at least signal its unreachability in a manner that's both perceivable to and emotionally resonant with others."

"My advice?" Leffler says. "Make it very, very fucking resonant."

•

Marco calls again.

"Yes, I'm still apologizing," I say.

"This isn't about that."

"Oh."

"Melissa is too upset to make this call, but she thinks it's best if Sophie stays with her exclusively for a time. Just to be clear, I'm speaking both as Melissa's brother slash Sophie's uncle and as someone who always liked you. Somewhat. Or at least found you entertaining, despite yourself. And though I am not speaking as Melissa's legal counsel, I can say that while Melissa's not ready to involve the courts, she has serious and, in my view, deeply valid questions about your parenting choices, especially in light of a series of attack videos Sophie has disseminated in her peer community."

"Thanks for the heads-up," I say.

"It's not a heads-up. It's an offer."

"I decline."

"Did you know I did some work with Krispy Kreme?"

"No," I say.

"They're a fine company," Marco says. "Have done well, obviously. But they once thought they could take on Dunkin'."

"I'm Krispy Kreme?"

"They readied themselves for a ferocious doughnut war. And, in my humble opinion, they had the superior doughnut product. But do you know what they didn't understand?"

"That it was really a beverage war?"

"Bingo."

"I read that article, too, Marco."

"It's not an article. It's an allegory."

"O.K."

"Also, just between the two of us, I've given it some more thought, and I really think you should apologize. I mean, you exposed yourself and whizzed on somebody's goddam desk."

"Just dribbled on it, really," I say.

"Why is this even a conversation?"

Marco says. "Which, full disclosure, is, verbatim, what I just tweeted out."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"I just tweeted out, 'he whizzed on somebody's desk. why is this even a conversation?' With some emojis after it."

"But I thought you said it was between the two of us."

"Wait," Marco says. "What?"

•

"Snake cult" was what my mother and Cleon called it—derisively, I am sure.

We are sometimes some of us called away, if only temporarily, to more spiritual pursuits. When I was a kid, the oldest daughter of the family next door, Becky Coldtree, joined a group of neo-Nestorians in Piscataway. Later she earned a big rep in pediatric nephrology. Our journeys are mysteries.

My father's journey is the greatest mystery.

He took me onto his lap before he left us, stroked the back of my neck as you would a kitten.

"Little boy," he said. "My sweet little boy. I wish I could take you with me. But it wouldn't be fair to your mother. Or you. And Meister Herpo would not approve. But remember what I told you about lemons, O.K.?"

"O.K.," I said.

I never heard from him again. I've steered clear of lemons. Oranges, too. I'm a banana man.

Still, I forgive my father.

Will any among you summon the bravery to forgive me? Why must we judge one another by our worst acts? (Well, one might argue, if you murder

somebody you should be judged by your worst act, and this I will concede, but leaving a harmless, pale slick on a slab of office polymer, or voicing a phrase mostly for the felicity of its music, and certainly not with foreknowledge of its very loose association with aspects of our hemisphere's dark past, is not tantamount to murder. Not unless murder itself has been abolished, and much lesser crimes have roared up the ladder of reproach.)

Why not judge me by my better acts? Who remembered that Farooq was allergic to coconut when we ordered his birthday cake? Who covered for Rona when she won tickets to the circus and wanted to take her kids during a working Saturday? Who spent weeks training his newest colleague, showing the proverbial ropes to a person hired by design to be his immediate superior upon completion of said training? Couldn't one even argue that my supposedly hurtful comment, allegedly rendered even more destructive by our power differential, was in fact merely a teasing acknowledgment that this very differential was about to be reversed?

Did I not, at any rate, conduct the training with a smile, or, at the very least, a polite rictus on my face?

And let me reiterate: even if I experienced some modicum of uncertainty about the inappropriateness of my language, I am still profoundly sorry it hurt my colleague's feelings, and my remorse for whipping out Ol' Captain One-Eye, a.k.a. the Worm That Wowed Pittsburgh, and irrigating a team member's work surface is nothing if not Grand Canyonesque. But maybe, just maybe, we should leave off right there. Perhaps now, in fact, is not the time for punishment at all but for kindness, grace, and a company-wide regeneration rooted in our common humanity and shared goals. As for me, I stand here, wiser, humbler, and say to my aggrieved colleagues: I can do better, and I will do better, and I hope all of you smug, hypocritical, witch-hunting weasels calling for my head on a pike will do better, too. ♦

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Sam Lipsyte on the madness of workplaces.



# THE CRITICS



BARON WOLMAN / GETTY

POP MUSIC

## SPACE JAMS

*The visionary sounds of Sun Ra.*

BY HUA HSU

When the aliens came for Sun Ra, they explained that he had been selected for his “perfect discipline.” Not every human was fit for space travel, but he, with his expert control over his mind and body, could survive the journey. According to Ra, this encounter happened in the nineteen-thirties, when he was enrolled in a teachers’-training

course at a college in Huntsville, Alabama. The aliens, who had little antennas growing above their eyes and on their ears, recognized in Ra a kindred spirit. They beamed him to Saturn and told him that a more meaningful path than teaching awaited him. They shared knowledge with him that freed him from the limits of the human imagina-

tion. They instructed him to wait until life on Earth seemed most hopeless; then he could finally speak, imparting to the world the “equations” for transcending human reality.

This instruction guided Ra for the rest of his life as a musician and a thinker. By the fifties, the signs of hopelessness were everywhere: racism, the threat of

*“The impossible attracts me,” Ra said, “because everything possible has been done and the world didn’t change.”*



nuclear war, social movements that sought political freedom but not cosmic enlightenment. In response, during the next four decades—until his death, in 1993—Ra released more than a hundred albums of visionary jazz. Some consisted of anarchic, noisy “space music.” Others featured lush, whimsical takes on Gershwin or Disney classics. All were intended as dance music, even if few people knew the steps.

Ra was born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1914, to a supportive, religious family. He was named after Black Herman, a magician who claimed to be from the “dark jungles of Africa” and who infused his death-defying escape acts with hoodoo mysticism. Early on, Ra showed a prodigious talent for piano playing and music composition. After his purported alien visitation, he left college and eventually moved to Chicago, where he played in strip clubs, accompanied local blues singers, and found a place in a big band.

During Ra’s childhood, archeologists had discovered the intact tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun. The news inspired many African Americans to draw pride from the Egyptian roots of human civilization. Chicago exposed Ra to new interpretations of Scripture by Black Muslims and Black Israelites, as well as to suppressed histories of Black struggle and works of science fiction. These influences soon permeated his playing. In 1952, he changed his name to Le Sony’r Ra—Sun Ra for short—after the Egyptian god of the sun. On Chicago’s South Side, he circulated mimeographed broadsheets with titles like “THE BIBLE WAS NOT WRITTEN FOR NEGROES!!!!!!”

Ra formed a band, later known as the Arkestra, which featured the saxophonists Marshall Allen, John Gilmore, and Pat Patrick. Rather than employing tight swings and ostentatious solos, they played in a ragged, exploratory style, with squiggles of electronic keyboard and off-kilter horns. In the early sixties, Ra and his bandmates moved to New York, and became known for wearing elaborate, colorful costumes that felt both ancient and futuristic.

In his album notes and interviews, Ra began sketching out an “Astro-Black mythology,” a way of aligning the history of ancient Egypt with a vision of a future human exodus “beyond the stars.”

The specifics of Ra’s vision remained hazy, but he seemed to believe that the traumas of history—most notably of American slavery—had made life on Earth untenable. Humanity needed to break from it and travel to a technological paradise light-years away. “It’s after the end of the world / Don’t you know that yet?” the singer June Tyson asks in the 1974 film “Space Is the Place.” Ra referred to his teachings as “myths”—they were stories about the future, meant to guide us.

