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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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DRAWINGS Farley Katz, Will McPhail, Liana Finck, Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby, P. C. Vey, Tim Hamilton, Frank Cotham, Roz Chast, Lila Ash, Amy Kurzweil SPOTS Dermot Flynn
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LETTER FROM BERGINIA
In 1923, the Soviet Union began an experiment in introducing Marxism to indigenous Arctic societies.

DISPATCH
Emily Witt on Marianne Williamson’s effort to bring the spiritual movement to electoral politics in the 2020 race.

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BY ANY OTHER NAME

During my nine years as the director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington, D.C., Justice John Paul Stevens was a regular visitor (The Talk of the Town, August 5th & 12th). Every year, he would bring his clerks to see books in our collection that may have belonged to Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford. As Tyler Foggatt describes, Justice Stevens believed de Vere to be the author of Shakespeare’s works.

We at the Folger revered Justice Stevens for his independent-mindedness. But his denial of Shakespeare’s authorship is founded on a conspiracy theory that no reputable Shakespeare scholar countenances. The historical evidence of Shakespeare’s career as an actor and a playwright—including praise of his greatness by his contemporaries—is clear and undeniable. Those interested in the question should consult Shakespeare Documented, the Folger’s authoritative Web site. While we at the Folger will remember Justice Stevens fondly, we strongly disavow his wrongheaded opinions about Shakespeare.

Gail Kern Paster
Washington, D.C.

CONSIDERING AL FRANKEN

Franken was the most impressive voice I ever heard in Senate hearings—clear, fair, and focussed (“The Case of Al Franken,” July 29th). When he was accused of sexual assault, I was horrified. I did not automatically assume the stories were true, however, and did not want him to resign without proof. Jane Mayer’s article gives the accusations their long-overdue airing. The senators who now lament having called for Franken’s resignation appear to be trying to have their cake and eat it, too.

Shirley Stuart
Berkeley, Calif.

The photo in which Franken pretends to grope Leann Tweeden while she is asleep is a textbook illustration of the way men demean women. Franken’s intentions at that moment are irrelevant; what matters is that no one would find the joke funny if society didn’t treat women’s bodies as consumer products. That attitude needs to be thrown out of American culture. It is arguable whether forcing Franken out of government was productive or appropriate, and I sympathize with the idea that it was unfair. But women shouldn’t have to just accept harassment, either, and I wish Mayer’s article had done more to reckon with that issue.

Christine U’Ren
Berkeley, Calif.

DERSHOWITZ REPLIES

If anyone doubts the political bias of The New Yorker, I urge them to compare Jane Mayer’s defense of Al Franken with Connie Bruck’s screed against me (“Devil’s Advocate,” August 5th & 12th). Mayer resolves doubts in favor of Franken and against his accusers, whose motives she challenges. Bruck resolves doubts in favor of my false accusers, whose motives she does not challenge, and against me. The difference is that there is evidence that Franken did the things he was accused of, though there are questions about whether what he did was sufficiently serious to warrant his resignation from the Senate. In my case, there is not a scintilla of evidence to support the false allegations made against me by two women who Bruck concedes are “imperfect witnesses,” one of whom admits that she invented false accusations against other prominent people.

Let me be categorical: I never met my two accusers; I have never had sex with an underage person; the accusations against me are totally false.

Alan Dershowitz
Chilmark, Mass.

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When the Afropunk Festival débuted, in 2005, it was intended as a safe haven for black punks. As its popularity grew, so, too, did its embrace of the broader culture, and the marginalized soon found their space invaded by the mainstream. Nonetheless, the festival remains renowned for both its striking lineups and the equally remarkable fashion of its attendees. Included on this year’s staggering bill, running Aug. 24-25 in Brooklyn’s Commodore Barry Park, is Rico Nasty, whose raging punk-rap embodies the event’s original counterculture spirit.
FALL PREVIEW

New MOMA, Rube Goldberg, Art as Life Hack

The painter Amy Sherald, who has described herself as “an American realist, painting American people doing American things,” made headlines last year, when her official portrait of the former First Lady Michelle Obama was unveiled. The Hauser & Wirth gallery exhibits her latest luminous, color-washed figures. (Opens Sept. 10.) The Met Breuer surveys the fifty-year career of another American realist, the Latvian-born, New York-based painter Vija Celmins, whose crystalline renderings of night skies, seascapes, and spiderwebs convey the unfathomable mystery of the so-called known world. (Opens Sept. 24.)

The comic genius Rube Goldberg once wrote, “The younger generation know my name in a vague way and connect it with grotesque inventions, but don’t believe that I ever existed as a person.” The Queens Museum reintroduces visitors to the Pulitzer Prize-winning illustrator in the first major exhibition of his work since 1970, the year of his death. In addition to drawings, films, photographs, and related ephemera, there’s an interactive Rube Goldberg machine, created just for the occasion. (Opens Oct. 6.)

Those still mourning the end of “Game of Thrones” may find solace in a Brienne of Tarth–worthy show at the Met: “The Last Knight: The Art, Armor, and Ambition of Maximilian I,” a display of a hundred and eighty objects—many never before seen in the U.S.—that marks the five-hundredth anniversary of the death of the Habsburg power broker. (Opens Oct. 7.)

After a four-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar renovation and a four-month hiatus, MOMA reopens, on Oct. 21, with increased exhibition space—including admission-free galleries at street level—and a new studio for performance, dance, music, film, and “art forms not yet imagined.” The inaugural shows, all of which focus on the museum’s collection, include a deep dive into the autobiographical assemblage “Black Girl’s Window,” made, in 1969, by the incomparable Betye Saar, and a selection of works by the Chicago performer, sculptor, and category-transcender Pope.L, whose concurrent exhibition, “Choir,” opens at the Whitney on Oct. 10.

In 1971, the Guggenheim abruptly cancelled a show by Hans Haacke, after learning that one of his pieces traced art patrons’ questionable real-estate practices. In the subsequent decades, the German–born Conceptualist has only sharpened his anti-establishment critique; his political integrity, formal acuity, and trenchant wit are on view in a sixty-year retrospective at the New Museum. (Opens Oct. 24.)

Brainy, funny, eye-catching, and compellingly strange, the sculptures and installations of the New York-based mid-career artist Rachel Harrison are some of the most influential American art works of the past quarter century. The Whitney gathers a hundred pieces, including her indelible drawings and photographs, in the highly anticipated retrospective “Rachel Harrison Life Hack.” (Opens Oct. 25.)

—Andrea K. Scott
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ART

“Culture and the People”
Museo del Barrio

In 1969, when the artist-educator Raphael Montañez Ortiz was asked to develop a curriculum on Puerto Rican history and culture, his answer was to open a community museum, El Museo del Barrio, in a Harlem public-school classroom. This fiftieth-anniversary exhibition celebrates the institution and its innovative curatorial approach with a detailed, wall-spanning time line, punctuated with photos of El Museo’s landmark shows and acquisitions. It’s accompanied by a sprawling, nonchronological survey of works in the museum’s collection, from pre-Hispanic Taino artifacts and modernist abstractions to documentation of performances and a diverse array of prints, all arranged into three sections: “Peoples,” “Resistance,” and “Resiliencia.” Although not everything on view is explicitly activist, a picture emerges of El Museo’s ever-evolving mission to represent indigenous, Latin-American, and Latinx cultures. The Mexican artist Ana de la Cueva’s piece “Maquila” is as relevant now as it was in 2007, when she created it: the coat of the heroine is outlined in tan threads on unbleached linen, hangs near a video of an embroidery machine violently stamping the U.S.-Mexico border on the fabric in blood-red thread.—Joanna Fateman (Through Sept. 29.)

“Well Whitman: America’s Poet”
New York Public Library

This year we celebrate Whitman’s two-hundredth birthday, and by “we” I mean all of us who take conscious pleasure in speaking American English. Whitman invented a poetry specific to this language and to open the kinds of experiences “Leaves of Grass.” They would best be complemented by an observance at home: read some of the poet aloud to a loved one, falling into the easy-flowing cadences like a phonograph needle in a vinyl groove.—Peter Scheinfeldt (Through Aug. 30.)

“AFRican SPIRits”
Milo

Chelsea This exhilarating and dense group exhibition takes its name from a series by the Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso, but it’s a different series by the artist—a grid of impeccably flamboyant self-portraits—that anchors the diverse work on view. In these twelve black-and-white images, made in the mid-nineteen-seventies, Fosso assimilates disco-era imports from Europe into a distinctly African tradition. In Hasa Hajar’s glorious “Cardi B Unity,” from 2017, Fosso’s showy poses are echoed in the rap star’s regal demeanor. Cross-generational conversations crop up easily among the twenty-three artists here, prompted by the smart grouping of their works. A strange and charming triptych of vintage prints portraying a young man artfully entangled with bicycles, from the Beninese studio Roka, complements the formal composition of Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s nearby “Mirror Study” (QSA3497), in which the American artist’s blurred figure merges with the black diagonals of a tripod.—J.F. (Through Aug. 23.)

Allan Sekula
Marian Goodman

UPTOWN This influential L.A.-based photographer, critic, and educator died in 2013, at the age of sixty-two, but his Marxist sensibility feels attuned to the present moment—art for the age of the Squad. Among the earliest pieces on view in this career-spanning show is “This Ain’t China,” from 1974, which documents a group of pizzeria employees (Sekula included) as they consider going on strike. The piece juxtaposes a textbook management diagram with black-and-white photos of the workers in a cramped kitchen, with the fruits of their labor (a pepperoni pizza, a basket of fries) appearing in color, like ads. Sekula was committed to making self-implicating art, keenly aware of photography’s role in both defining and challenging the social order. The images in “Dead Letter Office,” from 1996-97—of the Republican National Convention, a Tijuana coffin factory, and a ship impounded for smuggling immigrants—lay out complex and disturbing connections. His sombre slide sequence “Waiting for Tear Gas [white globe to black],” from 1999-2000, which was shot from the crowd during anti-W.T.O. protests in Seattle, is an elegant testament to the vigor of his still bearing critique.—J.F. (Through Aug. 23.)

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it’s advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Michael Feinstein
54 Below

Michael Feinstein, the best friend of the Great American Songbook, concludes his “I Happen to Like New York” residency (at his own club) by sharing the stage with two other vocalists. Melissa Manchester, a sturdy stylist who has morphed from pop songstress to cabaret chanteuse, is featured first, followed by the nineteen-year-old Jackie Evancho, who, a decade ago, grabbed the nation by its ears on “America’s Got Talent.”—Steve Futterman (Aug. 20-23.)

Tame Impala
Madison Square Garden

Tame Impala, the brainchild of the Australian musician Kevin Parker, relies on illusion—a sensory deception that begins in the studio, where Parker creates and records the music by himself. The final result, which often blurs the lines between electronic and analog instrumentation, is intricate and lush, with the kind of blissful melodies that can warp time. Onstage, Parker’s agile band and creative lighting design bring the psychedelic properties of Tame Impala’s music to life; to be in the audience is like climbing inside one of his songs and being enveloped with a warm feeling of euphoria.—Briana Younger (Aug. 21-22.)

Bill Callahan
Webster Hall

Where the conventional pop warbler wrings every splash of sentiment from the thinnest of songs, Bill Callahan has long maintained a poker face while navigating a stark landscape of detonated relationships and dark jokes. Yet on his charming new album, “Shepherd in a Sheepskin Vest,” Callahan—apparently now a husband, father, and manager—dispenses with the chill, singing tenderly of landing “the woman of my dreams and an imitation Eames.” He headlines one of the largest rooms of his three-decade career, suggesting that, even in the glut of precints of singer-songwriters, listeners still crave happiness.—Jay Ruttenberg (Aug. 22.)

Lil Keed/Lil Gotit
Elsewhere

When it comes to rap, Atlanta is a wellspring of every kind of texture and style you can imagine, and probably some you can’t. Trap music largely drives the city’s hip-hop ecosystem, and the rappers (and brothers) Lil Keed and Lil Gotit are two of its blossoming proponents, each with his own career. They’re part of a generation that seeks to carry the torch of trap’s resident eccentric, Young Thug: Keed often references his “Beast Coast” lifestyle, and the collective Pro Era (horns to Joey Badass)—spent that time developing their kinship alongside their own artistic identities. As individual acts, each has a unique personality: heady spiritualists, horrorcore enthusiasts, nineties-rap revivalists. Together, they’re united by an appreciation for psychedelics and a resounding sense of home-town pride. “Escapre from New York,” their new record, is their shared mission statement, a cipher of friends trying to both channel and transcend the towering legacy of their city.—B.Y. (Aug. 22.)

Beast Coast
The RoofTop at Pier 17

It took Beast Coast nearly seven years to release its debut album. The members of this Brooklyn-bred hip-hop supergroup—made up of the duo the Underachievers, the trio Flatbush Zombies, and the collective Pro Era (horns to Joey Bada$)—spent that time developing their kinship alongside their own artistic identities. As individual acts, each has a unique personality: heady spiritualists, horrorcore enthusiasts, nineties-rap revivalists. Together, they’re united by an appreciation for psychedelics and a resounding sense of home-town pride. “Escape from New York,” their new record, is their shared mission statement, a cipher of friends trying to both channel and transcend the towering legacy of their city.—B.Y. (Aug. 22-23.)

Mija
Elsewhere

Amber Giles, the d.j. and electronic artist who goes by Mija, crashed the public consciousness at sunrise one day in the summer
DERREN BROWN
SECRET
ON BROADWAY

“A THRILLING SPECTACLE OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL MAGIC.”

PREVIEWS BEGIN SEPTEMBER 6
OPENS SEPTEMBER 15

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As the dog days of summer give way to autumn’s cool, opportunities to catch a show beneath the sun and the stars are dwindling. Luckily, the Rooftop at Pier 17 offers myriad options: Z100’s Summer Bash (Aug. 29) gathers such crossover acts as the d.j. Marshmello, the country singer Kane Brown, and the man of the moment Lil Nas X. The Afrofuturist singer and musician Janelle Monáe (Sept. 25) helps wind down the waterfront venue’s summer concert series, which officially wraps with Thievery Corporation (Oct. 11). Elsewhere, the stacked E.D.M. festival Electric Zoo (Aug. 30-Sept. 1) returns to Randall’s Island Park; Global Citizen (Sept. 28) calls on the star power of Queen + Adam Lambert, Pharrell, and Alicia Keys for its annual Central Park event; and the New York edition of the preeminent hip-hop festival Rolling Loud débuts at Citi Field (Oct. 12-13).

Indoors, larger stages present some of the most in-demand artists of past and present. Two home-town heroes—the legendary rapper Nas and the equally revered R. & B. singer Mary J. Blige—split a bill at the Barclays Center (Aug. 28). At the same venue, the urban Latin event Souffrito (Aug. 30) features Ozuna, A Boogie, and Jeremiah amid an enticing cross-genre lineup, and, in a random but still somehow plausible pairing, the revered punk band Blink-182 combines powers with the equally punk rapper Lil Wayne (Sept. 20). Across the river, Madison Square Garden’s calendar includes the Jonas Brothers, far removed from their Disney Channel beginnings and celebrating their first studio album in a decade (Aug. 29-30). The band Vampire Weekend takes its acclaimed “Father of the Bride” record on the road (Sept. 6), as does Tyler, the Creator (Sept. 12), whose recent release “igor” further advances his singular style; the following month, Chance the Rapper’s new album, “The Big Day,” brings him to his first headlining date at the Garden (Oct. 8).

At SummerStage, the brilliant singer-songwriter Mitski performs her final shows before a planned hiatus (Sept. 7-8). Brooklyn Steel hosts the R. & B.-tinged pop of Banks (Sept. 7-10) and the rising reggae star Koffee (Sept. 11); the next day, Madonna begins a series of intimate shows at BAM (Sept. 12-Oct. 7). As November draws near, Charli XCX brings her own brand of energetic electro-pop to Terminal 5 (Oct. 21-22), and the exhilarating multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Georgia Anne Muldrow, the saxophonist Tia Fuller, and the percussionist Sasha Berliner hold court at BRIC Jazz Fest’s three-day marathon (Oct. 24-26). —Briana Younger

of 2014, when she played a surprise 6 A.M. set with Skrillex, at Bonnaroo. A recording of the two of them behind the booth percolated throughout the Internet, introducing fans to her and the eclectic musical philosophy she’s dubbed “I’m a genre.” Of late, she’s moved into chemical-pop territory, testing out her voice over bright, maximalist productions.—Juliya Lopez (Aug. 23.)