“The impossible attracts me,” he later explained, “because everything possible has been done and the world didn’t change.” He gave instruments new names, like the “space-dimension mellophone,” the “cosmic tone organ,” and the “sun-harp.” One band member remembered that, if you played something wrong, everyone else had to follow along, incorporating the mistake into the song. For Ra, the Arkestra weren’t musicians at all; they were “tone scientists.” A 1967 album is titled “Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy.”

In 1968, Sun Ra and his bandmates moved into a house in Philadelphia. The group’s communal ethos is a focus of “Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise,” a 1980 film by Robert Mugge. For all his seeming eccentricity, Ra wasn’t a free spirit in his personal life. He had an ascetic vision, supposedly abstaining from alcohol, drugs, sex, even sleep. He demanded that his band be available for practice at any hour of the day. Yet his mischievous side—he once referred to himself as “Earth’s jester”—also comes across in the film. At one point, he offers a riddle about his true identity: “Some call me Mr. Ra. Others call me Mr. Re. You can call me Mr. Mystery.” In one practice session, Tyson sings a sputtering, raucous song called “Astro Black,” and the band members, who look as if they’re dressed for at least three different outer-space movies, smile at the racket.

The British record label Strut recently reissued “Lanquidity,” an album originally released in 1978. It is one of the best albums that the group recorded during its Philadelphia years, when it had settled into a style that toggled between enchanted, ethereal visions of deep space and woozy, demented takes on the jazz of the thirties and forties. The bandmates shielded themselves from the whims of the day, but the track “Where Pathways

Meet” rests on a surprisingly sturdy funk groove, a disco crossover flecked with the occasional blast of free-jazz soloing. The new edition of “Lanquidity” includes the original mix of the album, copies of which were available only at the group’s live performances. The minor differences between the versions are most obvious on the quieter numbers. Ra earned his stripes playing the blues, but, in the seventies and eighties, his recordings took on a more pensive quality. The track “There Are Other Worlds (They Have Not Told You Of)” drags along, carried by chants and a funereal bass line. Ra’s synthesizer sounds as if he were trying to evoke a shiver. Listen closely and you hear whispers: “There are other worlds they haven’t told you about” repeated by different voices, as though passing a secret. And then: “They wish to speak to you.”

In 1969, *Esquire* canvassed a range of celebrities, including Muhammad Ali, Ayn Rand, and Leonard Nimoy, for suggestions about what Neil Armstrong should say as he set foot on the moon. Most people provided grave warnings or made jokes. Sun Ra contributed a poem: “Reality has touched against myth / Humanity can move to achieve the impossible / Because when you’ve achieved one impossible others / Come together to be with their brother, the first impossible / Borrowed from the rim of the myth / Happy Space Age to you . . .” Space exploration inspired Ra; it seemed to be proof that humanity was destined to harness its technological potential.

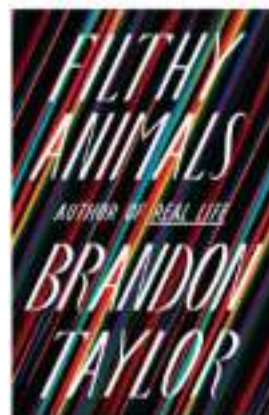
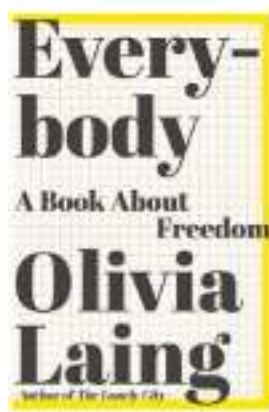
Ra was far from obscure: in the late sixties, he graced the cover of *Rolling Stone*. In the seventies, he taught at Berkeley, performed on “Saturday Night Live,” and toured around the world. But by the time “Lanquidity” was released Ra was becoming less optimistic about how much listeners had learned from his work. He was often treated as an eccentric, and his theatrical dress frequently overshadowed his prowess as a composer. In a lecture that he delivered in New York, he reiterated his lack of interest in making music about “Earth things.” He riffed on Iran, the threat of nuclear warfare, the fact that young people seemed uninterested in cosmic salvation. “For a long time, the world has dwelt on faith, beliefs, possibly dreams, and the truth. And the kind of world



you've got today is based on those particular things. How do you like it?"

We are always rediscovering Sun Ra—though he would probably prefer that we spend our time musing on the future rather than on the past. In 2020, Strut released a compilation called "Egypt 1971" that explored the music Ra recorded while touring there. Last spring, Duke University republished John Szwed's definitive 1997 biography, "Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra." Last December, the first in a series of "Sun Ra Research" films was released. It was the culmination of decades of work by two obsessive fans, Peter and John Hinds, who self-published a Ra-centric zine in the nineties. The film is an absorbing collage of Arkestra performances interspersed with long, meandering interviews, and footage of Ra doing mundane things like answering the phone or checking into a hotel. The Arkestra, which is now led by Ra's protégé Marshall Allen, who is ninety-seven, still goes on tour. Last year, the group released a set of new recordings of Arkestra classics, titled "Swirling." During the pandemic, Allen and the Arkestra streamed a benefit concert hosted by Total Luxury Spa, a Black-owned streetwear brand in Los Angeles, which has been influenced by Ra's ideas and iconography.

Each time Ra is rediscovered, his reception reflects what his listeners crave. When I was first introduced to Ra, in the early nineties, he was presented as an oddball with a good backstory—a precursor to the "alternative" music of the day. Today, in the midst of overlapping global crises, Ra asks us to believe in the impossible. This spring, the Chicago gallery and publisher Corbett vs. Dempsey reproduced a series of Sun Ra poetry booklets: "Jazz by Sun Ra," "Jazz in Silhouette," and "The Immeasurable Equation." As with his fifties broadsheets, these writings capture a rawness and directness distinct from his experimental music. In one poem, he implores Black youth to never feel unloved: "I am your unknown friend." He is always there, in the past and in the future, ready to be found by his listeners. In another booklet, originally published in 1957, he explains that his music is, at root, about "happiness." Maybe people don't recognize these new forms of joy quite yet. But, he writes, "eventually I will succeed." ♦



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Everybody**, by Olivia Laing (Norton). In this "book about freedom," a novelist and critic presents an expansive exploration of topics such as sexual liberation, feminism, illness, incarceration, exile, gay and trans rights, and the nature of protest. Drawing consistently surprising corollaries from history and art, Laing vaults from subject to subject. She returns repeatedly to her own experiences (including as a nonbinary person) and to the life of the radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, whose career began with groundbreaking work on bodily autonomy and sexual politics but ended in quackery, isolation, and a prison sentence. Although Laing cannot fully explain the "weird border between self and world" that fascinates her, her paths of inquiry are engrossing and illuminating.

**Geniuses at War**, by David A. Price (Knopf). Colossus, the first digital, electronic computer, was developed by British intelligence during the Second World War, to decipher encrypted messages between Hitler and his generals. This history places the famous achievements of the computer scientist Alan Turing alongside the work of his mentor Max Newman and of Tommy Flowers, the engineer who designed the machine. Price describes the complexity of the codes produced by Germany's cipher machines and recounts Colossus's triumph in obtaining military intelligence before the Normandy landings. Noting that Colossus marked the beginning of the digital age, Price observes that it was the product "not of impersonal forces but of the joining of extraordinary individuals within an extraordinary institution."

**Filthy Animals**, by Brandon Taylor (Riverhead). Asked to account for a recent suicide attempt, Lionel, the main character of this collection of linked stories, says, "You know how sometimes an animal will chew its arm off to get loose if it's desperate enough?" Lionel, a queer Black graduate student, gets pulled into a relationship with a bisexual dancer and the dancer's girlfriend. This narrative is interspersed with the stories of other characters, whose passivity threatens to give way to violence: an abused woman babysitting a child; a man rejected by his mother for being gay; a teen-ager caught in a web of casual cruelty, who wishes that "he could enter into another version of his life, one in which things have not gone quite as horribly awry."

**The Great Mistake**, by Jonathan Lee (Knopf). This historical novel is partly a procedural built around the murder, in 1903, of Andrew Haswell Green, a force behind the creation of Central Park and the New York Public Library. But Lee's true project, as he recounts Green's remarkable career, is to chart the shaping of the self by "the concert of barely connected moments that make up any life": an early homosexual encounter; Green's first job in New York, as a store clerk; his time in Trinidad supervising sugarcane workers; his friendship with Samuel Tilden, the future governor. The result is an immersive bildungsroman, whose fluid, regretful protagonist observes that "one's past was as much a work of imagination as the future."

## THE BIG REVEAL

*Are all short stories O. Henry stories?*

BY LOUIS MENAND



The story of the writer who called himself O. Henry could almost be an O. Henry story. The writer—his real name was William Sidney Porter—had a secret, and he spent most of his adult life trying to conceal it.

The pseudonym was part of that effort, but Porter also avoided being photographed, rarely gave interviews, and steered clear of situations where someone might pry into his past. He was not a recluse, but he did not like to be the center of attention. People found him affable, unpretentious, and somewhat inscrutable.

As a writer, Porter was identified with New York City, where more than a hun-

dred of his stories are set, but he was born in the Confederacy, in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1862, and he retained, as you can see in some of his stories, the racial prejudices of a white Southerner of his time.

His early life was unsettled. At nineteen, he was licensed as a pharmacist (his uncle's occupation), and his stories have occasional references to drugs and medications, many of which can look fictional to a layperson but are apparently accurate. Soon afterward, he moved to Texas and worked on a ranch, although he spent much of his time there reading. He later published a number of stories set in the West.

He met his future wife in Austin. It seems to have been love at first sight—something that happens more than once in O. Henry stories. And he began a lifelong practice of roaming the streets, hanging out in bars (he was a prodigious drinker, with a reputation for being able to handle his liquor), and observing life after dark. He liked to listen to people talk about themselves, and he used their stories as the basis for his fiction.

Porter was also a talented cartoonist and composed humorous verses, and he started up a weekly, called *The Rolling Stone*, as an outlet for his work. It did not prove to be a financially sustainable proposition.

Then disaster struck. After Porter and his wife had a daughter, he took a job as a teller in the First National Bank of Austin. In 1894, a federal bank examiner discovered a shortage of \$5,654 in the First National Bank's accounts, and accused Porter of embezzlement.

It was natural to assume that Porter had borrowed money from the till to keep his struggling magazine out of debt, intending to pay it back. That may be true, but what really happened is unclear. The shortfall could have been a matter of sloppy bookkeeping, or it could be that others were in on the pilfering. On the few occasions that Porter is reported to have alluded to the episode, he implied that he was covering for someone else, but he never said who it was. The bank was happy to settle, and a grand jury refused to issue an indictment. But the federal examiner was zealous. A second grand jury was convened, and this time Porter was indicted.

Just before his trial was scheduled to start, in the summer of 1896, he fled to Honduras, leaving his wife and his six-year-old daughter behind. Honduras was an attractive haven for people in Porter's situation, because it did not have an extradition treaty with the United States. Porter later wrote several linked stories set in a "banana republic" (a term he seems to have coined). But when he learned that his wife was ill he returned to be with her, and to stand trial. (She died, of tuberculosis, in 1897, at the age of twenty-nine.)

He declined to speak in his own defense and was sentenced to five years in

*The writer (seen here in a picture from the eighteen-eighties) hid his own life story.*



prison. And that is the secret he spent the rest of his life trying to hide—even from his daughter. In an O. Henry story, the secret would be the climactic reveal.

In prison, Porter wrote fourteen stories and began using O. Henry as a pen name. (He had other aliases, but after 1903 he signed everything “O. Henry.”) He was released, with time off for good behavior, in 1901, and moved first to Pittsburgh, where his daughter was living, and then, in 1902, to New York City, a place he had never visited, but where his prospects as a writer were better because he would be closer to his editors.

In New York, he began producing at an astonishing rate. He contracted to write a story a week for the *Sunday World*, and he continued to write for magazines. In 1904 alone, he published sixty-six stories. He began bringing out collections, notably, in 1906, “The Four Million,” which contains some of his most famous work: “The Gift of the Magi,” “The Cop and the Anthem,” “An Unfinished Story,” and “The Furnished Room.”

Porter’s daughter remained in Pittsburgh, and although he wrote to her regularly and affectionately, they rarely saw each other. His life style made living with a dependent impossible. He kept irregular hours, and his biographer Richard O’Connor says that he was a “womanizer.” As Porter had done since his Austin days, he spent his evenings talking to people he met in restaurants and bars.

Financially, he led the hand-to-mouth existence of most full-time writers, even very successful ones. You can’t live off pieces you’ve already been paid for. You always have to be producing a new piece, and you’re always afraid that it won’t be as good as your last piece. Despite his rate of production, Porter found writing stressful and had trouble with deadlines. And he was frank about the fact that he wrote for the income. When he started getting paid more for his stories, he wrote fewer of them.

Not that he saved up the money. He was never prudent. He gave a lot away, and there is some evidence that he was blackmailed by a woman who knew his secret. Even after he had become famous and his work was in constant

demand, he was perpetually pleading with his editors to advance him funds against his next story. He received no royalties from a hit Broadway play based on a character in one of his stories (Jimmy Valentine). A series of popular Hollywood movies were based on another character he had created, the Cisco Kid, but they were made after he died. He tried his hand at a musical, and he contracted to write a novel, but those projects went nowhere. He was a short-story writer. That was what he was good at.

In 1907, he married a woman he had known from his childhood in Greensboro, but his health had been deteriorating, largely because of the drinking. Suffering from cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, and a dilated heart, he died in 1910. He was forty-seven. He was begging his editor for a fresh advance right up to the end.

Ben Yagoda, the editor of the new Library of America volume “O. Henry: 101 Stories,” says that Porter published hundreds of short stories, along with ephemera that appeared in *The Rolling Stone* and the *Houston Post*, where he worked as a reporter during some of his Texas years. The best way to consider the stories as an oeuvre, I think, is on the model of the comic strip—which is, effectively, what they were when they appeared once a week in the *Sunday World*. In some weeks, your favorite comic strip is more entertaining than it is in others, but you always read it, because you know what you’re going to get. The same is true of O. Henry stories. Porter had a formula; he had a set of character types; and he had a distinctive verbal palette.

The palette is what the critic H. L. Mencken, who disliked O. Henry’s writing, called “ornate Broadwayese,” a style that is part Damon Runyon (the writer whose stories are the basis for the musical “Guys and Dolls”) and part S. J. Perelman—streetwise observations delivered in a comically overcooked or circumlocutionary manner.

So you get this kind of thing, in a description of the scene around a murdered man:

A doctor was testing him for the immortal ingredient. His decision was that it was conspicuous by its absence.

Or this, about a grifter who makes his living selling bogus products and then skipping town:

He is an incorporated, uncapitalized, unlimited asylum for the reception of the restless and unwise dollars of his fellowmen.

O. Henry’s characters, from whatever walk of life, often talk in this mode of high facetiousness:

“The feminine nature and similitude,” says I, “is as plain to my sight as the Rocky Mountains is to a blue-eyed burro. I’m onto all their little side-steps and punctual discrepancies.”

“I never exactly heard sour milk dropping out of a balloon on the bottom of a tin pan, but I have an idea it would be music of the spears compared to this attenuated stream of asphyxiated thought that emanates out of your organs of conversation.”

And Porter liked arcane words—“vespertine,” “mucilaginous,” “caoutchouc”—and malapropisms:

“He wants his name, maybe, to go thundering down the coroners of time.”

“I follows, like Delilah when she set the Philip Steins onto Samson.”

This style belongs to a comic tradition that includes George Herriman’s strip “Krazy Kat” (which started appearing in the *New York Evening Journal* in 1913) and, later on, the movies of W. C. Fields. There is a lot of it in Dickens (Mr. Micawber, for instance), whom Porter idolized. O. Henry’s readers must have found it droll. Still, a little goes a long way.