Gauche
Alphaville
Gauche descends from a regional punk lineage whose tradition of activism can make the buttoned-up denizens of its home town, Washington, D.C., seem apotithetical by comparison. Fittingly, the sextet’s new début LP, “A People’s History of Gauche,” is lyrically righteous enough to abide by its cheeky title. The music’s underlying concern, though, is a person’s unimpeachable right to shock his or her backside, with anthems enlivened by joyous bursts from a rarely employed punk trump card: the mighty saxophone.—J.R. (Aug. 24.)

High Seas Festival
Hornblower Infinity
Around 2009, a handful of hazy, electronic projects that fit under the so-called chill-wave umbrella lulled listeners into tranquil daydreams. Though the sounds eventually retreated from the indie main stage, the High Seas Festival is a sign that remnants of that blissed-out musical moment are still floating around—and evolving. For this showcase, acts including Washed Out, Goldroom, and RAC find an ideal place for their live sets: a boat in the middle of the Hudson.—J.L. (Aug. 24.)

Jan Jelinek
The Shed
Sound collage, as much as musical composition, has been central to the Dutch electronic musician Jan Jelinek’s work from the beginning. As Farben, and also under his own name, his lustrously bare tracks helped define nineties-into-two-thousands minimal techno. There’s a straight line from those releases to the thematic audio essays he now makes for German radio, and his recent slowed-down d.j. sets are similarly heady, often incorporating his own field recordings. Jelinek follows a live show featuring new videos by the multimedia artist Tony Coka at The Shed with a performance at Public Records, on Aug. 27.—Michaelangelo Matos (Aug. 24.)

Shigeto
MOMA PS1
The Detroit hip-hop and electronic-dance producer Zach Shigeto Saginaw made his name in moody down-tempo, d.j. culture’s most orthodox style, but his recordings have grown more engaging and less predictable as he’s matured. His most recent, “The New Monday,” from 2017, features layers of percussion that add a swinging, loose funk to even the most beat-heavy tracks. Live, Shigeto utilizes a large array of programmed gear, plus a drum kit for embellishment.—M.M. (Aug. 24.)
“EUPHORIC. GASP-INSPIRING.
FORBIDDEN PLEASURES ABOUND IN THIS
SPECTACULAR MUSICAL.
IN ‘MOULIN ROUGE,’ LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL.”

BEN BRANTLEY, THE NEW YORK TIMES

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FALL PREVIEW

Latin-Jazz Tap, Kuchipudi, Quietude

This autumn, New York is bursting with dance. Ayodele Casel, one of the city’s preeminent tap dancers and choreographers, will have her first full-evening show at the Joyce (Sept. 24–29), a collaboration with the Latin-jazz composer and bandleader Arturo O’Farrill. (Tap is enjoying a welcome resurgence, with women leading the way.) Casel and four other dancers will share the stage with O’Farrill’s band, tapping to a range of music styles, from rumba to bomba (a thrillingly percussive style from Puerto Rico) and, of course, Latin jazz. “It’s a family affair,” Casel says, “rooted in the need to communicate everything human.”

The most recognizable element in Merce Cunningham’s “Summerspace,” from 1958, is its design. A Pointillist backdrop, by Robert Rauschenberg, glows with yellow, orange, red, blue, purple, and green dots; the dancers’ unitards are painted to match. This early Cunningham work is full of clean, pellucid shapes that make it easier to grasp than some of his later, more densely packed compositions. It’s also very beautiful, like watching a colony of gazelles frolic in a field of flowers. New York City Ballet, which first performed the piece in 1966, brings it back as part of its fall season (Sept. 17–Oct. 13, at the David H. Koch Theatre).

Also returning is Shantala Shivalingappa, who last appeared in New York three years ago. Shivalingappa is a master of the quicksilver, lilting southern-Indian classical-dance form Kuchipudi, but she has also appeared in the works of several contemporary choreographers, including Pina Bausch, and theatre directors, such as Peter Brook. She brings this varied background to her dancing, which is pure, light, and animated from within. At the Joyce (Oct. 8–12), she performs a solo evening called “Akasha,” which means “sky” or “space” in Sanskrit, accompanied on stage by four excellent musicians.

Most shows at the Shed, the new, expandable performance space at Hudson Yards, are mashups of various artistic genres, but this season the smaller Griffin Theatre will offer something rather more straightforward: an evening of dances by the contemporary choreographer William Forsythe. The intimacy of the venue is essential to the mood of the program (Oct. 11–25), titled “A Quiet Evening of Dance.” Two of the works are performed in silence or with minimal accompaniment; all of them reflect Forsythe’s lifelong exploration of the geometries of ballet and the mechanics of the human body. There’s absolutely nothing flashy about it—and that’s just fine.

—Marina Harss

DANCE

Milton Suggs Quintet
Dizzy’s Club

The questing spirit of the sixties carried into the 1970 album “That Healin’ Feelin’: The United States of Mind Phase I,” the first of a trilogy by the pianist, composer—and, for this project, lyricist—Horace Silver. Here, the vocalist Milton Suggs takes on the series’ funky vibe of love, peace, and mindfulness, presumably with all contemporary irony left at the door. If he avoids Silver’s more didactic ruminations on, say, diet and exercise, the positive message and incessant groove of the music will win out.—S.F. (Aug. 26.)

DANCE

SummerStage / Wendy Whelan
Rumsey Playfield, Central Park

The 2017 film “Restless Creature: Wendy Whelan” is an affecting portrait of the former New York City Ballet star as she reinvents herself in middle age; she comes across as an appealing blend of humble, frank, self-doubting, and brave. This free SummerStage screening is preceded by a taste of the kind of projects she does now (in addition to serving as the associate artistic director of City Ballet). Whelan performs a work-in-progress excerpt of a new, topical take on Saint-Saëns’s “Carnival of the Animals,” with choreography by Francesca Harper, and spoken word by the writer and dancer Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who riffs on the migration of monarch butterflies to make points about human refugees.—Brian Seibert (Aug. 21.)

Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival
Becket, Mass.

OUT OF TOWN When Boston Ballet premiered William Forsythe’s “Playlist (EP),” in March, it was big news—the piece was the controversial choreographer’s first work for an American ballet company in almost thirty years. It turned out to be conservative: classical-style variations set to a mixture of current and retro pop hits. Now excerpted for the troupe’s program at the Ted Shawn Theatre, alongside drearier fare by Leonid Yakobson and Jorma Elo, it’s mild fun that makes the company look good. At the Doris Duke, Urban Bush Women braves much deeper music, nothing less than John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme.” In their 2015 work “Walking with Trane,” they dance, semi-improvisationally, to two Coltrane-inspired scores (one played live by the excellent pianist George Caldwell), reaching for his spiritual heights.—B.S. (Aug. 21–25)

“The Hudson Eye”
Basilica Hudson

OUT OF TOWN Of the recent wave of artists setting up shop in Hudson, New York, the choreographer Jonah Bokaer arrived on the early side. Now he’s celebrating ten years there with a ten-day festival. The events around town encompass much more than dance—art exhibitions, music performances, “hot topic” panel discussions, films by Marina Abramović—but the dance offerings are especially plentiful, including
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WS NEW YORK
Stephen M. Ross, Founder (left); Marvin R. Shanken, Founder (center); Kenneth A. Himmel, Founder (right)
WS New York, Hudson Yards’ only Private Club, opens Fall 2019
Like schoolchildren who don’t want summer to end, the New York Philharmonic and the Broadway soprano Kelli O’Hara open the fall season with Barber’s “Knoxville: Summer of 1915,” a lovely tribute to a warm Tennessee evening (Sept. 18-21). Then the orchestra and its music director, Jaap van Zweden, venture into the bowels of horror with a fully staged double bill of Schoenberg’s Expressionist monodrama “Erwartung” and Bartók’s “Bluebeard’s Castle,” with Katarina Karnéus, Nina Stemme, and Johannes Martin Kränzle (Sept. 26-28).

In the first concert of Yannick Nézet-Séguin’s “Perspectives” series, at Carnegie Hall, the Canadian conductor summons Strauss’s majestic “Alpine Symphony” with the Philadelphia Orchestra (Oct. 15). Carnegie has all but cleared its 2020 calendar to celebrate Beethoven’s two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, so the pianists Marc-André Hamelin (Oct. 22), Denis Matsuev (Oct. 20), and Daniil Trifonov and Sergei Babayan (Oct. 16) opt for brooding, muscular Russian music instead.

Two centuries younger than Beethoven, the Chamber Music Society turns fifty this year, marking the milestone with a concert of pieces by composers who forged the sound of American art music. David Finckel, Paul Neubauer, David Shifrin, and Ransom Wilson, among others, play Copland’s “Appalachian Spring” and Dvořák’s “American” Quintet—wistful reminders of the tender strength evoked by the country’s iconic mountains and plains (Oct. 15).

It’s been nearly thirty years since the Metropolitan Opera staged Gershwin’s idea of American folk music, “Porgy and Bess,” with its sui-generis blend of opera, jazz, and Broadway. Still, the tenants of the work’s fictitious South Carolina slum have a way of snapping to life in tunes immortalized by Leontyne Price and Ella Fitzgerald; Eric Owens and Angel Blue star in James Robinson’s season-opening production (Sept. 23-Oct. 16). Anthony Braxton, a very different kind of jazz auteur, gets a retrospective to open the twentieth annual “Composer Portraits” series at Miller Theatre. The chamber ensemble Either/Or and the Jack Quartet play his mind-clearing avant-garde compositions (Sept. 25).

In “Zauberland,” Katie Mitchell’s stage adaptation of Schumann’s song cycle “Dichterliebe,” for Lincoln Center’s tenth-anniversary White Light Festival, the soprano Julia Bullock portrays a Syrian refugee seeking the promised peace of a “magic land.” Schumann’s pastoral idyll, with its forests and flowers, is still there, but this version gives new meaning to the gentle longing that runs through the work like a river.

—Oussama Zahr
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and one gratuitous face slap to the opera stage almost two centuries before Bravo put "The Real Housewives" on television. Jonathon Loy directs Craig Colclough, Deanna Breiwick, Matthew Grills, and Emmett O’Hanlon in a traditional production of the vivid, slightly mean-spirited comedy at the Berkshire Opera Festival; Brian Garman conducts. —Oussama Zahb (Aug. 24 at 1 and Aug. 27 and Aug. 30 at 7:30.)

Summer HD Festival Lincoln Center
The Met sets up thousands of chairs in Lincoln Center Plaza for its Summer HD Festival, which plays on a big screen affixed to the opera house’s façade. The ten-day outdoor movie series kicks off with the iconic pairing of Anna Netrebko and Anita Rachvelishvili in last fall’s “Aida,” then pivots to a celebration of the company’s new music director’s ample repertoire. Nézet-Séguin, with replays of his first-ever HD simulcast (“Carmen,” 2010) and his most recent (“Dialogues des Carmélites,” from May). No tickets are required, and seats are first in, first served. Also playing: The company tips its hat to Hollywood with a pre-festival screening of the Golden Age musical “Funny Face” (Aug. 23), starring Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn.—O.Z. (Aug. 24 at 6.)

“Carmen” Bryant Park
Perhaps inspired by August’s Sevillian heat, New York City Opera takes Bizet’s sultry Iberian drama, “Carmen,” outdoors with an hour-long concert at Bryant Park. The abridged, fully costumed presentation should still give the cast, led by the mezzo-soprano Lila Coogan and the tenor Lushan Li, an opportunity to work its way through the opera’s best-loved melodies. Chairs and picnic blankets are provided, and a concession stand serves beer, wine, and cheese plates for audience members looking to live out their alfresco opera fantasies; no tickets are required.—O.Z. (Aug. 26 at 6.)

THE THEATRE
Bat Out of Hell City Center
In this garish, hyper-colorful, and sort of stressful musical, directed by Jay Scheib, with a book, lyrics, and music by Jim Steinman—based on songs that the singer Meat Loaf made famous—the kids have it rough. Strat (Andrew Polec) leads a gang of perpetual youths, all stuck at age eighteen, and loves Raven (Christina Bennington), whose father, Falco (Bradley Dean, who barrels around like Andrew Cuomo), is a post-apocalyptic despot. Think Peter Pan made up like Edward Scissorhands, with ample aesthetic borrowings—the costumes are wild; confetti’s a constant—from “Mad Max” and “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.” The slender plot is beside the point. The songs are what they’ve always been—if you’ve heard them, you’ve heard them. But “Bat Out of Hell” is a bit like Meat Loaf’s florid and inimitable career, and also like some eighteen-year-olds, cooped up in their intensely private minds: either you’ll totally get it, or you really, really won’t.—Vinson Cunningham (Through Sept. 8.)

Into the Woods Boscobel House & Gardens
OUT OF TOWN For its first foray into full-out musical theatre, Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival presents Stephen Sondheim’s oft-neglected gem. This book is a mashup of fairy tales—Little Red Riding Hood (Kayla Coleman), Cinderella (Laura Darrell), beanstalk Jack (Brandon Dial), and others—that goes on to darkly imagine what follows “happily ever after.”

Midsummer: A Banquet Café Fae
Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” with its whimsy and good-natured chaos, is a perfect fit for a summer evening and a Gowanus café. This makes Food of Love Productions and Third RJ Projects’ immersive production of the play, accompanied by a multicourse tasting menu, delectable in more ways than one. Though it’s still set in the fairy forest, this “Midsummer,” staged in a French café, works a narrow, cumbersome space into something fun. Kids to adults, the actors’ timing and lightness of touch is spot on—growing up (Christian Avery), playing a spirited Roxane, Luis Quintero a touching Christian.—Ken Marks (Through Sept. 8.)

Love, Noël Irish Repertory
In addition to being a playwright (“Private Lives,” “Blithe Spirit”), a performer, a songwriter, and an author, the Englishman Noël Coward was a voluminous letter writer. The Coward scholar Barry Day has used that correspondence to charming effect in the ninety-minute diversion “Love, Noël: The Songs and Letters of Noël Coward,” directed by Charlotte Moore. Two of the city’s most prominent cabaret artists, Steve Ross, as Coward, and KT Sullivan, playing a wide range of the author’s leading ladies—including Gertrude Lawrence, Beatrice Lillie, Elaine Stritch, and Marlene Dietrich—read the letters, sing the songs, and dish the dirt. Of the two due-dirt Coward portraits, a few songs performed, in snippet or in full, only a few have entered the popular canon (among them “Mad About the Boy” and “Someday I’ll Find You”), but they’re all terribly clever and amusing.—K.M. (Through Aug. 25.)

Make Believe Second Stage
The four Conlee kids have an attic playroom that serves as both an escape and a refuge in this quietly unsettling play by Bess Wohl. As in her acclaimed “Small Mouth Sounds,” Wohl creates fleshed-out characters from seemingly little—an impressive feat, considering that the characters are preteens (played by child actors) in the show’s first half. “We are not even going to remember most of this stuff when we grow up,” the boisterous Chris (Ryan Fouist) soothingly tells his siblings in a time of crisis. “Make Believe” explores trauma and its legacy, brought to the stage when the Conlees’ adult selves turn up. At eighty minutes, this is the rare show that feels too short, and Michael Greif’s production, for Second Stage, has moments that are a little too big, a little too emphatic. Still, Wohl has a voice all her own, especially when suggesting the unsaid.—Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Sept. 15.)

Sea Wall/A Life Hudson
The monologues that make up this show, directed by Carrie Cracknell, are not so much acted as presented by Tom Sturridge and Jake Gyllenhaal. In “Sea Wall,” by Simon Stephens, a youngish photographer named Alex (Sturridge) talks adoringly about his family—a wife too good to be deserved, a beautiful little girl, and a father-in-law, Arthur, with whom he has gently antagonistic conversations about the existence of God. Stephens braids these talks with Alex’s meditations on the nature and power of water; we see the heavy ending coming from a nautical mile away. In “A Life,” by Nick Payne, Gyllenhaal plays a man grieving for his father as he expects his first child. Payne flits between the two cataclysms, first with slow precision, and then, as the cruxes approach, back and forth cinematically, the borders showing some slippage. The scene is nicely done, but it doesn’t lead to much of a revelation. You might just shrug if the anvil of these plays’ shared desire weren’t so obvious: Cry. Feel.—V.C. (Reviewed in our issue of 8/19/19.) (Through Sept. 29.)
HOW BER MUDA SERV ED UP T E N N IS TO AM E R I C A

In 1874, tennis arrived in the United States via a New York socialite’s suitcase, following her alluring island adventure in Bermuda.

Bermuda, the archipelago known for its pink-sand beaches, turquoise waters, and year-round warm weather, has been announced as the Official Sponsor of the U.S. Open. It’s a fitting collaboration, given the island’s reputation as a destination for travellers in search of idyllic adventures—just a ninety-minute flight from N.Y.C. Lesser known, however, is that the long history of American tennis was introduced by this enchanting Atlantic island.