“The plot of nearly all the good stories in the world is concerned with shorts who were unable to cover,” Porter wrote in one of his best-known works, “The Third Ingredient,” and the remark is in many ways the key to his writing. For he was himself such a person. Whether he filched from the First National Bank of Austin or took the fall to protect others, he had once made a bet that he could not cover.

The characters in O. Henry stories usually find themselves in similar predicaments. The woman in “The Third Ingredient” lacks an onion for her stew and the means to purchase one. In “The Gift of the Magi,” which must be the most widely anthologized O. Henry story, an impecunious young husband sells his gold watch in order to buy an expensive set of combs as a

Christmas gift for his wife, only to find that she has cut off and sold her beautiful hair in order to buy him a fob chain for his watch.

That story has an easy moral (“It’s the thought that counts”), as do all the stories Porter published. Virtue in O. Henry’s world is generally rewarded, and virtue is found mainly among ordinary people, particularly working women, for whom Porter had a soft spot, and people who live outside the law, like small-time crooks, tramps, and other types keen to avoid the attention of the cops.

For O. Henry, it’s the men in suits—the bankers, millionaires, and politicians—who are the true grifters, pretending not to be the exploiters of working men and women that they truly are. His heart is with the marginalized and the downtrodden. Porter believed that their lives had genuine human interest, and, as a short-story writer, he is on their side.

His own money troubles stemmed in part from his generosity to people he met who were short of funds, and, as successful as he became, he always chose to identify with them. The title of the collection “The Four Million” alludes to a list of four hundred socially prominent residents of the city which had been published in the *New York Times*. Four million was the city’s population at the time. Those were O. Henry’s subjects. They provided his stock of character types.

The “common man” spirit of the stories may explain their appeal to readers of the popular press in the period during which Porter was writing, a time of mass immigration to cities like New York. It may also account for the fact that he was a favorite writer of both William James, the pragmatist philosopher who hated corporate bigness, and John Reed, the American journalist who joined the Bolshevik Revolution. It surely accounts for his popularity in the Kremlin. O’Connor says that, between 1920 and 1945, 1.4 million copies of the writer’s books were published in the Soviet Union. Even in 1953, the final year of Stalin’s dictatorship, the Soviets printed almost a quarter of a million O. Henry books. The thing that doubtless even Russian readers really enjoyed in an O. Henry

story, though, was not the proletarian heroes but the punch line, the twist, the reveal—what became known as the “O. Henry ending.”

Porter distinguished between the story and the plot. He got his stories mainly from people he met—out West, on Broadway and the Bowery, even in prison. But he invented his plots. He took probable situations and gave them improbable outcomes.

The twist, usually a neat pirouette at the very end, annoyed critics like Mencken, who complained about O. Henry’s “variety show smartness.” And there is something gimmicky about the endings. But Porter, although he pretended to regard himself as a hack, was well read, and a self-conscious writer. He understood the literary form he was working in.

Porter was writing in a golden age for the short story which starts with Edgar Allan Poe and includes Anton Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, and Charles Chesnutt. He was a contemporary of two wildly popular story writers, Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) and Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), and his own work can be classed with the subgenres they worked in: the detective story and the ghost story, both of which are gimmicky, in the sense that they are deliberately crafted to startle and surprise. You know what you’re getting when you read a Sherlock Holmes story.

The near-contemporary whose work most resembles Porter’s is the Scottish writer H. H. Munro (1870–1916), also universally known by a pen name, Saki. Munro’s characters are drawn from the upper classes, and his prose is droll in the British way—wry and epigrammatic. He is a much defter comic writer than Porter. But he also specialized in short stories—some, like the classic “The Open Window,” very short—with surprise endings.

If you think about the experience of reading a short story, you can feel, even in the case of stories by “literary” writers like Chekhov or Hemingway, that the ending is the money note of the form, the high C of the composition. And the pleasure it gives us is, in some way, sensory. It produces a brief thrill, a frisson—sometimes (as with many Kipling sto-

ries) a sense of mystery (“What really happened?”), sometimes (as with ghost stories) a little shiver of horror, sometimes (as with detective stories) a satisfying “Aha!”

Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote both detective stories and ghost stories, called this sensation the “effect,” and he thought that producing it was the purpose of all short-form writing, including poetry. “A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale,” he wrote in 1842. “If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents . . . as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect.”

Short stories are more like poems than like novels. Novelists put stuff in, because they are trying to represent a world. Story writers, as Poe implied, leave stuff out. They are not trying to represent a world. They are trying to express a single, intangible thing. The story writer begins with an idea about what readers will feel when they finish reading, just as a lyric poet starts with a nonverbal state of mind and then constructs a verbal artifact that evokes it. The endings of modern short stories tend to be oblique, but they, too, are structured for an effect, frequently of pathos.

Porter was perfectly aware that he was a writer of popular confections. He continually downplayed the literary merits of his work, saying that he couldn’t understand why anyone would take it seriously. But there are indications that he had higher aspirations as a writer.

His last story idea was for *The Cosmopolitan*. Titled “The Dream,” it was about a man who has gone down the wrong road—who dreamed the wrong dream. Porter intended the story to be different from his customary product. “I want to show the public,” he explained, “that I can write something new—new for me, I mean—a story without slang, a straightforward dramatic plot treated in a way that will come nearer my idea of real story-writing.” We don’t know how that turned out, because the story, like the career, was unfinished. ♦



## REACH FOR THE STARS

*The secret Hollywood of “You Must Remember This.”*

BY MARGARET TALBOT



How do you tell the truth about Hollywood, the greatest fantasy-making machine the world has ever known? One approach is to assume that the glamorous surfaces conceal something sordid, which means that exposing it will be titillating, and also sort of righteous: illusions are punctured, the rich and famous taken down a peg, and so on. Kenneth Anger's compendium of formative celebrity scandals, “Hollywood Babylon,” first published in the United States in 1965, took that tack, as do tabloids covering Hollywood gossip. One problem with this style of revelation—in addition to its frequent misogyny and its breezy violation of pri-

vacy—is that the details are often wrong, fact checking not being a key value for the “Hollywood Babylon” school. At the other end of the spectrum, academic film scholars offer a different promise: by looking at systems of representation, they hope to reveal structural truths about how movies create meaning. Fair enough, but film studies won't tell us what Marilyn Monroe said at a party. Then, there's the storytelling approach, practiced by those who try to locate the truth without sniffing too disapprovingly at the dish. Today, perhaps nobody works that line with as much rigor and spellcraft as Karina Longworth, the creator, writer, and host of the Holly-

wood-history podcast “You Must Remember This.”

Longworth started the series in 2014, during podcasting's adolescence. By her own account, she was less interested in the medium itself than in a chance to tell “the secret and/or forgotten histories of Hollywood's first century,” in a format more likely to attract an audience than most books about Golden Age Hollywood do. (In 2018, Longworth did publish a book, “Seduction: Sex, Lies, and Stardom in Howard Hughes's Hollywood,” but she remains better known for the podcast.) In the course of the show's run, she's produced seasons on “Dead Blondes” (Jean Harlow, Veronica Lake, Monroe), the Hollywood blacklist, and M-G-M's stable of stars. One season focussed on Charles Manson's bizarre adventures trying to make it as a rock musician in L.A., during which he fell in with sun-kissed celebs like Dennis Wilson, the drummer for the Beach Boys. In another, Longworth spent nineteen episodes fact-checking “Hollywood Babylon,” scandal by lurid scandal. Kenneth Anger was a pioneering, queer underground filmmaker, but in his muckraking mode he could be casually vicious, and frequently mistaken. Longworth found that the Mexican-American actress Lupe Vélez did fatally overdose while pregnant, possibly with Gary Cooper's baby, but she did not die, as Anger claims, with her head in the toilet, vomiting up a Mexican meal. The former silent-screen heartthrob Ramon Novarro was indeed killed, in 1968, by a couple of hustlers he brought to his Laurel Canyon home, but there was no Art Deco dildo involved in the grisly murder. And Clara Bow, the original It Girl, did not have sex with the entire U.S.C. football team—full stop.