In only a few short years, Mary’s unexpected souvenir from her Bermuda sojourn helped set in motion a national tradition: today, nearly eighteen million people in the U.S. play the sport, from the public-tennis-court games in many cities to the annual U.S. Open, in N.Y.C. Mary’s role in bringing tennis from Bermuda to America has earned her a place in the International Tennis Hall of Fame. In fact, when you visit the museum, in Newport, Rhode Island, a paper cutout of her likeness greets you at the door.

It only serves to enhance the sport’s allure to learn that every swing of a racket in the U.S. can be traced back to Bermuda, where island adventures still await all travellers—tennis lovers included. You’re welcome!

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Nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, the New York socialite Mary Ewing Outerbridge, the daughter of Bermudian parents, sailed for days to vacation on the secluded island. In the British Army garrison there, she watched, fascinated, as officers played tennis—albeit a version different from the one we know today. The courts in Bermuda were shaped like hourglasses, rather than rectangles. The net was also higher, and a number of the rules were different.

Mary became hypnotized watching the ball soaring back and forth against a backdrop of palmetto trees and glittering sea, and ended up purchasing a kit containing all the materials needed to bring the sport home to Staten Island.

Using a hand-drawn diagram, she laid out a court at her brother’s cricket club, where the sport caught on among members. From there, the game’s popularity quickly grew, leading to standardized rules and regulations—and then, in 1880, to the first U.S. tennis championship.

It is only natural that the port’s allure to learn that every swing of a racket in the U.S. can be traced back to Bermuda, where island adventures still await all travellers—tennis lovers included. You’re welcome!
FALL PREVIEW

History Revamped, Music Legends, Cyrano

The thirty-year-old playwright Jeremy O. Harris cannonballed into the downtown theatre scene last season, with his provocative, cheeky, and unsettling “Slave Play,” which premiered at New York Theatre Workshop while he was still in his third year at the Yale School of Drama. The play opens on a black woman and a white man in antebellum dress, enacting what appears to be an oddly kinky example of master–slave relations. (For one thing, she twerks to Rihanna.) Then Harris turns the tables on the audience—again, and again. The show sold out its first run, even as a campaign against it raged on Twitter. Now, remarkably, “Slave Play” is moving to Broadway’s Golden Theatre (beginning previews on Sept. 10), directed by Robert O’Hara.

That play is sure to be the prickliest pear in a season filled with amusements, oddities, and reckonings with America’s past and present. Matthew Lopez’s “The Inheritance” (starting Sept. 27, at the Barrymore), directed by Stephen Daldry, has drawn comparisons to “Angels in America” for its sweeping view of contemporary gay life; the two-part epic played the West End last year. Robert Schenkkan, who won a Tony Award for “All the Way,” in 2014, continues his theatrical account of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Presidency in “The Great Society” (Sept. 6, Vivian Beaumont), with Brian Cox taking over L.B.J. duties from Bryan Cranston.

Jukebox musicals are a much maligned genre, but every so often they can delight and surprise. “Tina: The Tina Turner Musical” (Oct. 12, Lunt-Fontanne) has the benefit of its subject’s stirring songbook and eventful life, plus direction by Phyllida Lloyd (“Mamma Mia!”) and a book by Katori Hall (“The Mountaintop”). “Jagged Little Pill” (Nov. 3, Broadhurst) uses the Alanis Morissette album, plus new songs, to tell the story of a suburban family grappling with very contemporary issues, including queer identity and opiate addiction; Diablo Cody wrote the script, and Diane Paulus directs.

Marisa Tomei plays a feisty Italian-American widow in the Roundabout Theatre Company’s revival of Tennessee Williams’s “The Rose Tattoo,” directed by Trip Cullman (Sept. 19, American Airlines). David Byrne makes a case for optimism in the theatrical concert “American Utopia” (Oct. 4, Hudson). And the hip-hop improv troupe Freestyle Love Supreme, whose rotating members include Lin-Manuel Miranda, Daveed Diggs, and James Monroe Iglehart, brings its impromptu rhymes uptown (Sept. 13, Booth).

Off Broadway, Peter Dinklage, who whispered to kings and queens on “Game of Thrones,” tries wooing from the wings in the New Group’s “Cyrano” (Oct. 11, Daryl Roth Theatre). Jonathan Groff plays a lovesick nerd who makes a Faustian bargain with a flesh-eating Venus flytrap in “Little Shop of Horrors” (Sept. 17, Westside). And the Public Theatre brings back two pivotal works: Tony Kushner’s political drama “A Bright Room Called Day” (Oct. 29), which played there in 1990, and Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf,” which premiered at the Public in 1976.

—Michael Schulman
NEW YORK CITY BALLET

OPENS SEPTEMBER 17
FALL PREVIEW

Romance and Politics, Past and Present

The New York Film Festival, at Lincoln Center (Sept. 27-Oct. 13), is the city’s main movie event, and this year’s edition includes a trio of films from Netflix. The festival’s opening-night offering is Martin Scorsese’s “The Irishman,” starring Robert De Niro as a hit man whose exploits connect with politics—in particular, the real-life disappearance, in 1975, of the union leader Jimmy Hoffa (played by Al Pacino). Joe Pesci, Harvey Keitel, and Anna Paquin co-star. Noah Baumbach’s romantic drama “Marriage Story,” the festival’s centerpiece, stars Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver as an actress and a playwright going through a bitter divorce; Laura Dern, Alan Alda, and Ray Liotta co-star. Among the festival’s main slate of films will be the French actress and director Mati Diop’s first feature, “Atlantics,” a drama set in Dakar, Senegal, about a young woman named Ada (Mame Bineta Sane) who confronts supernatural disturbances when her family thwarts her relationship with a construction worker (Ibrahima Traoré).

Bio-pics, as ever, are prominent among fall releases, but this year’s batch covers a distinctive range of historical figures. “Harriet” (Nov. 1), directed by Kasi Lemmons (who wrote the script with Gregory Allen Howard), stars Cynthia Erivo as Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery, liberated hundreds of other enslaved Africans via the Underground Railroad, and worked on behalf of women’s suffrage. Janelle Monáe, Joe Alwyn, and Leslie Odom, Jr., co-star. Renée Zellweger plays Judy Garland in “Judy” (Sept. 27), which is centered on the singer’s performances in London in 1968, the year before her death. It’s directed by Rupert Goold; Rufus Sewell co-stars, as Garland’s husband Sid Luft, and Jessie Buckley plays her assistant. In James Mangold’s drama “Ford v Ferrari” (Nov. 15), Matt Damon plays the car designer Carroll Shelby and Christian Bale plays the race-car driver Ken Miles, who, in the mid-sixties, joined forces to take part in the twenty-four-hour Le Mans competition. “Hustlers” (Sept. 13), written and directed by Lorene Scafaria, is based on the true story of a group of New York strippers who teamed up, after the 2008 financial crisis, to extract money from rich men by any means necessary. Constance Wu, Cardi B, and Jennifer Lopez star; Julia Stiles plays a journalist reporting on their deeds.

High-profile fantasies extend from outer space to Gotham City. James Gray’s science-fiction drama, “Ad Astra” (Sept. 20), is the story of an astronaut (Brad Pitt) who undertakes a dangerous mission to find his father (Tommy Lee Jones) deep in space. Liv Tyler, Ruth Negga, and Donald Sutherland co-star. In Pedro Almodóvar’s movie-centered drama “Pain and Glory” (Oct. 4), Antonio Banderas plays an aged director whose creative and personal struggles unleash a torrent of memories, including ones involving his mother (Penélope Cruz). The South Korean director Bong Joon-ho’s thriller “Parasite” (Oct. 11) follows members of a poor family in Seoul who, under false pretenses, move into a rich family’s palatial home. “Joker” (Oct. 4), the latest installment in the Batman series, stars Joaquin Phoenix in a tale of the villain’s turn to the dark side. Robert De Niro, Zazie Beetz, and Marc Maron co-star, and Dante Pereira-Olson plays Bruce Wayne.

—Richard Brody
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ACHIEVE GREATER
After the Wedding
Bart Freundlich’s film is based on a Danish movie from 2006, directed by Susanne Bier. The main character, an aid worker who travels from India to the West to raise vital funds for a charity, was originally played by Mads Mikkelsen. The role now passes to Michelle Williams; whether the switch of gender assists the plausibility of the plot, which was far-fetched in the first place, is open to debate. The aid worker, Isabel, arrives in New York, presents herself to the vastly wealthy Theresa (Julianne Moore), and gets invited to the wedding of Theresa’s daughter (Abby Quinn). At the happy event, Isabel encounters Theresa’s husband, Oscar (Billy Crudup), with whom she shares an unhappy past. The coincidences mount, as do the conflicts—glaring, blinding issues related to Indian poverty and American wealth. Such is the movie’s smooth solemnity, indeed, that some viewers may struggle to keep a straight face.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 8/19/19). (In limited release.)

Cold Case Hammarskjöld
This new documentary from the Danish director Mads Brügger dwells obsessively, though by no means exclusively, on the death of the former U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, in 1961, in a plane crash. The movie digs into some of the theories that have gathered around what may, or may not, have been an accident. The investigation takes place largely in Africa and leads to a number of shady figures, a fair proportion of whom are either self-evident fantasists or white colonialists fearful of black majority rule. The problem is that Brügger cannot resist planting himself in the middle of his search at all times, usually dressed as if he were playing a character in a period drama. More tiresome still, he admits to growing weary of Hammarskjöld (who is scarcely an uninteresting subject) and switches his attention to yet another conspiracy, this time involving the spread of AIDS.—A.L. (8/19/19) (In limited release.)

American Factory
In 2016, in Dayton, Ohio, where unemployment and despair were widespread after the closing of a G.M. plant, the Chinese automotive-glass-company Fuyao opened a factory and hired thousands of local residents to work under grim and dangerous conditions. For this documentary, Julia Reichert and Stephen Bognar had extraordinary access to the facility, its employees, and its managers. The filmmakers discover trouble of an extraordinary corporate variety—management’s opposition to unionization—and find that it’s exacerbated by underlying political conflicts. The C.E.O., vowing to create a “model plant” if it unionizes; the company propagandizes against the union drive and fires the organizing leaders. Workers contend that their safety and well-being are disregarded; violations are discovered; supervisors complain that employees are insufficiently submissive to Brown, advocating for the union, oustages management; on a visit to China, the local “union” is shown to be run by the C.E.O.’s brother-in-law and linked with the government. The filmmakers’ probing analysis reveals the basic principles of freedom and dignity within the political essence of labor issues.—Richard Brody (In limited release and on Netflix.)

Blinded by the Light
In this heartily sentimental comedic drama, directed by Gurinder Chadha, a sixteen-year-old British high-school student named Javed (Viveik Kalra), the son of Pakistani immigrants, is torn between his family’s customs and the lure of wider experience. The story is set in 1987, in the industrial town of Luton, where Javed, an aspiring writer, feels oppressed by his practical-minded father (Kulvinder Ghir) and cowed by local neo-Nazis. Then his classmate Roops (Aaron Phagura), who is Sikh, introduces Javed to the music of Bruce Springsteen. Inspired by the Boss’s lyrics and attitude—and encouraged by a teacher (Hayley Atwell)—Javed makes a name for himself in the school newspaper, local journalism, and a literary competition, but faces increasing conflict with his father. Civic realities, such as high unemployment and Thatcher-era protests, mesh with personal relationships—including Javed’s romantic awakening with an activist classmate (Nell Williams)—in a wishful vision of progress sparked by the universal power of an American pop icon. Though the situations have the ring of authenticity, the film’s saccharine treatment denatures them.—R.B. (In wide release.)

Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool
The director Stanley Nelson’s biographical documentary about the trumpet and bandleader who shaped the history of music from the mid-forties through the mid-seventies has just been released. As Davis himself says, “Value takes time,” and this is true here. Davis’s musical achievements and focuses attention on disturbing aspects of his personal life—in particular, his violence toward women. In interviews, Davis’s first two wives, the dancer Frances Taylor and the singer Betty Mabry, speak in particular of violence and abuse and relate to him his substance abuse, which, in turn, they link to his medical issues. The film also gives overdue attention to Taylor and Mabry’s crucial behind-the-scenes artistic contributions to Davis’s career. Important but brief sequences portray Davis’s experiences as a young musician in Milwaukee, Chicago, and New York, and the struggle to make music, such as a beating by New York police in 1959. Interviews with his musical collaborators are given short shrift, and archival footage and recordings are dismissively used as visual and sonic backdrop. The movie’s simple arc and conventional contours flatten both the passion of Davis’s music and the destructive chaos of his life.—R.B. (In limited release.)

Party Girl
Nicholas Ray’s crime drama, from 1958, takes a retrospective look at gangland Chicago in the early thirties, but his psychological approach to the violence is altogether modern. The film starts with a musical scene, featuring Cyd Charisse, in the title role, as a hard-nosed night-club dancer who quickly pairs off with a darkly handsome, suavely understated Mob lawyer (Robert Taylor) and tries to pry him away from the underworld. Ray’s direction, with its garish, searing streaks of color (red has rarely slashed the screen so violently), sharp diagonals, and quickly lurching wide-screen views, reflects its characters’ raging energies and inner conflicts. A spectacular flameout of a dénouement reveals the self-destructive folly of unchecked ambition. Yet Ray lavishes similar passion on the elaborate backstory—and on a strange medical subplot, suggesting that the evil doings on which the plot runs are not failings but maladies awaiting treatment of their underlying causes.—R.B. (Film Forum, Aug. 24, and streaming.)

The Peanut Butter Falcon
Zack Gottsagen, an actor with Down syndrome, stars in this affectionate drama as Zak, a young man with the same condition, who escapes from the Georgia nursing home where he lives in order to search for a professional-wrestling camp that he wants to enroll in. Along the way, he meets a small-time tidalwater fisherman on the run (Shia LaBeouf), who reluctantly agrees to help him. Zack catches up with LaBeouf, who eventually agrees to become a part of the adventure. The trio meet colorful characters in the course of this journey through photogenic landscapes (the cinema-tographer is by Nigel Bluck), Tyler Nilson and Michael Schwartz wrote and directed the film; despite their screenplay’s clichés, they don’t let life-lesson dialogue distract from the genial Mark Twain-esque settings. Both Gottsagen and Johnson deliver endearing performances, and LaBeouf’s scruffy, ramshackle manner lifts the film above its sometimes crude dialogue and perfects its madcap, uninhibited wit.—Bruce Diones (In limited release.)

Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark
This adaptation of tales from Alvin Schwartz’s trilogy of children’s books makes their composition its very subject. The action is set between Halloween and Election Day, 1968, in Mill Valley, Pennsylvania, where three nerdy high-school students, Stella (Zoe Colletti), Auggie (Gabriel Rush), and Chuck (Austin Zajutin), plus their new friend, Michael (Logan Lerman), try to pair off with a ghost—a cheaply ghostly figure, who Gothicizes her draft, head to a haunted house. There, they encounter the ghost of a woman—and the book of stories that she’s writing. As new tales appear, written on blank pages by the ghost’s invisible hand, their horrors are visited on the town’s residents—including the four young people, who do some research into local history in the hope of finding the cause of the terror and ending it. The director, André Øvredal, working with a script by Dan and Kevin Hageman, delights in the details of small-town adolescence and the period reconstruction, but the sequences derived from Schwartz’s work lack its urgency and unflinching wit.—R.B. (In wide release.)

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At L’Accolade, a new French restaurant and wine bar in the West Village that focuses on natural wines from small producers, laissez-faire service meets passionate oenophilia. The level of freaking out about wine was high during a recent happy hour, when a man who was already a regular (L’Accolade opened in June) sampled a white and declared, “If I was blinding this I’d be screaming Muscat.”

The ponytailed bartender, who had poured himself a taste, too, said, “It is, in a way.” What that might mean is anyone’s guess (there was no Muscat on the list), but they seemed to be having a great time.

Dreamy French pop seeped through the speakers while two other men intently analyzed a bottle of sparkling Le Petit Beaufort (“A hundred per cent Chardonnay,” one of them said, in awe) and a couple of snacks. These delightful little dishes, available for eight dollars each between 4 and 7 P.M., are artful appetizers posing as drinking food. They include a gutsy melon composition—pickled shaved cucumber, tiny Mexican cucumber, yellow watermelon, honeydew, and cantaloupe assertively spiced with cumin seed, coriander, and black pepper—all brought together by a pool of tangy buttermilk cream. Fried spheres of cod and potato, intriguingly named Brandade Dauphine, sit atop a piquillo-pepper purée, showered with Parmesan. And, if gougeres weren’t decadent enough, the chefs, Ben Traver and Nate Kuester, have fixed that by filling cheese puffs nearly the size of tennis balls with molten aged Cheddar infused with smoked jalapeño—the puffs won’t win any beauty contests, but it’s what’s inside that counts.

One evening, two women waiting for friends to arrive sought instructions from the bartender, who doubled as the host: “Should we wait at the bar?” “You can do whatever you want,” he said with a smile, gesturing wide around the room, which was dotted with hanging succulents, wine bottles, and sophisticated young grownups. There’s a similar generous flexibility to the dinner menu, offered à la carte or in two- or three-course sets. But the ambitious food that Traver (who worked at the Modern and at Café Bou-lud) and Kuester (who has cooked at Aquavit) are making belies L’Accolade’s nonchalant atmosphere.

That evening, the barbecued carrot, among the small plates, was too intriguing to pass up; listed with mustard, sour cherries, and country ham, like a Kentucky picnic, it ended up seeming like little more than carrots with barbecue sauce. The Lettuce and Lentils was half a head of gem and radish curls tinged with a sweet bacon-infused sherry dressing. The gooey Parisienne Gnocchi, studded with thick rounds of red hot chili peppers, was pleasingly confusing. Fluke, often the least favorite fish in a sushi combo, was supremely soft in a crudo, and confoundingly luxurious when mixed with tart white strawberries and quinoa. A jar of textbook duck rillette, with an improvised topping of tart-sweet plums stewed with black vinegar, was polished off completely; scooped up with über-sesame cracker shards.

As the night went on, the music shifted to early-eighties Grandmaster Flash, a formidable cheese plate was demolished, and there was no sign of the main course. Eventually, the heretofore gregarious waiter appeared, abashed, with an explanation: “I’m sorry, the plate of chicken fell on the floor. They have to make a new one.” More wine was ordered.

The entrées, when they finally arrived, looked beautiful, but there were problems. Thick slices of duck, a tad too magenta, straddled an irresistible plank of fried bread. Beef Flatiron, next to an appealingly sticky rice cake, was not medium rare but raw. A silky slab of arctic char, however, accompanied by sweet tomatoes and steamed kohlrabi, had a nicely crisp skin. And that chicken was worth waiting for: wonderfully tender, in a summery sea of corn-and-bean fricassée.

The waiter, back to his carefree self, returned with a parting gift. “The two glasses of wine I’m taking off the bill. Due to the chicken story.” (Entrées $22–$28.)

—Shauna Lyon
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MUSEUM MARVELS


THRILLER THEATRE

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts celebrates the opening of the REACH, its dynamic, state-of-the-art expansion, with a free festival with live music, dance and other performances, Sept. 7-22. On the stage, Theatre Week (Sept. 10-29) makes it easy to catch musicals, dramas and comedies at playhouses throughout the region with $15 and $35 tickets. Works by August Wilson take center stage with Jitney (Sept. 13 - Oct. 20) at Arena Stage, dedicated to American theater, and Fences (Sept. 27 – Oct. 27) at historic Ford’s Theatre. Catch a jaw-dropping rhythmic dance performance from Step Afrika!, one of the most beloved African American dance companies in the country.

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Learn more about the celebration at Kennedy-Center.org/REACH
CULTURAL FESTIVITIES

DC neighborhoods know how to party. Enjoy live music, family-friendly activities and food vendors galore during Adams Morgan Day (Sept. 8) and the H Street Festival (Sept. 21). Revel in riverfront views and sample pours from 20 different Virginia wineries during the Fall Wine Festival & Sunset Tour (Oct. 11-13) at George Washington’s Mount Vernon. Jam to an incredible array of artists at the All Things Go Fall Classic, held at Union Market on Oct. 12 and 13. Comedy lovers will not want to miss the 10th edition of Bentzen Ball, which hosts hilarious performances at various venues from Oct. 24-27.

MUSIC

The Anthem always features can’t-miss concerts and the fall slate is no different: Jenny Lewis (Sept. 5), Andrew Bird (Sept. 14), Mac DeMarco (Sept. 20) and Massive Attack (Sept. 24) will all rattle its walls in the same month. The legendary 9:30 Club pairs indie darlings Deerhunter and Dirty Projectors together on Sept. 8 and hosts the uber-talented Charli XCX on Oct. 18. DC’s dance mecca, Echostage, will go bananas for a set from Diplo on Sept. 14. Capital One Arena hosts pop superstars Carrie Underwood (Oct. 4) and The Chainsmokers (Oct. 15).
The Talk of the Town

Comment
See Nothing

How hard was it, really, to see what Jeffrey Epstein was doing? In the last hours of his life, early on the morning of August 10th, it shouldn’t have been difficult at all. He was in a cell at the Metropolitan Correctional Center, awaiting trial on charges related to the sex trafficking of minors, and a guard was required to check on him every half hour. That was less supervision than he had when he was on suicide watch, in late July—the watch was lifted after just six days—but it should have been sufficient. He was supposed to have a cellmate, too, but he didn’t. And the two guards on duty were, reportedly, asleep.

Those, anyway, were the basic contours of the story as of the end of last week. On Friday, New York’s medical examiner determined that the cause of death was suicide by hanging. Investigations by the Bureau of Prisons, the Justice Department’s inspector general, and the F.B.I. are under way. The warden has temporarily been reassigned; the guards, who may have been working an unacceptable level of overtime and may also have doctored their logs, have been placed on administrative leave.

A careful examination of the events should also redress the conditions that lead to the suicides of prisoners who are not well known, and whose situations never come into view. It might also help dispel many of the conspiracy theories now attached to Epstein’s death.

But it won’t answer a central question in the case: Was everybody asleep? For years, Epstein was able to operate and be feted in the social, financial, and academic worlds, despite barely bothering to conceal his illicit activities. Visitors to his various homes would see young women there who looked as if they should still be in school. In Florida, in 2008, he had secured a shamefully lax plea deal, which U.S. Attorney Alexander Acosta signed off on. (Acosta later became the Labor Secretary for Donald Trump, who had had his own interactions with Epstein; so, as Trump has practically been shouting on Twitter, did Bill Clinton.) Prosecutors there knew of dozens of alleged victims who were minors, but Epstein was allowed to plead guilty to a pair of state prostitution charges, which both hid and distorted the girls’ stories. The lack of respect for young victims is another pathology that extends beyond the Epstein case. Before the Miami Herald published an investigation of that deal last November, Epstein had managed to return to his life in New York, and to evade accountability.

Money offers one explanation for why people seemed to ignore what was plain to see. But money, here, is really shorthand for a range of ways to exert influence. Epstein used it to buy prestige, donating millions to Harvard and hosting dinners for scientists and scholars; and to buy protection, hiring ruthless legal representation. Even now, though, it’s not clear what his business was. Some of the people who dealt with him were wealthier than he was and, one would think, at least as financially adept. Among them are Les Wexner, the head of L Brands; Leon Black, the founder of the private-equity firm Apollo Global Management; and Glenn Dubin, a co-founder of Highbridge Capital Management, whose wife, Eva, was an old friend of Epstein’s. They all gave Epstein money to manage, or retained him as an adviser in personal financial matters, or allowed him to be included in their deals. Why they would do so isn’t obvious.

The Times, in an account of Epstein’s relationship with J P Morgan, reported that, in late 2008, compliance officers at the firm’s private bank began conducting a review to identify problem clients from whom it ought to disassociate itself. (The bank had had some unfortunate dealings with Bernie Madoff.) They flagged Epstein; this was after the guilty plea, and after reports questioning the source of his wealth had surfaced. The bank kept working with him. (J P Morgan denied to the Times that...
a top executive had overruled the compliance team.) According to the Times' sources, the reason, remarkably, was not the amount of money Epstein had but how much the bank valued his relationships—the friends and associates whose business he might steer its way. The Wall Street Journal reported that when Highbridge was sold to JP Morgan, in 2004, Epstein received a fifteen-million-dollar fee from Highbridge, apparently for making an introduction. The bank didn’t extricate itself until 2013; after that, Epstein moved to Deutsche Bank, which kept him on as a client until this summer.

Tolerance of Epstein, in other words, wasn’t simply a matter of bystanders focusing on the dollar amount and not seeing the rest. He often suggested that he was involved in complex foreign-currency trades, big plays with an intellectual aspect. In reality, he may have just been the guy who gets a cut. But what currency he was actually trading in—charisma, loyalty, insight, tax schemes, or even, as he reportedly insinuated, secrets—is a matter for further inquiry. The financial accounting doesn’t add up.

Indeed, the day before Epstein’s death, Wexner released a statement saying that, in trying to disentangle his finances from Epstein’s, after the plea deal, he’d concluded that Epstein had “misappropriated vast sums of money” belonging to it. It would have been helpful if Wexner had made that discovery public years ago. Instead, Epstein quietly compensated him with a transfer of funds—from a supposedly charitable foundation that he had set up and from another entity that he controlled—to the Wexner family’s foundation. (The proper use of charitable foundations is another issue that the Epstein case raises; they are not supposed to be vehicles for obscuring the true nature of transactions.) Epstein had long deployed philanthropy to burnish his reputation. But he also encouraged speculation about his ties to powerful people. He sold the idea that he had a way in and up that was outside normal channels; it is disheartening to realize how many influential people seemed to find that appealing.

Meanwhile, Epstein’s victims were trapped in a nightmare. Last week, documents were unsealed in a defamation suit that Virginia Giuffre had filed in 2015 against Ghislaine Maxwell, whose relationship with Epstein is somewhat opaque, and who Giuffre alleges aided him in abusing her. Maxwell settled the suit and has denied any wrongdoing, but others have made similar allegations. Prosecutors have pledged that, despite Epstein’s death, they will pursue any accomplices or co-conspirators. There will, doubtless, be more to learn, from more women. Epstein is absent, but his crimes should be clear to see. They always were.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

Torch Dept.

Backstory

People familiar with Meat Loaf’s seminal 1977 album, “Bat Out of Hell,” whose cover art features a long-haired man on a horse-skulled motorcycle, flying up through a graveyard, into a flame-red sky, under the gaze of an enormous bat, will remember one song’s distinctive come-on. “’On a hot summer night, would you offer your throat to the wolf with the red roses?’” a man asks. A provocative dialogue ensues. In “Bat Out of Hell: The Musical,” now at City Center, after runs in the U.K. and Toronto, the question functions as a riddle, asked repeatedly by the show’s hero, Strat, played by Andrew Polec, on his search for love in the post-apocalyptic city of Obsidian, where he lives with his street gang, the Lost, sometime after the chemical wars. The question is a stumper. Even when it’s posed on the Meat Loaf album, Polec said the other day, “you’re like, ‘What is this? Like, why? And whose voice is that?’” That last question, at least, is easily answered. “It’s Jim,” Polec said.

Jim Steinman, seventy-one, is the songwriter behind “Bat Out of Hell” and its two sequels, which together have sold some hundred million copies, and the musical, which also includes hits that he wrote for Air Supply and Celine Dion. (Hellfire, it turns out, transitions seamlessly to “Making Love Out of Nothing at All.”) Polec has starred in the show since it began, in 2017. As Strat, wide-eyed and belting out rock anthems with ease, he prances shirtless in leather pants, falls in love with Raven (Christina Bennington), rattles her powerful parents (Bradley Dean and Lena Hall), stands on a chopper, kneels under a Mylar-glitter snowfall, smears stage blood on his torso, and gets crucificatory with a mike cord. Superfans have tattoos of the Lost gang’s symbol and of Polec himself. The day before the New York premiere, as an image of him writhed across a Times Square jumbotron, Polec revisited the spot where his “Bat” journey began: a building on West Forty-third Street, formerly home to a casting agency and now a WeWork. Polec, thirty, is willowy and muscular, with a puff of blond hair, blue eyes, and the cosmic wonder of the angel in “Barbarella.” He wore all black: boots, skinny jeans, T-shirt, bolero hat. In 2015, as an unknown, he auditioned there for “The SpongeBob Musical.” “I was, like, ‘I love SpongeBob! SpongeBob is my life!’” he said. “I brought this to the audition.” He held up a child-size SpongeBob backpack. Auditioners were asked to bring an instrument, so he brought a large red drum. “I bombed,” he said. Before he left, another actor said, “There’s a ‘Bat Out of Hell’ audition down the street.”

Polec was incredulous. “Meat Loaf’s ‘Bat Out of Hell?’” he asked.

“No,” the actor said. “Some Jim guy.”

Polec knew all about the Jim guy: “Bat Out of Hell” was also his life. He raced to Pearl Studios, near Thirty-fifth Street, trying not to bump pedestrians with his drum. He retraced that journey now, making his way down Eighth Avenue in his SpongeBob backpack and talking about his love of Meat Loaf. Polec discovered “Bat Out of Hell” as a teen-age athlete, after a bicycle accident ended his lacrosse career. (Steep hill, blind turn, desire to “keep going fast.” “I Supermanned,” he said.) As he recovered from a severe head injury, his parents played Seventies rock to cheer him up. Hearing “Paradise by the Dashboard Light,” Meat Loaf’s teen-lust epic, on themes of baseball, parking, and regret, Polec was thunderstruck. “Meat Loaf is like an athlete of the voice,” he said. He focussed his energy in a rock-and-roll direction. Leads in high-school
musicals followed (Lancelot, Beanstalk Jack, Harold Hill), then theatre at the University of Rochester and at Brown.

At Pearl Studios, Polec took the elevator to the twelfth floor. His audition room was empty, and he entered, reënacting the moment. “I was, like, I’m going to sing Jet, “Are You Gonna Be My Girl,” while bangin’ on this drum,” he said. He got a callback—with drum—for a supporting role, and was cast as the lead.

A few hours before showtime, in his dressing room at City Center, Polec recalled meeting Meat Loaf. “I called him Mr. Loaf,” Polec said. “He said, ‘Call me Meat.’” Meat gave him some advice: “Make it your flesh, make it your blood. Give it as a gift to the audience.” Performing in the show “feels like love,” Polec said. “Meat Loaf passed the torch to us. It’s an honor to take that fire from Mt. Olympus and pass it around.” The torch isn’t all they share. “Meat said that when he was in high school, at a track-and-field event, he was hit in the head with a shot put,” Polec said. “That’s how he started singing.”

—Sarah Larson

DEPT. OF HOARDING
RARE PAIRS

One morning in Manhattan: downtown, a sneaker pop-up selling ninety-nine-cent AriZona Iced Tea-branded Adidas turned into a riot, with a bottle hurled and police summoned. Seventy blocks uptown: Sotheby’s hosted a hushed display of a hundred pairs of what the auction house called the “rarest sneakers ever produced.” Among the people in the gallery was Miles S. Nadal, the Canadian-born executive chairman of the Peerage Capital Group. He was dressed like any other sixty-one-year-old businessman, in a dark suit and a striped tie, but on his feet he wore a spotless pair of “varsity blue/varisty red” Sacai x Nike LD Waffle trainers, which featured double swooshes, two tongues, and midsoles that jutted out the back like little cliffs. He had bought them the day before, for seven hundred and fifty dollars, at the SoHo sneaker store Stadium Goods.

“I’ve been doing this for a long time,” Nadal said, of his shoe habit. He paused for effect: “Since Saturday.” That’s when he agreed to buy ninety-nine pairs of the sneakers in the Sotheby’s sale; they had originally been scheduled to be auctioned online, in partnership with Stadium Goods. He paid eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the lot. He wanted to buy all hundred pairs, but one, the only known pair of Nike Moon Shoes in never-worn condition, designed in 1972 by the company’s co-founder, Bill Bowerman, was off limits. (The consignor decided to keep them available for public auction.) Nadal hadn’t paid attention to sneakers before. “I saw a piece in the Post about the sale,” he said. “I didn’t collect shoes seriously since meeting Jay Leno, seven years ago. (He had purchased a hangout with Leno at a charity auction.) Now he has a hundred and forty-two rare cars and forty motorcycles, which are kept in a private collection, in Toronto, that he calls the Dare to Dream Automobile Museum.”

“I’m going to put the sneakers in as a permanent installation,” he said.

Nadal seems ready for some new hobbies. In 2015, he was the subject of a Securities and Exchange Commission investigation into his expenses, as C.E.O. of a company called M.D.C. Partners. The S.E.C. later fined him five and a half million dollars and banned him for five years from serving as an officer or director of a public company. (Peerage is privately owned.) He had failed to disclose perks, including cosmetic surgery, jewelry, pet care, and yacht-related expenses, totalling more than eleven million dollars.