Longworth's newest season, which began in May, chronicles the lives of the influential Hollywood gossip columnists Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. It's a particularly rich subject for Longworth, since it's concerned with how some of the stories she's investigated in the past were manufactured, manipulated, or suppressed in the first place. Hopper and Parsons “became rich and famous in a world of men,” Longworth says in the first episode, “by selling regular people the illusion that they were taking them behind the scenes, while really they were

*In its latest season, the show studies the creation of the modern gossip industry.*



reinforcing a system that relied on audiences having no idea how movies were really made or what stars were really like.” Longworth, too, implicitly promises to take us behind the scenes, while relying on the knowledge that many of her listeners—sophisticated consumers of celebrity gossip, simply by virtue of living in the world as it is—will be skeptical of that very idea.

Longworth, forty, is a former film critic for *LA Weekly*. She is married to the director Rian Johnson, who made the movies “Knives Out” and “Star Wars: The Last Jedi.” On “You Must Remember This,” her M.O. is to take a story, research widely, sift meticulously through the known and rumored versions of events, and reassemble them into a persuasive narrative. Many of these building blocks can be found in books, which Longworth cites in her show notes, and less often in the podcast itself. But she puts them together in a way that strikes you as reliable—partly because she’s transparent about what can’t be known, and partly because she’s nearly as concerned with why we *think* we know something as she is with the truth itself.

Why, for instance, do certain Hollywood legends stick even when they can easily be debunked? Sometimes the culprits are racism, sexism, or campaigns by studios to spin a story. But the reasons can also involve a subconscious, affective attachment to specific archetypes and myths. In her episode on Jean Harlow, Longworth refutes a persistent rumor that the platinum-blond actress, who died at twenty-six, was killed by her weekly hair bleaching. That probably *is* what caused her hair to fall out in clumps—after all, her formula was a mixture of peroxide, ammonia, Clorox bleach, and Lux soap flakes—but Harlow most likely died of kidney disease, which she’d suffered from since childhood. The innuendo about Harlow’s death endured, Longworth says, because “people who love Hollywood love stories about how the things Hollywood people do to become stars end up destroying them.” In her telling, the most salacious or conspiratorial version of Hollywood gossip is often the least likely to be true, but the reasons that people believe it are almost always worth exploring.

Gleeful revisionism is not Longworth’s

style, either. If someone has been thrown under the bus by previous chroniclers of movie history, she will pull her out, dust her off, and send her on her way—respectful but seldom besotted. If there’s more credit to be handed out, she’ll do that, but she won’t get carried away with redemptive zeal. In one of her best seasons, Longworth reconstructed the life of Polly Platt, an art director, producer, talent whisperer, and behind-the-scenes maverick who, though beloved in Hollywood, never garnered much recognition in the wider world. Platt started her career in the late nineteen-sixties, collaborating closely with her then husband, the director Peter Bogdanovich, on his first and best films, including “The Last Picture Show” and “Paper Moon.” (On the set of the former movie, Bogdanovich began an affair with the ingénue Cybill Shepherd, and left his marriage. In the meantime, Platt, who was doing the hair, makeup, and production design, continued working with Shepherd, insuring that she would look as desirable and luminous as the movie, and Platt’s husband, needed her to be.)

The title of the Platt season calls her an “invisible woman,” but the argument Longworth weaves in is subtler. Platt went on to make major contributions to some of the biggest successes in seventies and eighties Hollywood: “Pretty Baby,” “Terms of Endearment,” “Broadcast News.” She mentored the director Cameron Crowe, helped launch the ca-



reer of Wes Anderson, and introduced the cartoonist Matt Groening to James L. Brooks, thus planting the seed for “The Simpsons.” If Platt never became quite as famous as she could have been, it’s probably because she never directed a film. And if *that* was because it was so hard for women to get hired, it was also, Longworth suggests, because Platt got in her own way—she had a chronic drinking problem, and backed off at least one opportunity to direct, perhaps because

she had paralyzingly high expectations for herself. Besides, as Longworth reminds us, it’s only if you subscribe to the purest auteur theory—which attributes cinematic achievement almost entirely to the genius of the director—that Platt’s remarkable career can be dismissed.

Complicating the narrative without killing the vibe can be tricky. People who love Golden Age Hollywood really love it. They—and by “they” I mostly mean “we”—don’t want to see it fetishized in some unsavory way, but they don’t want to see it trashed, either. We like to summon up the shimmering shades of John Garfield or Joan Crawford when we sip our Martinis at Musso and Frank. We know the pitfalls of nostalgia, but we don’t want to lose the pleasures that old movies afford us. There are times, listening to “You Must Remember This,” when I miss a certain kind of goofball enthusiasm—something like the joy of settling in for the night when you discover that your hotel’s cable includes TCM, or the mock-heroic debate you get into with the nerdy cinéaste in the popcorn line. Although Longworth will occasionally offer a lyrical aside about an actor’s charisma, or urge listeners to watch an obscure movie that she loves, the podcast generally avoids effusiveness.

But Longworth does set a mood—a little haunted, a little seductive, a little old-fashioned. As podcasts go, “You Must Remember This” has few bells and whistles. It’s basically just Longworth talking, or, actually, reading a written piece on the subject at hand. She enunciates with care, with some faint, period-specific musical cues behind her. (Actors speak some of the quotes from her subjects; this season, Julie Klausner, as Parsons, and Cole Escola, as Hopper, make particularly persuasive *grandes dames*.) The introduction uses Dooley Wilson singing “You must remember this . . .” in an echoey, distorted setting; the phrase, taken from the “Casablanca” theme, seems to float to us from across the sea. “Join us, won’t you?” Longworth asks, and off we go, in our little rowboats, borne ceaselessly back into the past and all that.

Hopper and Parsons have been written about before—and we’ve seen versions of them played by Helen Mirren and Tilda Swinton, in “Trumbo” and



"Hail, Caesar!" Both were from small-town, middle-class America, and both transformed themselves into capable professionals when the movie industry was new and marginal enough to make room for ambitious women. (Parsons was a script editor in the early years of silent film, Hopper an actress with a flair for extravagant hats.) But Longworth's take on them makes an especially strong case that Hollywood history is "inextricable," as she puts it, "from American history." As longtime Hollywood columnists for the Hearst syndicate and the Los Angeles *Times*, respectively, Parsons and Hopper essentially created the template for modern entertainment coverage, with its symbiotic, often corrupting relationships and the swapping of access for fulsome treatment. For decades, a good word in one of their columns was the syrup on a mogul's pancakes; a bad one meant a thundercloud over Burbank. Hopper, in particular, forged a style that was a precursor to a lot of online writing: as Longworth notes, she "captured the sound of a dishy, slightly ditzy friend who always had a story to tell and always seemed to walk into a room with that story in medias res."

Both women coöperated extensively with powerful men—in Parsons's case, the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, and, in Hopper's, the F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover. Parsons saw herself as the protector of Hollywood's interests, which meant skillfully deflecting attention from the scandals that made the industry vulnerable to government censorship. (The same spirit saw studio heads voluntarily agree, in the nineteen-thirties, to abide by the Production Code, which limited the sex and violence that movies could show.) Hopper, the so-called Queen of Mean, was more politically conservative. She became a handmaiden of the blacklist, with a particular animus toward Charlie Chaplin, whom she helped Hoover to deport. She also indulged in anti-Semitism. During the production of "Gone with the Wind," Hopper became furious that British actors (Vivien Leigh and Leslie Howard) were being cast in the roles of Scarlett O'Hara and Ashley Wilkes. Deconstructing the politics of this peculiar crusade, Longworth notes that the movie's producer, David O. Selznick, wanted to promote "British-



*"Son, one day two hundred square feet of this city could be yours to rent."*

American relationships and mutual sympathies," at a time when the America First crowd was warning against getting suckered by foreigners and Jews into fighting the Nazis. Hopper had it in for non-Americans and refugees—though she made an exception for Hitler's beloved propagandist, Leni Riefenstahl, whose 1938 visit to Hollywood (three years after Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will") she defended. (Hopper found her "perfectly charming.")