“I learned that you can never be too humble,” he said. He was joined in the exhibition space by Noah Wunsch, Sotheby’s global head of e-commerce. The two had met earlier this year, after Peerage bought Sotheby’s International Realty Canada. Wunsch pointed to a pair of blue sneakers in a vitrine—the Air Jordan 11 Derek Jeter shoe, commemorating the New York Yankee’s retirement, in 2017. Only five pairs were given out, via a scratch-off lottery.

“My favorite shoe might be the Jeter shoe,” Nadal said. “A, I love Jeter. And, B, I just love the aesthetic of it.”

“The navy suède is gorgeous,” Wunsch said. “It’s got an Yves Klein blue to it.”

“I was thinking if I could find some-thing like this that wasn’t as dear, that was wearable, I’d buy three or four pair of them,” to keep in his homes in New York, Toronto, the Bahamas, and Florida, Nadal said. Next, they admired four pairs of unreleased Travis Scott x Air Jordan 4s, designed by Scott, a rapper, for friends and family. “My kids know all about him because he’s Kylie Jenner’s boyfriend,” Nadal said. They moved on to another

Miles S. Nadal

musician-designed shoe, a 2017 collaboration between Pharrell, Adidas, and Chanel—this one with the word “Karl” on the upper. Pharrell had given them to Karl Lagerfeld, who died in February.

In the center of the room was a vitrine containing the Nike Moon Shoes, which were displayed with a vintage waffle iron. (Bowerman used his wife’s waffle iron to create the prototype of the shoe’s sole.) “These are unbelievable,” Nadal said, peering through the glass. “First of all, love Nike. Love Phil Knight,” the other Nike founder. Nadal mentioned Knight’s best-selling memoir, “Shoe Dog.” “Actually read the book—cover to cover! A rarity for me.” He stared at the Moon Shoes. The presale estimate was a hundred and sixty thousand dollars.

The next week, Nadal nabbed the Moon Shoes, for four hundred and thirty-seven thousand and five hundred dollars. The price beat the world auction record—a hundred and ninety thousand dollars, for a signed pair of Converse worn by Michael Jordan. Afterward, Nadal said that he expected sneaker collecting to become a lifelong passion. “I
have a big quote on the wall in my museum, and it says, ‘The unattainable is invariably attractive,’” he said. “It’s not my quote—I got it from the Porsche Museum, in Germany—but I think it’s true.” The quote is by the artist Jenny Holzer, who painted it on the side of a BMW “art car,” and is widely understood to be a critique of consumerism. —Mark Yarm

SOUTHAMPTON POSTCARD
MEET THE MAYOR

When William F. Buckley ran for mayor of New York City, in 1965, a reporter asked him what he would do first if elected. “Demand a recount,” he said. Jesse Warren, Southampton’s youngest ever mayor, at thirty-seven, had no such impulse in June, as he watched the ballot count that gave him a victory, by forty-five votes, over the incumbent.

“I wasn’t expected to win,” Warren, who moved to the village in 2009, said. (His opponent was a lifer.) “My campaign manager said my run was supposed to be a learning experience.” Warren grew up in Roslyn, graduated from Brown, worked in finance, and then quit to move to Southampton and open a high-end boutique called Tenet, on Main Street. He ran on the Unity Wave ticket, a party he created to expand local participation in government. One of his first acts as mayor was to pass a popular resolution to allow surfing schools to reopen on the beach. “But only twelve students at a time,” he said.

To woo Southampton’s full-time population of thirty-three hundred, Warren used social media, a campaign-tracking app, search-engine optimization, Freedom of Information Act requests (to locate absentee voters), and old-fashioned door knocking. The Southampton Press referred to him as a “wake-up call” for his opponent (Warren’s platform included cleaning up Lake Agawam, which is dangerously polluted, and revitalizing the business district), but the paper didn’t endorse him.

On a recent Thursday, the mayor, who does not like to discuss his outfits with the media (tight gray jeans, untucked checkered shirt, and sneakers as bright white as his teeth), was minding his nearly empty store. “This time of day, everyone is at the beach,” he said. “But they’ll be back to shop later, and if we have a cloudy weekend we’ll need all hands on deck.” The hands were a squad of young women, several in very short jean cutoffs.

It was a good time to wander over to Village Hall, his other workplace, with a quick stop for lunch. Warren, who is the same age as Mayor Pete, of South Bend, and who has the same bouncy step, has already learned that getting from one place to another requires a time-allocation strategy. Southampton has a diverse population, which includes—along with Thurston Howell-ish blue bloods and unreal housewives—many middle-class residents, and members of the Shinnecock tribe, whose reservation borders the village. An older man stopped and thanked him for recently showing up in person (along with the police) to shush a noisy night club.

In Catena’s Market, a supporter named Denise Smith, a former Southampton High School cheerleader, stopped to chat. Part Shinnecock, part African-American, she owns a food truck called Native Soul. “When I first met you, I thought, Who is this little boy?” she said. Warren cringed a little, wolfed his sandwich, and told her that he was late for a meeting. She walked with him as he popped in to Ralph’s Barber Shop and greeted constituents. They passed a Club Monaco, which Smith said used to be a five-and-ten, and Herrick Hardware, a family-run store with beach chairs hanging on its exterior like climbing roses.

At the red-brick Village Hall, Warren greeted staffers who were dealing with parking stickers and ice-cream-truck permits, and slipped into his dingy office. (He said that he plans to “brighten it up.”) After a meeting with county officials about sharing services, he hustled to the ribbon-cutting of a thrift store at the Southampton History Museum. Photo op done, he shook hands with Fred Thiele, a New York assemblyman, who is sixty-six.

“So far, I love it. No issues yet,” Warren said, when Thiele asked him about the new gig.

“Well,” Thiele, in a blue blazer, replied, “there’s still time.”

On his way back to Village Hall for a planning-commission meeting, Warren was accosted by four noisy women at a table outside Sant Ambroeus. They were dressed in white and were drinking rosé. One, a Tenet customer, showed Warren a dress that she had just bought, and asked how business was.

“I’m the mayor now,” he said.

“Shut up! You are not,” she replied. “How old are you?”

The next morning, after a meeting at a private residence about the lake (a
runoff valve sometimes spews toxic water near beaches), Warren drove his black Mercedes past landscaping trucks and children bicycling in tennis whites, and parked on Pond Lane. He made a quick visit to the former property of Pyrrhus Concer, a freed slave who became a prominent whaler in the eighteen-forties; Warren is hoping to renovate the site with help from the Southampton African American Museum. Also on his weekend schedule were a hospital fundraiser and a footrace benefitting an organization called Hope for Depression.

He crossed the street to inspect the scum on Lake Agawam. Last year, the level of blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) was three thousand times the threshold allowed by the E.P.A. In 2012, a Jack Russell terrier died after splashing in the stuff in East Hampton’s Georgica Pond. Warren spotted a little girl in a summer dress perched at the water’s edge. “That is a potentially dangerous situation,” he said.

—Bob Morris

**BARKS AND BITES**

**LITTLE KIBBLE**

There was a loud altercation at the hostess station the other evening at the Wilson, a New American restaurant on West Twenty-seventh Street. An impatient patron in an orange gingham shirt started whining—typical. Then he commenced yelping.

“Nelson! Sit!” Lauren, the owner of the Chihuahua-Shih Tzu mix (per a DNA test), commanded. She was the dog’s plus-one for an event billed as a dinner “pawty,” thrown by JustFoodforDogs, a California-based company selling “freshly prepared meals made from human-grade ingredients.” (“It is food for dogs . . . not dog food!”) The company recently made its first major foray into New York City—an exhibition kitchen, inside the Petco in Union Square, that aims to produce one ton of food a day—and was hoping to get some of the city’s fussed-over pooches hooked.

“He loves raw and organic food and single-ingredient treats,” Lauren said, as Nelson (@nelson.the.pup; 29.2K Instagram followers) skittered toward the bar. “Biff, do not eat the napkin!” a recent college graduate named Morgan yelled, lunging after a sixty-pound ball of white fluff wearing an avocado-patterned bandanna. According to Morgan, Biff (@biffthesamoyed; 34.9K) favors cow hooves but is an equal-opportunist eater. “See this scratch on my face?” Morgan said. “I was eating a bagel in bed, and all of a sudden he swoops in!”

Cody, a miniature Goldendoodle wearing a bucket hat and a backpack (@codycuddlebug; 39.5K; bio: #FluffyNotFat), crashed into a table. “He’s any party’s resident drunk uncle,” his owner, Anj, said. “But I don’t give my dog alcohol.” She does cook breakfast for Cody on weekends. She pulled up photos. “This one is of the Good Boy Challenge. You leave the food”—fried eggs, for instance, with dog doughnuts from Maison de pawZ—“and then you wait. It’s like the marshmallow test for dogs.” Posts like that one led to Cody being cast in a Dyson social-media campaign. “They gave us—him—a vacuum cleaner!” Anj said.

Another attendee was a red Maltesepoodle mix named Agador (@poochofny; 143K). “On social, he’s referred to as ‘the Bob Ross of dogs,’” Agador’s owner, Allan, said, noting the pet’s humidity-defying bouffant. “In Europe, they call him Jeff Lynne, from Electric Light Orchestra.” Allan carries a special Japanese comb, for on-the-spot repoufing. “The first thing people want to do is touch his hair,” he said.

Agador has worked with Katy Perry, to promote her single “Bon Appétit” (“I’m a five-star Michelin/A Kobe flown in/You want what I’m cwooking, boy”), and has appeared in ads for Google and A.T. & T. Most of his meals are a medley of Instant Pot-steamed vegetables and boiled Trader Joe’s chicken, but a visit to the Petco kitchen had generated positive reviews.

The furry V.I.P.s lost their cool as waiters at the restaurant—which offers a forty-two-dollar grilled rib eye for patrons’ dogs—spooned out variously colored mush into bowls on the floor: New Zealand venison and squash; wild Alaskan cod and sweet potato; turkey and whole-wheat macaroni. Whether or not JustFoodforDogs’s claims, such as a “healthy, soft, shiny coat, abundant energy, brightness in the eyes, good muscle tone, little to no ‘doggie odor,’ well-formed stool,” would prove true remained to be seen.

Finally, it was time for the humans to be fed. The company’s founder, Shawn Buckley, a serial entrepreneur who wore a blazer and jeans, said a few words about the perils of kibble—“there’s nothing natural about a little brown pellet”—as lamb meatballs, falafel waffles, and Brussel-sprout tacos were passed. “There was a time when dry food was appropriate—when dogs were on the farm or left outside in doghouses,” he said. “But we live in a world now where the D. Hotel is a hundred bucks a night to put your dog up!” He bemoaned the staying power of “Big Kibble.” He didn’t get his first dog, a black Lab named Simon, until he was thirty-eight, at the urging of his ex-fiancée, who is now his publicist. “My current dog is Marty, who is a three-legged Chihuahua,” he said. Marty is not on social media. “I can’t imagine why anybody would want to know about me or my dog or where I had dinner, with pictures of my dessert,” Buckley said.

Agador’s “brother” Fred (@littlefreddietinkles; 34.2K) was still peckish. He spotted a scrap of human food and lurchched toward it, sending a loaded plate smashing to the floor. “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” played through speakers.

JustFoodforDogs is facing a branding challenge: it has branched out into the cat-food game. “We started with three cat-food recipes, and two we never even brought to market,” Buckley said. “They’ll like something for a while, and then they’ll stop liking it. Cats are so difficult.”

—Emma Allen
W. E. B. Du Bois, the twentieth-century’s leading black intellectual, once lived at 3059 Villa Avenue, in the Bronx. He moved to a small rented house there with his wife, Nina Gomer Du Bois, and their daughter, Yolande, in about 1912. When I’m walking in that borough I sometimes stop by the site. It’s just off Jerome Avenue, not far from the Bedford Park subway station. The anchor business at that intersection seems to be the Osvaldo #5 Barber Shop, which flies pennants advertising services for sending money to Africa and to Bangladesh. All kinds of people pass by. You hear Spanish and Chinese and maybe Hausa spoken on the street. The first time I went to Du Bois’s old address, I wondered if I might find a plaque, but the house is gone, and 3059 Villa is now part of a fenced-in parking lot. Maple and locust trees shade the front stoops, and residents wait at eight-twenty on Tuesday mornings to move their cars for the street-sweeping truck. A fire hydrant drips, slowly enlarging a hole in the sidewalk. Even unmemorialized, 3059 Villa is a not-unpleasant spot from which to contemplate the great man’s life.

About a forty-minute walk away is the Bronx Zoo. In 1912, it was called the New York Zoological Park, and it was run by a patrician named Madison Grant from an old New York family. Though he and Du Bois lived and worked within a few miles of each other for decades, I don’t know if the two ever met. As much as anyone on the planet, Grant was Du Bois’s natural enemy. Grant favored a certain type of white man over all other kinds of humans, on a graded scale of disapproval, and he reserved his vilest ill wishes and contempt for blacks.

As Du Bois would have remembered, in 1906 the zoo put an African man named Ota Benga on display in the primate cages. Ota Benga belonged to a tribe of Pygmies whom the Belgians had slaughtered in the Congo. A traveller had brought him to New York and to the zoo, where huge crowds came to stare and jeer. A group of black Baptist ministers went to the mayor and demanded that the travesty be stopped. The mayor’s office referred them to Grant, who put them off. He later said that it was important for the zoo not to give even the appearance of having yielded to the ministers’ demand. Eventually, Ota Benga was moved to the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, in Brooklyn, and he ended up in Virginia, where he shot himself.

Madison Grant was someone who preferred to stay in the background and pull strings; but because of history, both past and present, he is not in the background anymore. Like other men of his social set—Teddy Roosevelt and Henry Fairfield Osborn, a president of the American Museum of Natural History, to name two—Grant adored nature, which to his milieu meant the North American continent, minus its original native population and reconstituted as a hunting preserve and contemplative retreat for themselves. Grant and others founded the conservation movement in America. They helped to save the buffalo. When the herds on the Great Plains had been almost destroyed, a new herd was started in Oklahoma, with animals shipped by rail from the zoo. Today, of the thousands of buffalo on the plains, many have distant relatives in the Bronx; the force behind the reintroduction was the American Bison Society, of which Grant was a principal member.

That was the “better” Grant. But, like a character in a comic book who harbors an inner arch-villain with a plan to destroy the universe, Grant had another side. Just as he feared that certain species of native wildlife would go extinct,
he feared that the same would happen to a precious (and largely imaginary) kind of white person. To address this potential disaster, in 1916 he published what remains his best-known book, “The Passing of the Great Race; or, the Racial Basis of European History.” A centenary edition is available online.

To return for a moment to the “better” Grant: starting in 1906, he headed the commission that built the Bronx River Parkway. The commission bought up property along the river valley and created a landscaped autoroute leading to the headwaters in Westchester County. The project became a model for other parkways in the city and beyond.

In an oak grove overlooking the river is a flagpole with a plaque honoring “the founder of the Bronx River Parkway.” But the honoree is William White Niles, another commission member. There is no memorial devoted to Grant anywhere along the parkway; nor are there any public monuments to Grant at the zoo. In the borough where he did a lot for New York’s civic improvement, nothing is named for Madison Grant.

“The Passing of the Great Race” is probably why. It became one of the most famous racist books ever written, and today it’s considered part of a modern genre that began with Arthur de Gobineau’s “The Inequality of Human Races,” published in 1853-55. Hitler read “The Passing of the Great Race” in translation, admired what Grant had to say about the great “Nordic race,” and wrote the author a fan letter, calling the book “my Bible.” Grant took pride in the Nazis’ use of his book and sent them copies of a subsequent one, about how American Nordics like himself had conquered North America. He also was a director of the American Eugenics Society, thought “worthless” individuals should be sterilized, and considered his lobbying for the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, which shut down most immigration to the U.S., to be one of the great achievements of his life.

The preposterousness of “The Passing of the Great Race” approaches the sublime. To summarize: according to Grant, all of Western civilization was created by a race of tall, blond, warlike people who ventured down from Northern Europe every so often to help start great cultures, such as ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, before retiring into their northern forests. Over time, a lot of these Nordics became "mongrelized" by mixing with “inferior races” (Grant’s books cannot be described without the use of many quotation marks), or else they killed one another off in internecine wars because of their bravery and their love of fighting, as they were doing at that very moment in the Great War. By Grant’s reckoning, the greatest men in Western history had been Nordics. Among the stars he claimed for the team, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Dante all clearly possessed Nordic blood, as he had determined by careful study of the shapes of their heads in busts.