Many of the stories that Longworth tells are not about what Hopper and Parsons wrote but about what they agreed to hide—gay relationships, out-of-wedlock births, all manner of chaos in the lives of stars. Often, these omissions were made in exchange for other, less juicy scoops, or for reasons of narrow self-interest. In the late twenties, Hearst worried about the advent of sound movies because his mistress, the silent-film star Marion Davies, had a stammer; in the papers, Parsons, who had millions of readers, dutifully cast doubt on the whole idea of talkies. It's partly because the studio system was so good, for so long, at this sort of subter-

fuge that Longworth can claim to be unveiling "secret" history.

In the end, "You Must Remember This" succeeds because it reveals more of the truth—or at least more of what happened, refracted through what we now believe about gender, race, and the machinations of Hollywood—than, say, Hopper or Parsons did. But some myths are left untouched. When Hollywood tells stories about itself, they tend toward the tragic—"A Star Is Born," "Sunset Boulevard"—and historians like Longworth seem drawn to that mood, too. It's not hard, after all, to find movieland lore about talent squandered, or white-hot ambition flaming out. Even the last episodes about the redoubtable Hopper and Parsons link fame to its eclipse. We get less than we might want about the actual work of filmmaking, and the joy that plenty of its practitioners seem to have taken in it over the years. In "You Must Remember This," the dreams that escape or ruin us tinge the atmosphere with melancholy. This, rather than any glittering, triumphant fantasy, seems to be the Hollywood ending that secretly entrances us. ♦



## FEEL THE POWER

*"Summer of Soul" and "F9: The Fast Saga."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Halfway through a heavy year, the best movie so far—the one most likely to ease the load and lift you up—is “Summer of Soul.” It’s a documentary, directed by Ahmir (Questlove) Thompson, a drummer, a d.j., a record producer, and a founder of the Roots, best known as the house band for Jimmy Fallon. You may have spotted Thompson behind the

unearthed and, in the hands of Thompson and his editor, Joshua L. Pearson, given new life and shape.

Among the skills required of any documentarian is a croupier’s cunning, and you have to be quick to notice the way in which Thompson, holding a full deck of footage, shuffles and deals. The festival consisted of six separate events, held

and so river-wide in its range of genres, that you want to laugh: Stevie Wonder, Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, Sly and the Family Stone, B. B. King, Hugh Masekela, David Ruffin—as thin as a barber’s pole, in a pink bow tie, with a falsetto sent from God—and Gladys Knight and the Pips. Especially the Pips. Their curvetting dance routines, around a single microphone, are a thing of calibrated beauty. (We long to know more, and Thompson, an ace of the educative cutaway, obliges by bringing in Knight. She credits the band’s choreographer, Cholly Atkins, who schooled them for ten or eleven hours a day.) Then, there’s the gleeful confession of Ray Barretto, bespectacled and busy at his drums: “In my blood I got Black—and white—red—Puerto Rican—Indian. I’m all messed up!”

To claim that the stage was occupied exclusively by people of color, though, would be inaccurate. For one thing, we see Lawrence bid welcome to the mayor of New York, John V. Lindsay, and introduce him as “our blue-eyed soul brother.” (For any viewers who are baffled by the film’s description of Lindsay as a “liberal Republican,” it should be explained that this refers to a once flourishing species, tough of hide but strangely peaceable in demeanor, that now verges on total extinction, like the Sumatran rhino.) Also visible, during a phenomenal set by Sly and the Family Stone, and easy to pick out in leopard-skin bell-bottoms, is Greg Errico. In the words of a man named Darryl Lewis, who was there that day, “The white guy is the drummer! You know, he’s not supposed to be able to *do* that.”

Lewis, a fount of geniality, is one of many attendees who are interviewed for the film. Their memories are, without exception, deliciously fresh. Dorinda Drake, who was nineteen at the time, says, “That’s the summer we became free”—pause—“of our parents.” Musa Jackson recalls the aroma in the park as if it were incense: “It smelled like Afro Sheen and chicken.” He was a little kid at the festival, though not so little that he didn’t lose his heart to Marilyn McCoo, a singer with the 5th Dimension. “I didn’t want to leave,” he says. Then, being a gentleman, he corrects himself: “I didn’t want to leave *her*.”

The 5th Dimension are seen perform-



Ahmir (Questlove) Thompson’s film celebrates a forgotten music festival.

decks at the Academy Awards, in April, where he seemed to be just about the only person, amid the scores of participants and the millions of television viewers, who was demonstrably having a good time. Now, adding one more arrow to his quiver, he has made his first film, in which pretty much *everybody* has a good time.

“Summer of Soul” is about the Harlem Cultural Festival of 1969. If you haven’t heard of it, that may be because it was—tellingly, if not deliberately—erased from public consciousness. The festival took place outdoors, in Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park), and it was filmed, under lighting generously provided by the sun. The tapes then sat in a basement, largely unseen, for half a century. At last, they have been

on a bunch of Sundays, beginning on June 29th and concluding on August 24th. But we glimpse that schedule only once, in passing, and the rest of the film makes no distinction between the different days, splicing the acts together and leaving us with the impression that the crowds that mustered in the park—some three hundred thousand strong, in total—were treated to one big rolling jubilee of sweet sounds. As far as I can tell, we get no clips from the final event, listed as “Miss Harlem Beauty Pageant and Local Talent.” Probably a wise move.

The festival’s producer, and the host of the proceedings, was Tony Lawrence, who is lauded in the film as “a hustler, in the best sense.” The outcome of his hustling was a lineup so absurdly rich,



ing their version of “Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In”—which is almost as merry as the lip-synched version at the end of “The 40-Year-Old Virgin” (2005)—wearing yellow, red, and orange. “You remember Creamsicles?” Jackson says, needing to nail the orange down. At the risk of blasphemy, I reckon that the clothes in “Summer of Soul” are very nearly as entertaining as the music. The cravats! The fringes! The hectic ruffs! Lawrence, as befits the master of ceremonies, sports an ever-changing cycle of outfits, including a white lace top with a carmine vest, and a shiny shirt that looks like an explosion in a host of golden daffodils. Imagine the envious glances he would have drawn at the court of Louis XIV.

“Summer of Soul” is one of those rare films from which you emerge saying, “My favorite part was that bit. No, that bit. Wait, how about *that* bit?” Personally, I’m torn between Stevie Wonder’s keyboard solo on “Shoo-Be-Doo-Be-Doo-Da Day,” in which he plays like a man possessed, and “Everyday People” from Sly and the Family Stone, with its captivating chorus—“Different strokes, for different folks, / And so on and so on and scooby-dooby-doo.” Has there ever been a neater précis of the Bill of Rights? And I haven’t even mentioned the beatific array of gospel performers, including Pops Staples and the Staple Singers, or the Edwin Hawkins Singers, vivid in lime green, swaying in unison to “Oh Happy Day.”

But something else is happening here. There’s no lack of great concert movies, so how to account for the urgent thrill of this one? Because of all the unhappy days. Because the whole of the Harlem

Cultural Festival was, as someone remarks of Nina Simone’s imperious set, “like a rose coming through cement.” Because “Summer of Soul” has a subtitle that presents its political credentials: “Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised.” The buzz of the occasion (even as the end credits die, you hear the hum of the throng) arose against a backdrop of profound unrest, in the African-American community above all. A year earlier, on April 4, 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Harlem had suffered riots and hours of looting, and, as Darryl Lewis suggests, “New York was trying not to have a repeat of that, in ’69.” Hence the brief but vital images of white policemen, standing calmly in the midst of Black festival-goers, and neither making trouble nor seeking to rein it in. Who knows, maybe they felt the groove inside.

What we are witnessing, in short, is not a state of bliss but a precious, precarious interlude of release and relief, before the pressures of an unequal society kicked back in. History chose to commemorate Woodstock, which unfolded a hundred miles or so away, in the heat of the same summer. But history, as so often, went to the wrong gig.

Clearly inspired by Montaigne, who added to his “Essays” in the course of many years, the makers of the “Fast & Furious” franchise have deemed it behooven, by God’s grace, to enlarge upon that which they have wrought. The first movie, “The Fast and the Furious,” came out in 2001, and scholars have focussed on its emblematic scene, in which Vin Diesel’s character took his seat *under* the hood of a hot rod, in the space where

an engine would normally be. No fit was ever snugger. Thenceforth, we could no longer tell where the motor ended and the man began, and, for twenty years, that exquisite confusion has endured.

The character’s name is Dom Toretto. (“Dom,” alas, is an abbreviated “Dominic,” rather than an ecclesiastical honorific.) He is back for “F9: The Fast Saga,” the ninth chapter of this multitudinous epic, joined by a selection of family members. In fiery flashback, we meet his father, Jack (J. D. Pardo). In the present, we have Dom’s sister, Mia (Jordana Brewster), and, new to the game, his naughty brother, Jakob (John Cena). The tiniest Toretto is Brian (Isaac and Immanuel Holtane), Dom’s son, whom he tucks into bed at the start of the film, neglects, and then retrieves more than two hours later. Where’s the sitter? Is there a Grandma Toretto somewhere, with her Prius and her knitting?

The director is Justin Lin. The stunts have an elastic implausibility that, though well suited to a Road Runner cartoon, seem embarrassing when transposed into live action. The locations include Tokyo, London, Cologne, Edinburgh, Tbilisi, and, in a booster thrust of desperation, outer space. The acting is of a soaring ineptitude; the deeper Diesel emotes, the more he resembles a man who dabbed too much wasabi on his tuna roll. The most imposing performance is that of Corona—not the virus but the beer, whose labels face the camera with pride. Drink enough of the stuff before you see the movie, and you might just have a blast. ♦

**NEWYORKER.COM**

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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VOLUME XCVII, NO. 19, July 5, 2021. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four planned combined issues, as indicated on the issue’s cover, and other combined or extra issues) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue; Anna Wintour, chief content officer; Jackie Marks, chief financial officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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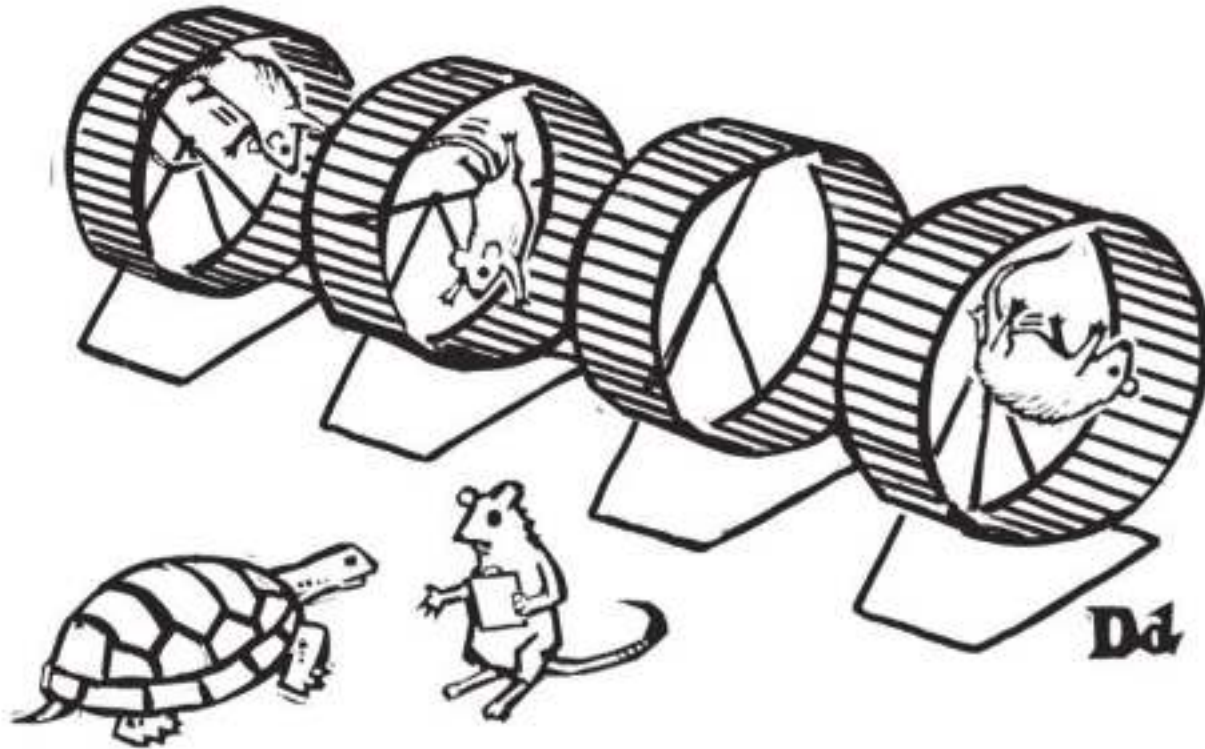
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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, July 4th. The finalists in the June 21st contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 26th 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



*“It's curb to table.”*

Susan Gale Wickes, Richmond, Ind.

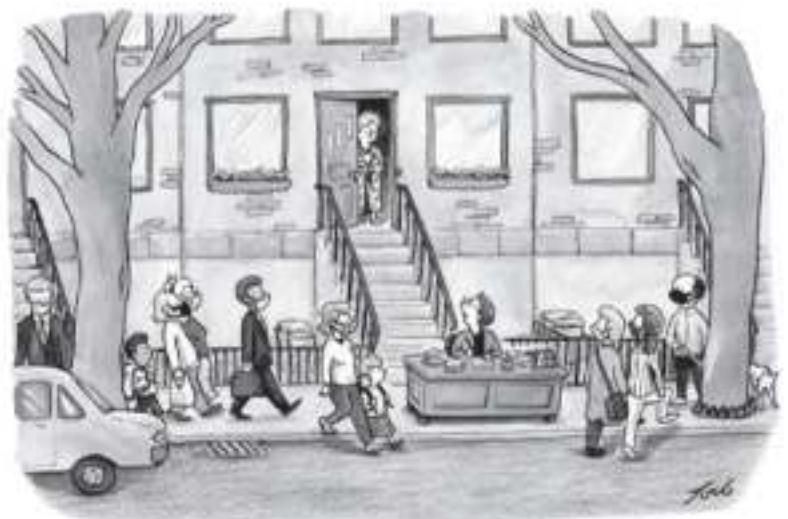
*“I'm sorry, sir, but we do reserve the right to serve refuse to anyone.”*

Eric Weingarten, Bloomington, Ind.

*“Define fresh.”*

Edo Steinberg, Be'er-Sheva, Israel

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Honey, can you close the door? I'm in a meeting.”*

Sam Villetard, Beaumont, Alta.