He wrote that a major problem leading to Nordic “mongrelization” was the uncooperative Nordic women, who had a habit of choosing the wrong men to mate with. Grant himself never married. He conceded, with regret, “It would be in a democracy, a virtual impossibility to limit by law the right to breed to a privileged and chosen few.”

And what was the special attribute the Nordics possessed that made them so unique and sacred? Grant didn’t talk about it much, but it slipped out once in a while. The secret dwelt in a mysterious substance known as “germ-plasm.” Everybody had it, but the Nordics’ germ-plasm was the best. Grant and his co-believers could apparently use phrases such as “our superior germ-plasm” with a straight face.

Grant often popped up in the news. He had a bald head, white sideburns, and a mustache that spread widely on either side of his face. The social pages followed his comings and goings, when he summereed in Bar Harbor and wintered in Boca Raton. New York society either did not know what he had written (and said, and done) or did not care, or it agreed with him.

He died in 1937. Soon the war put his love of the Nazis in a new light, and years of almost no public mention followed. But, as dependable old hatreds are rising up again, Grant has become more current. An excellent and unsparing biography, “Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant,” by Jonathan Peter Spiro, came out in 2009. (Grant was the first person to use the term “master race” in a modern context.) And earlier this year Daniel Okrent published “The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America,” which skillfully describes Grant’s and his pals’ nativist maneuverings. Okrent notes that Charles Scribner’s Sons published Grant’s major books and others by authors of similar leanings. At the same time that Scribner published Hemingway and Fitzgerald, it was the leading purveyor of white-supremacist books in America.

In March, 1929, the Chicago Forum Council, a cultural organization that included white and black members, announced the presentation of “One of the Greatest Debates Ever Held.” According to the Forum’s advertisement, the debate was to take place on Sunday, March 17th, at 3 P.M., in a large hall on South Wabash Avenue. The topic was “Shall the Negro Be Encouraged to Seek Cultural Equality?”

In smaller letters, the ad asked, “Has the Negro the Same Intellectual Possibilities As Other Races?” and below that the answer “Yes!” appeared with a photograph of Du Bois, who would be arguing the affirmative. Alongside the answer “No!” was a photograph of Lothrop Stoddard, a writer, who would argue the negative. In the picture, Stoddard projects a rugged, matinée-idol aura, with slicked-down hair and a black mustache. The ad identified him as a “versatile popularizer of certain theories on race problems” who had been “spreading alarm among white Nordics.”

The Forum Council did not oversell its claim. The Du Bois–Stoddard debate turned out to be a singular event, as important in its way as Lincoln–Douglas or Kennedy–Nixon. The reason more people don’t know about it may be its asymmetry. The other historic matchups featured rivals who disagreed politically but wouldn’t have disputed their opponent’s right to exist. Stoddard had written that “mulattoes” like Du Bois, who could not accept their inferior status, were the chief cause of racial unrest in the United States, and he looked forward to their dying out.

Du Bois’s life has been chronicled definitively in David Levering Lewis’s biography, and Grant now has a biographer, but nobody has written a
biography of Stoddard. One does exist of Stoddard’s father, John Lawson Stoddard, the world traveller who became one of the most successful public speakers of his day. Stoddard’s mother divorced his father for abandonment when Stoddard was a teen-ager. Later, Stoddard, Sr., in his villa in the Tyrol, enlisted an admirer to write the story of his life, and when the biography came out it did not mention that he had a son.

The Forum ad got it right—Stoddard was a “versatile popularizer.” As Huxley was to Darwin, so Stoddard was to Madison Grant. You can almost, but not really, feel sorry for the father-deprived young writer who found a hero in the wealthy older racist. Stoddard grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, attended Harvard like Stoddards before him, and got a Ph.D. in history. In the course of thirty-six years, he wrote at least eighteen books and countless magazine and newspaper articles. He always had to hustle. Basically, he was a freelance writer. His first book, “The French Revolution in San Domingo,” came out in 1914, and he dedicated it to his mother. In it, he discovered what would become his most successful writing strategies: scaring the reader with the spectre of race war, and scaring the Nordic reader with the prospect of losing a race war, as Stoddard interpreted what had happened to the Frenchmen in San Domingo (Haiti). There, as in later Stoddard imaginings, the villains were “mulattoes.” They became inflamed by the French Revolution, and then inflamed their fellow-blacks.

For Stoddard, the pivotal event of recent history was the Russo-Japanese War. By his reckoning, the defeat of a “white” country (Russia) by a “colored” country (Japan) in 1905 had opened the door to disaster. At some point after his Haiti book came out, he read “The Passing of the Great Race,” and it changed his life. Combining Grant’s view of the besieged and noble Nordics with his own ideas about nonwhite peoples, he predicted an imminent worldwide uprising against the “Nordic race.” “The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy” appeared in early 1920. Grant wrote the introduction. The book was an instant hit. Reviewers noticed it favorably. Franz Boas, the anthropologist, panned it, but the Times wrote an approving editorial:

Lothrop Stoddard evokes a new peril, that of an eventual submersion beneath vast waves of yellow men, brown men, black men and red men, whom the Nordics have hitherto dominated . . . with Bolshevism menacing us on the one hand and race extinction through warfare on the other, many people are not unlikely to give [Stoddard’s book] respectful consideration.

In a speech outdoors before more than a hundred thousand people, black and white, in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1921, President Warren G. Harding declared that blacks must have full economic and political rights, but that segregation was also essential to prevent “racial amalgamation,” and social equality was thus a dream that blacks must give up. Harding added:

Whoever will take the time to read and ponder Mr. Lothrop Stoddard’s book on “The Rising Tide of Color” . . . must realize that our race problem here in the United States is only a phase of a race issue that the whole world confronts.

The plug must have sold more than a few books for Stoddard.

Black people as well as white read “The Rising Tide of Color.” Black newspapers called him the “high priest of racial baloney” and the “unbearable Lothrop Stoddard.” A black columnist wrote that the news of the white race’s impending demise would probably come as a surprise to Negroes in the South. And Stoddard’s statistic, that the “colored races” outnumbered whites, did not alarm the black demographic. “The New Book by a White Author Shows Rising Tide of Color Against Oppression; Latest Statistics Show Twice As Many Colored People in the World As White,” an optimist headline in the Baltimore Afro-American said.

Stoddard, in the fog of his apocalyptic musings, made some predictions. He said that Japan was going to expand its influence in the Pacific and get into conflict with the United States, that the brown peoples of India would throw the British out, and that the Islamic world would grow militant and begin hostilities against the West. Whatever his philosophy and methods, his guesses sometimes proved out.

Stoddard was also more talkative than his mentor on the subject of the Nordic race’s secret sauce. In “The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man,” a follow-up to “The Rising Tide of Color,” he explained:

The new individual consists, from the start, of two sorts of plasm. Almost the whole of him is body-plasm—the ever-multiplying cells which differentiate into the organs of the body. But he also contains germ-plasm. At his very conception a tiny bit of the life stuff from which his springs set aside, is carefully isolated from the body-plasm, and follows a course of development entirely its own. In fact, the germ-plasm is not really part of the individual; he is merely its bearer, destined to pass it on to other bearers of the life chain.

This was the person whom Du Bois would debate, and try to prove that a black person could be the equal of.

At the time of the debate, Du Bois had just turned sixty-one. He had already written “The Souls of Black Folk,” helped to found the N.A.A.C.P., organized and led Pan-African conferences, and gained tens of thousands of readers for The Crisis, the N.A.A.C.P.’s magazine, which he edited and frequently contributed to. Like Stoddard, he had a Ph.D. in history from Harvard. He wore a more modest mustache, stood barely five feet six, and smoked Benson & Hedges cigarettes. Despite being often on the road and under plenty of stress, he lived for thirty-four more years.

Stoddard admitted to reading Du Bois’s books, and once went so far as to say that he treasured them in his library. He seems to have taken a kind of negative inspiration from Du Bois. On the first page of “The Souls of Black Folk,” published in 1903, Du Bois wrote, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” On page 1 of “The French Revolution in San Domingo,” Stoddard wrote, in 1914, “The ‘conflict of color’ . . . bids fair to be the fundamental problem of the twentieth century.” In “The Rising Tide of Color,” he cites Du Bois, to the effect that the colored peoples of the world are getting tired of white domination and will soon rise up.

The Chicago debate happened in this
way: about a year and a half earlier, the magazine The Forum had asked Stoddard and Alain LeRoy Locke, the black writer, philosopher, and founding figure of the Harlem Renaissance, to write on the subject “Shall We Give the Negro Cultural Equality?” The magazine also asked the two to read their pieces live on the radio. But then Locke, recovering from an unhappy affair with Langston Hughes, went to Europe, and by September 23, 1927, the day of the broadcast, he had not returned.

Du Bois agreed to fill in. What he said on air, elaborating on what Locke had written, must have been good, because The Forum’s editor told him that the debate was “a corker,” and the consensus was that Du Bois had won. The Forum Council organizers then suggested holding the debate again, before a paying crowd.

Stoddard had to have known that the audience would be mostly black. Home-field advantage would be with Du Bois. Why did Stoddard agree? Like any author with books to sell, he probably thought he could use the publicity. (He had two new ones, “The Story of Youth” and “Luck: Your Silent Partner.”) Also, Stoddard probably believed that he could overawe any audience of blacks. He had denied being a member of the Ku Klux Klan but endorsed its tactics passionately in his books. And, in 1926, he gave a lecture before two thousand at Tuskegee University, in Alabama, informing them that the Nordic race was superior to nonwhites and that, for the good of all races, the world must continue to be governed by white supremacy. A black newspaper reported that the students “sat averseicken during the address, which terminated without any applause.”

Du Bois, a realist, wondered if Stoddard would show up. In letters to Fred Atkins Moore, the director of the Forum Council, Du Bois asked if they should line up an alternate. He suggested inviting an egregiously racist senator, like James Thomas Heflin, of Alabama: “He would be a scream and you would clean up if you could get hold of him.” But Stoddard made positive noises about his plans to be there. He and Du Bois agreed in advance on the topic. It was decided that Du Bois would speak first.

Tickets for the debate sold for fifty or seventy-five cents. The crowd numbered five thousand, four thousand, or three thousand, according to different counts. Du Bois, in a letter to his wife, Nina, said that hundreds could not get in. The Chicago Defender, the city’s leading black newspaper, ran a photo that showed a packed hall—floor seating, and a wraparound balcony—with an American-flag-draped stage. “It was a great occasion,” Du Bois wrote to Nina.

Moore opened the program by telling the audience that the Forum Council itself “takes no stand on any questions whatsoever.” That is, the question of whether black people were inferior to whites and therefore not entitled to full equality remained open. Moore himself was white. He asked the audience to refrain from applause. Then he introduced Du Bois, “one of the ablest speakers for his race not only in America but in the whole world,” and Stoddard, “whose books and writings and speaking have made his views known to many hundreds of thousands of people both in this country and abroad.”

Du Bois steps to the lectern. He begins by asking what exactly “Negroes” are, what “cultural equality” is, and how anyone can be “encouraged” to seek it. He asks why Negroes or anybody else should not be encouraged to seek cultural equality. He allows that maybe in the past Negroes couldn’t have reached it, but since emancipation they have come wonderfully far, an accomplishment that “has few parallels in human history.” For this they had expected to be applauded, he says; but instead white America feared them and said their advance threatened civilization—as if culture were some fixed quantity, and Negroes’ having more of it would mean less of it for others.

Du Bois points out that such a view imagines culture as if it were material goods, the best of which belong to only the few who have leisure to enjoy them; and then these people begin to see the universe as made specially for them, and elect themselves as the “Chosen People”; and then they think that if the darker races come forward they “are going to spoil the divine gifts of the Nordics.” But
there is no scientific proof that modern culture came from Nordics, or that Nordic brains are better. “In fact,” Du Bois says, “the proofs of essential human equality of gift are overwhelming.”

He says that if Nordics believe themselves to be superior, and do not want to mingle their blood with that of other races, who is forcing them? They can keep to themselves if they wish. He begins to thunder:

But this has never been the Nordic program. Their program is the subjection and rulership of the world for the benefit of the Nordics. They have overrun the earth and brought not simply modern civilization and technique, but with it exploitation, slavery and degradation to the majority of men... They have been responsible for more intermixture of races than any other people, ancient and modern, and they have inflicted this miscegenation on helpless unwilling slaves by force, fraud and insult; and this is the folk that today has the impudence to turn on the darker races, when they demand a share of civilization, and cry: “You shall not marry our daughters!”

The blunt, crude reply is: Who in Hell asked to marry your daughters?

Du Bois says that what black, brown, and yellow people do want is to have the barriers to equal citizenship torn down—“the demand is so reasonable and logical that to deny it is not simply to hurt and hinder them, it is to fly in the face of your own white civilization.” He scores the senselessness of racial categories, in which a mixed-race person like himself could as easily be considered a Nordic as a Negro. The hypocrisy gets worse, he says, when America, “a great white nation with a magnificent Plan of Salvation,” tosses out Christian behavior in dealing with issues of race: “The attacks that white people themselves have made upon their own moral structure are worse for civilization than anything that any body of Negroes could ever do.”

Then he asks the world of white supremacy a practical question: If it really intends to keep other races in subjection—can it? The white exploiters can’t even get along among themselves, as was demonstrated by the recent war, which was “a matter of jealousy in the division of the spoils of Asia and Africa, and by it you nearly ruined civilization.”

Stoddard goes next. Having been praised by the moderator for his courage in appearing in a venue where Du Bois has so many supporters, Stoddard begins, “Nothing is more unfortunate than delusion. The Negro has been the victim of delusion ever since the Civil War.” He does not warn the audience against being swept away by his mulatto opponent, nor does he say (as he has already written elsewhere) that white Americans would rather see themselves and their children dead than mix with black people. Du Bois is surprised by the weakness of his performance, and later attributes it to Stoddard’s being too cautious to state frankly what he believes.

Stoddard outlines a solution, which he calls “bi-racialism”—a “separate but equal” setup, which he says will be based not on any inherent inferiority but merely on racial “difference.” He says that white people don’t want to mix with Asians, either, although they don’t find Asians inferior—just “different.” He uses the famous metaphor of the hand, first proposed by Booker T. Washington—that “in all things purely social [the races] can be as separate as the fingers; yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

The defining moment of the debate occurs as Stoddard describes how bi-racialism will provide each race with its own public sphere. The Forum Council later printed the debate in a small book, which records the moment. Stoddard says:

The more enlightened men of southern white America... are doing their best to see that separation shall not mean discrimination; that if the Negroes have separate schools, they shall be good schools; that if they have separate train accommodations, they shall have good accommodations. [laughter]

There is just that one bracketed word, “laughter.” The transcription is being polite. Blacks who had moved to Chicago from the South knew the Jim Crow cars. The absurd notion that Jim Crow cars were anything except horrible—dirty, crowded, inconvenient, degrading—got a huge laugh. As the reporter for the Baltimore Afro-American put it:

A good-natured burst of laughter from all parts of the hall interrupted Mr. Stoddard when, in explaining his bi-racial theory and attempting to show that it did not mean discrimination, said that under such a system there would be the same kind of schools for Negroes, but separate, the same kind of railway coaches, but separate. . . . When the laughter had subsided, Mr. Stoddard, in a manner of mixed humility and courage, claimed that he could not see the joke. This brought more gales of laughter.
Du Bois, in his rebuttal, says the reason that Stoddard does not understand why the audience laughed is that he has never ridden in a Jim Crow car. He adds, “We have.” Stoddard, when his turn comes again, scolds the audience, saying that real progress is being made in bi-racialism, and “that you have something that you cannot laugh down, that you cannot sneer at, that you cannot be cynical about.” But it is too late; he is fighting a rear-guard action. Du Bois ends by wondering whether the mistake that white supremacists make is believing that civilization is a gift bestowed by an elite, and not derived from “the masses of ordinary people.” With the moderator’s final thanks, the event tapers off in politeness, obscuring the fact that Stoddard has been more or less laughed off the stage.

News of Du Bois’s victory spread fast. “DuBois Shatters Stoddard’s Cultural Theories in Debate; Thousands Jam Hall...Cheered As He Proves Race Equality,” the Defender’s front-page headline ran. “5,000 Cheer W.E.B. DuBois, Laugh at Lothrop Stoddard,” the Afro-American blared. Soon came requests that the debate be repeated in other Northern cities. The idea of watching the champion of white supremacy get shot down by a brilliant black debater had great appeal. If Stoddard had been willing, the two might have sold out halls across the country. In the process, the lunacy of his theories might have been laid bare, and the Nazis who later used Stoddard and Grant and other American racists to justify the crimes of the Third Reich might have had less to work with.

To requests for more debates, Du Bois replied that he was willing, but doubted whether Stoddard would agree. Eventually, Du Bois received confirmation from the director of a lecturers’ agency: “Lothrop Stoddard does not want to debate you again.” But great debates must be repeated in order to be remembered; Lincoln and Douglas, Kennedy and Nixon did not debate each other only once.

Stoddard had his dignity to think of. In 1929, white supremacists were not often the subjects of jokes. Look through anthologies of humor pieces from the period, and you will not find parodies of nuts like him and Grant, although you will find dialect pieces making fun of blacks. Du Bois knew that the racists would be unintentionally funny onstage; as he wrote to Moore, Senator Heflin “would be a scream” in a debate. Du Bois let the overconfident and bombastic Stoddard walk into a comic moment, which Stoddard then made even funnier by not getting the joke.

At that instant in Chicago, the black audience saw over the horizon of humor. Were there a History of Modern Laughing, the word “[laughter],” in the debate transcript, would be its opening exhibit. Back then, the comic potential of Nazis remained eons away from discovery. In 1939, Stoddard went to Germany as a correspondent for a national news service and sent back pro-Nazi stories that ran in dozens of papers, including the Times and the Boston Globe. His upbeat dispatches remarked on Goebbels’s “quick smile” and the greater warmth and friendliness of Mussolini as compared to Hitler. The stories read like comedy sketches today.

Plenty of Grant’s and Stoddard’s contemporaries rejected their blather, but I can find no other record of them being made figures of fun. Decades of miserable history had to pass before the comedy buried within their malignity was revealed, like a vein of ore uncovered by a natural catastrophe. The best example of Grant-Stoddard-based comedy comes midway through Stanley Kubrick’s masterpiece “Dr. Strangelove,” from 1964, when Peter Sellers, as Group Captain Lionel Mandrake, a British officer, is talking to his American superior, Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper. The general has just sent a B-52 squadron to drop nuclear bombs on Russia; the end of the world is minutes away, and Mandrake is trying to get Ripper to tell him the planes’ recall code.

Ripper talks of a supposed Communist plot to put fluoride in drinking water, soup, and ice cream—in order, he says, to pollute and degrade “our precious bodily fluids.” Mandrake asks how he developed this theory. Ripper replies, “I first became aware of it, Mandrake, during the physical act of love.” The look Sellers gives him at this juncture reaches the peak of movie comedy. “Our precious bodily fluids” is certainly the direct descendant of the vaunted Nordic “germ-plasm.” “The supposedly life-generating secret of the Nordics never generated
any real offspring except the deranged General Ripper’s “precious bodily fluids.”

Stoddard died in 1950, at the age of sixty-six. Like Grant, he was mostly forgotten. Flacking for the Nazis turned out to be a bad career move. But a ghostly image of him survives, in the early pages of “The Great Gatsby,” Nick Carraway, the narrator, has just remet Tom and Daisy Buchanan, his old friends. They are at dinner when something Nick says gets a rise out of Tom:

“Civilization’s going to pieces,” broke out Tom violently. “I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read ‘The Rise of the Colored Empires’ by this man Goddard?”

Tom informs them that they’re all Nordics: “And we’ve produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art, and all that. Do you see?” Nick finds the outburst pathetic, “as if his complacency, more acute than of old, was not enough to him any more.” The magical Nordics, originators of all civilization: through the reference to Stoddard (and the “G” in “Goddard” can stand for “Grant”), we get a revealing glimpse of Tom. Fitzgerald, a fellow Scribner author, may also be taking a jab at Maxwell Perkins, Scribner’s most important editor, for publishing “The Rising Tide of Color” and the rest of the evil nonsense that was bringing in money for his company.

Madison Grant’s last address, 960 Fifth Avenue, overlooks Central Park from East Seventy-seventh Street. The building may be the one that stood there in Grant’s lifetime, or not. It lacks a cornerstone with a date, and is not forthcoming in any other way, after the manner of Upper East Side buildings whose only tight-lipped message is that you, the passerby, could never live there. I sometimes imagine Grant or Stoddard coming back to life in New York City, looking at the many people on the street who don’t resemble them, and asking, “What war did we lose?”

The American Museum of Natural History is directly across the Park from 960 Fifth Avenue, so I wandered over to it. Grant was a longtime trustee of the museum, and I thought it might still hold a few traces of him. In the Hall of North American Mammals, I located the Grant caribou—two males with large antlers, standing on the tundra in Alaska. Metal letters on a boardbase say “Gift of Madison Grant.” Two young guys, one with a ponytail, noticed me looking and asked me who Madison Grant was. I tried to tell them about Grant, and about “The Passing of the Great Race.” The ponytail guy nodded his head and then began to talk about people who give women misinformation about the development of fetuses in order to persuade them to have abortions, and how the Masons and the Illuminati were originally involved in this scheme.

I took the subway up to the Bronx Zoo, where groups of day-camp kids were testing the calm of crossing guards. I recalled that Grant was not the first bad man to frequent this part of the Bronx. Just east of the zoo, a waterfall drops maybe fifteen feet from a placid stretch of the Bronx River. For centuries, the falls powered mills; in the seventeenth-hundreds they were owned by the De Lancey family. During the Revolution, the De Lanceys sided with the British. James De Lancey, a rogue son, led a rabacious group of Loyalists and terrorized the countryside. If he felt like hanging someone, he hanged him. In 1783, when George Washington, having won the war, came riding through what’s now the Bronx, and James De Lancey and his men had fled, something basically if imperfectly good replaced something basically if imperfectly evil—as simple as that.

De Lancey’s mills are long gone. A small park now borders the river at the falls. I walked into the park, thirsty in the heat, and asked a young man on a bench if he had noticed a drinking fountain around. “Yes, I think I saw one,” he said, with a French accent. I asked if he was from the neighborhood, and he said that he and his family were visiting from Réunion, an island in the southern Indian Ocean, near Mauritius. He said that they had flown here, twenty hours on airplanes, by way of Paris.

He led me to the fountain. My thoughts had been warping with the latest evil nonsense in the news, which was aimed that day at immigrants. In the latest iteration, American citizens were being told to go back where they came from. An entire city, Greenville, North Carolina, seemed to be chanting the evil nonsense. Before I took a drink, I thanked the man from Réunion and said, “I hope you move here.”

He smiled a wide smile, from one side of his face to the other. I don’t often see anyone smile like that nowadays. “Yes,” he said. “Maybe.”

During the debate, Stoddard had insisted that “white America is resolved not to abolish the color line.” In time, Du Bois accepted that this was true. Nonetheless, after Pearl Harbor he said that blacks should enlist, support the war effort, and work for the integration of the military. In 1951, authorities indicted him in connection with an international peace organization that he had chaired. They charged him with being an unregistered agent of a foreign government; the Justice Department thought he was taking money from the Soviet Union. During his arraignment, officers handcuffed the eighty-two-year-old peace activist. At his trial, eight months later, the judge tossed out the case.

In the late fifties, Du Bois, soon to become an avowed Communist, spent time in the Soviet Union, went to China, and met with Mao. In the sixties, he moved to Ghana, renounced his citizenship, and became a Ghanaian citizen. He died there on August 27, 1963, the day before the March on Washington.

At a tribute to Du Bois at Carnegie Hall in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., said:

One idea he insistently taught was that black people have been kept in oppression and deprivation by a poisonous fog of lies that depicted them as inferior, born defective and deservedly doomed to servitude to the grave. . . . Dr. Du Bois recognized that the keystone in the arch of oppression was the myth of inferiority and he dedicated his brilliant talents to demolish it.

In 1923, Du Bois received a letter from a man named Madison Jackson. Jackson has just read “The Rising Tide of Color.” He tells Du Bois, “I am a layman and an ordinary workman . . . but I am a reader, and I think.” The book’s lies about blacks have troubled him. He asks Du Bois to write a rebuttal of the book.

Du Bois answered the letter. He tells Jackson that The Crisis (i.e., Du Bois himself) will be dealing with the subjects in the book. He reassures him, “Lothrop Stoddard has no standing as a sociologist. He is simply a popular writer who has some vogue just now.”
A: The truth is that you’re about as likely to pay off your loan as a horse as you are in your current incarnation, so we’ll take our chances.
Q: What if I actually pay off my loan before I die, in this life?
A: Oh, my God, that’s adorable.
Q: I’ve taken out more than three hundred thousand dollars in student loans. I’m wondering if you can tell me why I did that.
A: Is that . . . a question?
Q: I was worried about applying to grad school and amassing more debt on top of my undergraduate loans, but now I feel, like, Screw it, it’s the horse’s problem, right?
A: To be clear, you’re not definitely becoming a horse.
Q: I want to be a horse so bad.
A: I know you do.
Q: Wouldn’t your efforts be better spent finding a solution to rising tuition costs, rather than trying to unlock the cycle of existence through the transcendence of consciousness?
A: You mean the harder thing? No.
Q: My parents want to know: If they reassign my loan, will their future selves be held responsible for it?
A: Yes, but their future selves will be free to track down your future self to help out with the loan. Just make sure they understand that your future self might not know what they’re talking about, because you’re a turtle.
Q: All this existential talk is making me question whether we can ever say for certain that it was me who took out this loan in the first place, you know?
A: It was you.
Q: Or . . . was it?
A: It was.
Q: Is it possible that I’ll be asked to assume the loan of one of my past selves, and wind up with two loans?
A: Dimensional Double Debt Dipping is prohibited, so no.
Q: What if I come back as someone from England? Can you convert loan payments from pounds to sterling?
A: As of now, we do not have that capability.
Q: Come to think of it, some racehorses make lots of money. If I come back as a racehorse, can I help name him?
A: No, because you won’t be there, remember! You’ll be the horse.
Q: Ooh, how about Sky Dancer? ♠
Before Terry Lim handed me an aluminum flask filled with a blend of gasoline and diesel and asked me to set fire to the Tahoe National Forest, he gave me a hard hat, a pair of flame-resistant gloves, and a few words of instruction. “You want to dab the ground,” he said. “Just try to even out the line.”

The line was a low ridge of flame, no more than a foot high, creeping toward us through the forest. In front of it, the ground was springy, carpeted with a dense layer of pine needles and studed with tufts of grass. Specks of sunlight shimmered in the deep, almost kaleidoscopic green, bouncing off lime-colored ferns and conifer boughs. A foot-long alligator lizard skittered in front of me, pausing to pump out a couple of quick pushups before vanishing into the brush. Beyond the line, the ground was black and silent. Silhouettes of large trees loomed out of a shallow gray haze.

The lit cannister of fuel I was holding, known as a drip torch, had a long, looped neck that emitted a jaunty quiff of flame. I took a deep breath, and ducked my way through the scrub to the far end of the line. Then I walked back, dotting the tip of the torch’s neck to the forest floor a few feet in front of the flames, as if I were tapping out a message in Morse code. The dots and dashes ignited small fires, which joined up so rapidly that at one point I set fire to my boots. A swift, panicky battering with my gloved hands smothered the flames before any damage was done.

The main fire was advancing into the wind, so it moved slowly and stayed close to the ground. But my new flames had the wind at their back and quickly jumped across the gap separating them from the original front, transforming the line’s ragged edge into a wall of flame. It was mesmerizing and thrilling, and I couldn’t wait to do it again. As the afternoon wore on, I began setting my ignitions farther away from the line, in order to consume the forest faster. I started to anticipate how terrain would affect the pace of fire: open stretches of pine needles caught instantly, but I learned to place my dabs in tight clusters near saplings and denser shrubbery.

I wasn’t really supposed to be setting the forest on fire. That was the job of the United States Forest Service crew whose work I was there to observe. Their task was to carry out a prescribed burn—a carefully controlled, low-intensity fire that clears duff and deadwood, reducing the risk of a catastrophic wildfire. But the crew were temporarily occupied by what they called “a slope-over event”: a rogue ember had leaped

As megafires become the new normal, prescribed burns give trees breathing room and prevent the worst damage.
across a trail that acted as a firebreak at one edge of the burn, sparking a half-acre blaze so hot that standing within a few feet of it made my chest hurt. While the crew used chainsaws and hoes to create a new firebreak, it fell to me to ensure that no part of the line got ahead of the rest. If flames are allowed to break ranks and surge forward, they can whirl around and start running with the wind, burning more intensely and smokily than the prescription allows.

It took the team more than an hour to fully contain the slope-over. Then they returned to the line with their drip torches. By the end of the day, they had set fire to a hundred and twenty acres of forest. As Lim walked me out of the woods, through the gray-gold twilight of the burn zone, he gave a satisfied sigh. “See, now that’s nice,” he said. “The trees have breathing room.”

The contrast between that day’s prescribed burn and the uncontrolled blaze that the crew had rushed to extinguish epitomizes California’s spiralling problem with fire. Throughout the twentieth century, federal policy focussed on putting out fires as quickly as possible. An unintended consequence of this strategy has been a disastrous buildup in forest density, which has provided the fuel for so-called “megafires.” The term was coined by the Forest Service in 2011, following a series of conflagrations that each consumed more than a hundred thousand acres of woodland.

Megafires are huge, hot, and fast—they can engulf an entire town within minutes. These fires are almost unstoppable and behave in ways that shock fire scientists—hurling firebrands up to fifteen miles away, forming vortices of superheated air that melt cars into puddles within seconds, and generating smoke plumes that shroud distant cities in apocalyptic haze. Centuries-old trees, whose thick bark can withstand lesser blazes, are incinerated and seed banks beneath the forest floor are destroyed. Without intervention, the cinder-strewn moonscape that megafires leave behind is unlikely to grow back as forest.

Six of the ten worst fires in California’s history have occurred in the past eighteen months, and last year’s fire season was the deadliest and most destructive on record. More than a hundred people were killed, and more than seventeen thousand homes destroyed. Experts have warned that this year’s fire season could be even worse, in part because record-breaking rains early this year spurred the growth of brush and grasses, which have since dried out, creating more fuel. Governor Gavin Newsom proclaimed a wildfire state of emergency in March, months before fire season would normally begin.

The tools and techniques capable of stopping megafires remain elusive, but in the past few decades a scientific consensus has emerged on how to prevent them: prescribed burns. When flames are kept small and close to the ground, they clear the leaf litter, pine needles, and scrub that fuel wildfire, and consume saplings and low-level branches that would otherwise act as a ladder conveying fire to the canopy. With the competing vegetation cleared out, the remaining trees grow larger, developing a layer of bark thick enough to shield them from all but the hottest blazes. California’s state legislature recently passed a bill earmarking thirty-five million dollars a year for fuel-reduction projects.

“And yet no one is actually burning,” Jeff Brown, the manager of a field station in the Tahoe National Forest, told me when I visited him there recently. Although prescribed burns have been part of federal fire policy since 1995, last year the Forest Service performed them on just one per cent—some sixty thousand acres—of its land in the Sierra Nevada. “We need to be burning close to a million acres each year, just in the Sierras, or it’s over,” Brown said. The shortfall has several causes, but, some fifteen years ago, Brown set himself the almost impossible task of devising a plan for the forest he helps maintain that would be sophisticated enough to overcome all obstacles. Now he is coordinating an urgent effort to replicate his template across the Sierra Nevada.

The Sagehen Creek Field Station, where Brown is the manager, lies twenty miles north of Lake Tahoe, in the eastern Sierra Nevada. It was established in 1951 to conduct fishery and wildlife research, and is part of the University of California, Berkeley. Its amenities include a dozen radio-linked meteorological towers, snowpack sensors, tree-sap monitors, and a stream-depth gauge. It is not open to the public, but some twenty small red cabins are occupied by an ever-changing assortment of visiting researchers, student field-trippers, and even artists-in-residence.

When I drove there, in May, there were still patches of snow in the shade, but the banks of Sagehen Creek were dotted with the first buttercups of spring. I followed a rutted dirt road for a couple of miles through the forest, arriving at a simple shingled cottage, where Brown lives with Faerthen Felix, the station’s assistant manager. From here, they help oversee the Sagehen Experimental Forest, nine thousand acres of mountain meadows, alkaline fens, and pristine streams surrounded by dense stands of Jeffrey and lodgepole pine.