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# THE CROSSWORD

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*

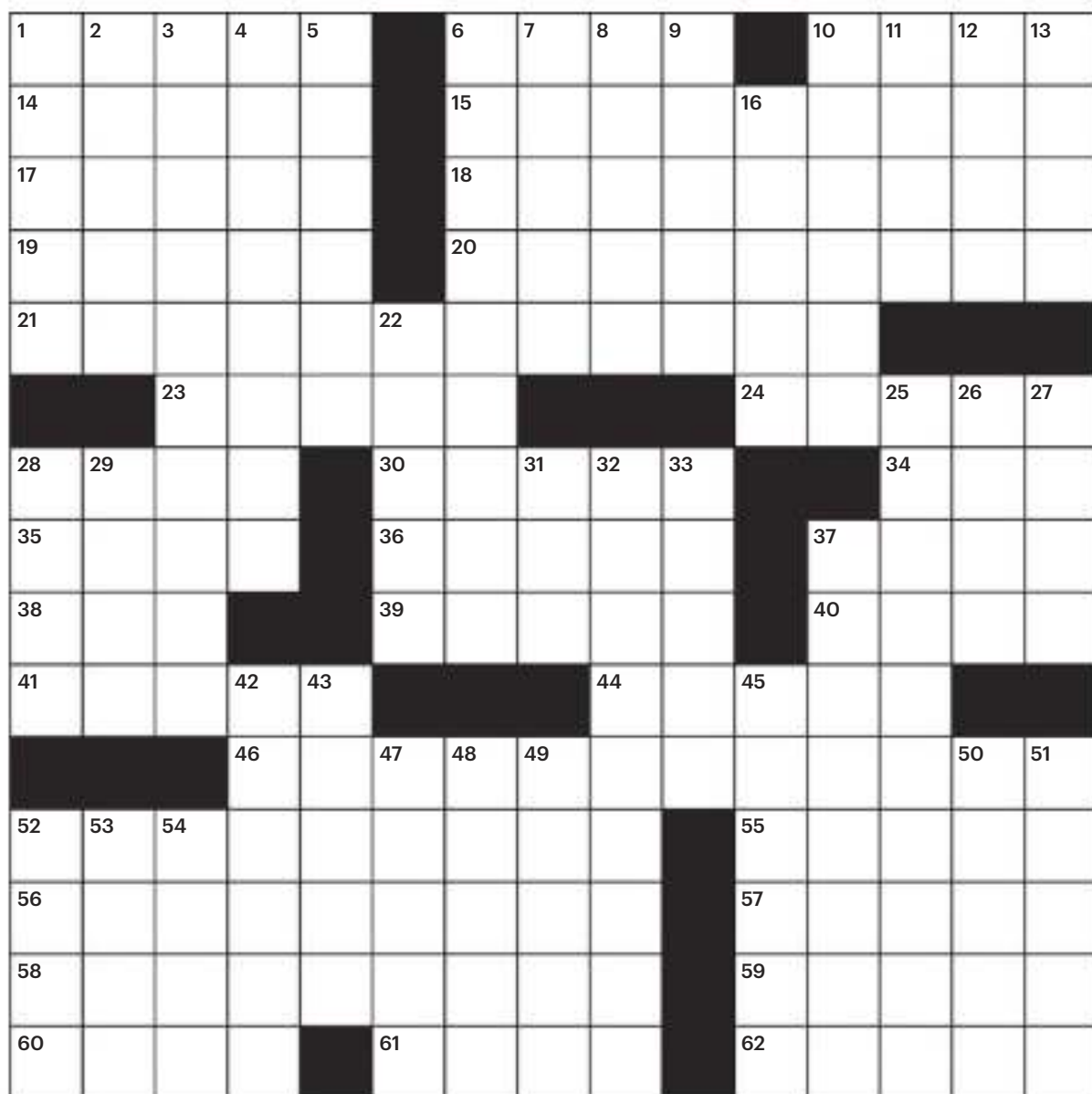
BY PATRICK BERRY

## ACROSS

- 1 Started paying attention
- 6 Runoff from a steel mill
- 10 Imitated Niobe
- 14 Lying face down
- 15 It's heard without delay
- 17 Grudgingly grant
- 18 "No more for me, thanks"
- 19 Evil organization in the G.I. Joe universe
- 20 Work amazingly well
- 21 Words on a blue screen of death
- 23 Conjunction with a slash
- 24 Award won by Deepa Anappara in 2021, for "Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line"
- 28 Food covered with mold
- 30 Forty-Three, folksily
- 34 "Well, whaddya know?"
- 35 Demond's "Sanford and Son" co-star
- 36 "\_\_\_ World" (recurring "Sesame Street" segment)
- 37 Grim fate
- 38 Goalkeeper's jersey number, often
- 39 Clinch, as a victory
- 40 "Caribbean Blue" singer
- 41 "Best \_\_\_ Movie" (2009 documentary about the film "Troll 2")
- 44 Lightly bedews
- 46 Request from the bench
- 52 Places where hogs are taken to drink
- 55 Humanitarian organization founded in England
- 56 Comic actress who hosts the podcast "Unqualified"
- 57 Musical instrument whose name means "soft"
- 58 Mirrors
- 59 Jackman's co-star in "The Greatest Showman"
- 60 "New Sensation" band
- 61 Truckful or trunkful
- 62 Almost out of power

## DOWN

- 1 What some probes probe
- 2 Vehemence



- 3 1996 video game set in Peru, Greece, Egypt, and Atlantis
- 4 Displaying unfashionable clothing lines?
- 5 "For 'tis the sport to have the engineer / Hoist with his own \_\_\_": Hamlet
- 6 Calculator made obsolete by the calculator
- 7 Arrivals at the Oscars
- 8 Publicly professes
- 9 Port on the Ligurian Sea
- 10 Like paper tossed at the wastebasket, usually
- 11 Falco with four Emmys
- 12 \_\_\_ 39 (tourist spot near Fisherman's Wharf)
- 13 Babysitter's charges
- 16 Asset for an actor
- 22 Digital-camera options
- 25 Travel to the big game?
- 26 Bridge call?
- 27 City built on seven hills, to locals
- 28 Spot for sweat
- 29 Gambling mecca near the California-Nevada border
- 31 Company whose headquarters resembles the cylinders of a four-cylinder engine
- 32 Taunt after a bad throw, perhaps
- 33 Les who was Bill Clinton's first Secretary of Defense
- 37 Get clean, in a way
- 42 Gives a lecture
- 43 Puts down roots?
- 45 Checked (out)
- 47 Game with batters but no pitchers
- 48 Mushroom Kingdom hero
- 49 "Wu-Tang: An American Saga" actress Alexander
- 50 Source material for fan fiction
- 51 Like the sport tuj lub
- 52 Island east of Java
- 53 Party to
- 54 Kentucky fort named after the first U.S. Secretary of War

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

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

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



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Top: **North Truro (Fehmarn)**, 2018–21, 30 x 38 inches, oil/linen, \$18,000. © 2021 Mitchell Johnson.

Above: **Provincetown Table**, 2019–21, 23 x 39 inches, oil/linen, \$17,000. © 2021 Mitchell Johnson.

Mitchell Johnson is the subject of two exhibitions. *Color Continuum: Selected Works 1988–2021*, at Pamela Walsh Gallery (Palo Alto), has been extended until July 2. In September, Castle Hill (Truro, Massachusetts) will present *Mitchell Johnson: Fifteen Years in Truro*. Johnson's paintings are known for their unique approach to color and shape and have been exhibited in New York (Tatistcheff), San Francisco (Campbell-Thiebaud), and Los Angeles (Terrence Rogers Fine Art), as well as in recent group shows at Ogunquit Museum of Art, Jundt Museum of Art at Gonzaga, Tucson Museum of Art, Bakersfield Museum of Art and New Mexico Museum of Art. The most recent museum acquisitions were by Museo Morandi in Bologna, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, Tampa Museum of Art, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Johnson moved to the Bay Area in 1990 after finishing his MFA at Parsons in New York where he studied with many former students of Hans Hofmann: Jane Freilicher, Paul Resika, Larry Rivers, Nell Blaine, Wolf Kahn, and Leland Bell. Numerous art writers and critics have written about Johnson's work including Jennifer Samet, Peter Selz, John Seed, W.S. Di Piero, Alexander Nemerov, Peter Campion, Martina Corgnati, Bonnie Gangelhoff, Chris Busa, Gerrit Henry, Susan Emerling, and Marilena Pasquali. Recently, Larry Groff interviewed Johnson for his blog, "Painting Perceptions;" and Erika Hess interviewed Johnson on her podcast, *I Like Your Work*. A complete bibliography is available at [mitchelljohnson.com](http://mitchelljohnson.com). Johnson is married to the author, Donia Bijan.