Brown, who is in his mid-sixties, is a former competitive triathlete, ski patrolman, and river-rafting guide, and he has the rugged look and expansive manner of a lifelong outdoorsman. When I visited, he was taking two filmmakers on a tour of the station. He led us out into a clearing and unrolled a map on the forest floor. In the distance, three young dogs picked their way through the undergrowth. Behind us was a shed with an underground window onto the next-door stream, for the observation of spawning trout. Over the decades, dozens of insect, bird, and other forest-dwelling species have been studied and monitored at Sagehen, and the station’s records constitute one of the longest-running and most detailed data sets on the Sierra. “We’re the best-inventoried forest in the western United States,” Brown told me.

As he led us through the trees, Brown pointed out that we were following an old railroad bed. Sagehen was clear-cut in the mid-nineteenth century to help build the railways and mines of the gold-rush era. (Sutter’s Mill, where the first gold was discovered, in 1848, is less than a hundred miles away.) After loggers felled the large trees, smaller ones became fuel for locomotives, and the eastern slopes of the Sierra are so dry that there are still stacks of cordwood left over from the eighteen-eighties. Nearby, Brown hopped up and down on pine needles that coated the ground. “See this?” he said. “These go down ten inches deep in places.”

When Brown and Felix arrived at
Sagehen, in 2001, they saw their responsibility as straightforward: to keep this assiduously catalogued patch of wild Sierra forest unchanged, for future generations of researchers. Only gradually did they grasp that the forest they had inherited was in terrible shape. During their first summer at the station, there were three big wildfires nearby, and Brown realized that all that dry wood and all those pine needles could easily go up in flames. Then, in 2004, scientists who had conducted research at Sagehen gathered for a belated celebration of its fiftieth anniversary. Several had not returned in decades, and expressed shock at how dense the forest had become.

The local district ranger at the time was worried, too, and asked Brown whether she and her team could help reduce the forest’s fuel load by doing some thinning—something the Forest Service does either by sending in loggers with chainsaws or by using a backhoe-like machine called a masticator, which shreds anything in its path. Brown was horrified at the suggestion. Like many staunch environmentalists, he was suspicious of the agency, because part of its remit is to generate revenue by logging timber like a crop. “To my mind, the Forest Service was the enemy, because if you cut down one tree you were doing something wrong,” he told me.

Elsewhere in the Sierra Nevada, conditions were much the same—overstuffed forests, stripped of big old trees and filled with smaller ones cramped together—and global warming amplified the risk of disaster with each passing year. The average temperature on a summer day in California is 2.5 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than it was in the nineteen-seventies, and in the same period there has been a fivefold increase in the acreage consumed by wildfire. Fire seasons have been getting longer and more severe since the nineteen-eighties. Brown realized that doing nothing was no longer an option.

When the conquistador Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo sailed three ships along the coast of California, in September, 1542, and became the first European to set foot in the state, he reported seeing a great pall of smoke drifting over the landscape. As the ethnobotanist M. Kat Anderson has documented, indigenous tribes traditionally set fire to the forest at a variety of intervals, for a variety of reasons: to create better habitat for elk; to encourage the growth of edible or useful plants, such as mushrooms or chia; and to minimize the risk of fire. Precontact California burned constantly but rarely disastrously. In her book “Tending the Wild,” Anderson writes, “Legends about destructive fires reflect the almost universal belief among California Indian tribes that catastrophic fires were not a regular, natural occurrence but rather a rare punishment.”

In 2004, one of Brown’s colleagues at Berkeley, a fire scientist named Scott Stephens, came to Sagehen and took samples from the stumps of huge trees cut down during the gold-rush era. Examining tree rings and scorch marks, Stephens was able to construct a record of fires dating back to the sixteenth-centuries. His findings confirmed that, in pre–Colonial times, Sagehen burned regularly. Those fires sometimes occurred naturally, from lightning strikes, but they were also deliberately set by Native Americans. The consensus now is that the entire Sierra Nevada burned every five to thirty years.

“The Washoe tribe used to hang out here in the summer, and then light it on fire in the fall, on their way out for the winter,” Brown told me. “Especially near the creek—they wanted fresh willow shoots in the spring for basket-making.” At Sagehen, some of the drier, south-facing slopes seem to have burned as often as every two years. Not only did the forest’s native species evolve to survive fire; several of them actually require it in order to thrive. Lodgepole pinecones do not open until heated by fire. Black-backed woodpeckers dine almost exclusively on seared beetle larvae.

Brown began to see the outlines of an opportunity to reduce Sagehen’s risk of a catastrophic wildfire, by working with the Forest Service and scientists at Berkeley to figure out how to implement prescribed burns. At the local Forest Service office, an eager young silviculturist, Scott Conway, was assigned to the project. When I talked to Conway, he recalled, “Somebody told me, kind of under their breath, ‘Sagehen is never going to happen, don’t get involved.’ And, of course, I immediately took that as a challenge.”

There were plenty of reasons to suppose that Brown’s attempt would fail. One was the mutual mistrust between the Forest Service and environmentalists who object to public land being used as a lumberyard. After the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act, in 1969, conservationist groups became adept at using its protections of threatened species and habitats as a basis for lawsuits to bring logging to a halt.

In the early nineties, “The Sierra in Peril,” a Pulitzer Prize-winning series of reports that appeared in the Sacramento Bee, spurred Congress to commission studies on California’s forest ecosystems. As a result, the Forest Service revised its policies to allow prescribed fire as well as thinning. However, the agency had very little experience in designing and conducting prescribed burns in the American West. The Sierra Nevada’s mountainous terrain and dry, Mediterranean climate make controlling even a planned fire challenging, and a century’s worth of fire suppression had left forests so flammable that the smallest spark might trigger an inferno.

Brown and the rest of the Sagehen planning team decided to pursue a strategy that had recently been developed by a Forest Service scientist at its Rocky Mountain Research Station. Affectionately known as SPLAT, for Strategically Placed Landscape Area Treatment, the technique involves clearing rectangular chunks of forest in a herringbone pattern. This compels any wildfire to follow a zigzag path in search of fuel, travelling against the wind at least half the time. The SPLATs function as speed bumps, slowing the fire enough that it can be contained, while allowing the Forest Service to get away with treating only twenty to thirty per cent of any given landscape.

The SPLAT technique had been tested only in flat grasslands in Utah, and adapting it to the mountainous topography of Sagehen proved tricky. When fire travels uphill, it preheats the ground in front of it, often doubling its velocity; fire usually moves downhill.
more slowly, but a lit pinecone rolling down a slope can easily ignite new areas. Topography also affects other factors that determine the pace of a fire, such as wind speed, rainfall, and soil-moisture levels. Scott Stephens and one of his doctoral students embarked on a multiyear study to gather all the landscape data needed to model fire behavior at Sagehen.

Adapting the SPLATs to Sagehen’s terrain took four years. Then, just as the plan was being finalized, a paper was published documenting the unexpected decline of the American pine marten at Sagehen. The marten, a member of the weasel family, is not endangered, but its population levels are seen as a useful proxy for forest health. Soon, the Sagehen planning team heard from Craig Thomas, the director of the environmental group Sierra Forest Legacy, which has a long history of litigation against the Forest Service. Thomas asked them to redesign the project, with an eye to protecting marten habitat.

Thomas, a small-scale organic farmer in his seventies, told me that he was astonished when the Sagehen group, especially the Forest Service, seemed open to the idea. “Instead of getting their backs up, they jumped in with both feet,” he said. Conway recalled his own response a little differently. “I was, like, really?” he said. “It meant a bunch of complexity, and making this project, which was already really too long, much, much longer.” Still, as Thomas recalls, Conway “went away and read every marten ecology paper in existence by the time the next phone call happened. And I went, Ah, this is somebody I think I want to work with.”

So in 2010 the team, which had now been working together for six years, began planning all over again, this time with an even larger group of collaborators and a more expansive goal. “It started as science, but it became diplomacy,” Brown told me. “How could we get all these people—groups that didn’t trust each other, were actively suing each other—to a consensus on what was best for the forest?”

Brown secured grants, hired a professional facilitator, and brought together loggers, environmental nonprofits, watershed activists, outdoor-recreation outfits, lumber-mill owners. Sometimes

THE SINGLE
MOST DARING
THING I’VE
SEEN IN A
THEATER IN
A LONG TIME.

- WESLEY MORRIS
The New York Times

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there were upward of sixty people at meetings. Scientists from all over the region presented the latest findings on beaver ecology or the nesting behaviors of various bird species. To categorize Sagehen’s diverse terrains—drainage bottoms with meadows and those without, north- and south-facing slopes, aspen stands with conifer encroachment—working groups hiked almost every yard of the forest.

Arriving at a consensus took years of discussion, but, in the end, the strategy the team decided on turned out to mimic the way fire naturally spreads. For instance, fire burns intensely along ridges and more slowly on north-facing slopes. Martens, having adapted to these conditions, rely on the open crests to travel in search of food and mates, while building their dens in shadier, cooler thickets. Following the logic of fire would create the kind of landscape preferred by native species such as the California spotted owl or the Pacific fisher—a mosaic of dark, dense snags and sunlit clearings, of big stand-alone trees and open ridgelines connecting drainages. Conway then led an effort to formulate a detailed implementation plan whose treatments varied, acre by acre, according to the group’s predictions. Some areas were to be left as they were, some were to be hand-thinned with a focus on retaining retarding tree trunks, and some were to be aggressively masticated and then burned.

Typically, a Forest Service project takes two months to plan. Sagehen had been in the works for nearly a decade, but Brown eventually achieved the impossible: a plan that everyone—environmentalists, scientists, loggers, and the Forest Service—agreed on. Then, three days before the group was due to sign off on the plan, there was yet another hitch: in one of the units of Sagehen that were scheduled to be burned, a Forest Service employee discovered a nesting pair of goshawks—raptors that are federally protected as a sensitive, at-risk species.

This time, it was the conservationists who compromised. “I could have said, ‘O.K., this area is now off limits, and if you don’t believe me I’ll sue your ass,’ ” Craig Thomas recalled. But, after some discussion, he agreed to stick with the plan. He knew that burning might make the birds leave or fail to fledge young, but, he told me, “the collaboration effort and what we had accomplished together mattered more.”

When the Sagehen Forest Project tested its fire regimen on two five-acre plots, the results were striking: a bespoke application of thinning followed by a prescribed burn reduced fire risk just as efficiently as the Forest Service’s standardized SPLATS, while also preserving more wildlife habitat and producing a higher yield of usable timber. The remaining trees seemed to respond well to fire, too; sensors that monitor levels of ethylene gas, which plants exhale when they’re under stress, showed that the forest relaxed almost immediately post-burn.

But, despite the success of the project, enormous challenges remain. The Forest Service struggles to muster the resources and the staff necessary to burn safely. The California Air Resources Board restricts prescribed burns to days when pollution is at acceptable levels and the weather likely to disperse emissions from fire. In practice, this means that burning can occur only during a few weeks in the spring. In summer and autumn—the seasons when forests would burn naturally—the state’s air usually falls foul of the Clean Air Act. These are also the months that are most prone to uncontrollable wildfires, whose smoke is far more damaging to human health than that from prescribed fire. But, perversely, because wildfires are classified as natural catastrophes, their emissions are not counted against legal quotas.

The window of time available for prescribed burns is further reduced by the stringent requirements of staffing, weather, and conditions on the ground, so that, in effect, there are just a few days each year when the Forest Service can set fires—nowhere near enough time to burn at the required scale. Even at Sagehen, large tracts of forest that should have been treated with fire remain untouched. When I made a second visit there and hiked through the forest with Brown and Faerthen Felix, he gestured ruefully as we passed through an area that seemed reasonably uncluttered. “We thinned this section years ago,” he said. “We just haven’t been able to burn, so it’s a mess.”

He pointed a few hundred feet ahead, to a couple of piles of spindly logs, two stories high. They represented another challenge. “These aren’t big enough to go to a mill to be processed into boards,” Brown said. “Ideally, we’d chip them and drag them down the road to burn for fuel and power, but the math doesn’t add up.” Traditional logging falls the biggest, most salable trees, but those are the ones that Sagehen’s strategy is designed to spare. Thinning produces timber that has no value as lumber. Brown was resigned to simply burning these woodpiles, but air-quality restrictions had prevented him from doing even that. So the logs just sat there, increasing the risk of wildfire.

Brown has begun working with a group of researchers at U.C. Santa Cruz to imagine the outlines of a timber industry built around small trees, rather than the big trees that lumber companies love but the forest can’t spare. In Europe, small-diameter wood is commonly compressed into an engineered product called cross-laminated timber, which is strong enough to be used in multi-story structures. Another option may be to burn the wood in a cogeneration plant, which produces both electricity and biochar, a charcoal-like substance used to replenish soil. Brown has also been talking to a businessman who hopes to burn waste wood to heat an indoor greenhouse-aquaculture operation. His vision is to provide organic vegetables and shrimp to buffets in Las Vegas, and then to interest California’s cannabis farmers in using shellfish-dung-enriched biochar as fertilizer.

Throughout California, creative efforts are being made to tackle the obstacles that have slowed implementation of the Sagehen plan and now hamper its replication elsewhere. Regional air-quality officials have been brought into collaborative projects, in the hope that they
will permit more flexibility. New state legislation has allocated millions of dollars to hire full-time burn crews, and will also require California’s air board to quantify emissions from wildfires, in order to reverse the incentive against prescribed fire. To help entrepreneurs build business plans for monetizing small-diameter timber, Forest Service scientists are trying to quantify how much of it will be removed from forests.

Across the region, the Forest Service is devising projects to thin and burn on the Sagehen model. Meanwhile, Brown has helped launch the largest forest-restoration venture yet undertaken in California: the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative. It encompasses an enormous swath of forest that extends as far north as Poker Flat, level with Chico, and as far south as the American River, level with Sacramento. Brown’s goal is to return fire to three-quarters of a million acres in the next fifteen years.

Achieving this will require a radical acceleration of the process that took place at Sagehen. Scott Conway has been exploring ways of using artificial intelligence to synthesize satellite data and aerial laser imaging into precise, three-dimensional maps of the more than a million acres that make up the Tahoe National Forest. With a grant of a hundred million dollars from the Moore Foundation and the support of Silicon Valley startups, he has begun work on creating an open-access platform currently called the California Forest Observatory. Information that required years of on-the-ground counting and analysis at Sagehen—tree diameter, forest structure, fuel load—should soon be almost instantly accessible. Currently, the fire-risk map used by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection doesn’t include weather data and hasn’t been updated to show burned areas since 2005. The prototype Forest Observatory will incorporate fresh satellite imagery on a daily basis.

Perhaps Sagehen’s most important legacy is cultural: persuading the Sierra’s warring stakeholders to conceive of forest management in ways they had previously rejected. Three of California’s national forests have recently mandated allowing wildfire to spread in areas where it will be beneficial. Forest Service employees will have to file paperwork to justify putting out a fire that has started, where previously any decision not to extinguish a fire was ground for disciplinary investigation.

Attitudes among conservationists have evolved, too. In July, I joined Craig Thomas, the former director of Sierra Forest Legacy, for a hike along Caples Creek, in the Eldorado National Forest, just south of Lake Tahoe. “I would take those out,” he said, pointing at two lovely little cedars nestled in the shade of an enormous sugar pine, their crowns just grazing its lower branches. They posed an existential threat to the larger tree, offering fire a fast track up to the canopy, and a lack of sunshine and nutrients had left them stunted. Thomas, a man who once spent much of his time suing the Forest Service, told me that he recently became certified to operate a chainsaw.

The Illilouette Creek wilderness area, in Yosemite National Park, is encircled by granite peaks that create a natural firebreak. Because it is so unlikely that any fire could spread beyond them, the National Park Service, in 1972, made the decision not to suppress wildfire within the basin’s fifteen thousand acres. Since then, thanks to more than a hundred and fifty lightning ignitions, almost every acre, excepting bare rock and the creek itself, has burned at least once—some in small, pocket blazes, some in larger, more intense conflagrations. The resulting landscape provides a glimpse of what California’s forests ought to look like—how they will look if Brown’s Sagehen strategy succeeds.

In June, I visited Illilouette with Katya Rakhmatulina, a doctoral student who works with Scott Stephens studying the hydrological effects of wildfire. On a two-mile hike to one of three monitoring stations she maintains there, we passed perhaps only a hundred and fifty feet of what most people would consider picture-postcard Sierra Nevada forest—dark-green, conifer-packed woods with a rust-colored carpet of fallen pine needles. The rest was a surprising patchwork of landscapes: rush-filled meadows, crisscrossed with fallen logs; large, sunny grasslands punctuated by a few big trees; copses of young pines and willows; and recently burned expanses, where the ground was brownish black, spattered with delicate pink flowers and adorned with carbonized trunks, gleaming and sculptural.

Rakhmatulina was going to the station to rewire some cables that had been detached by bears. While she attempted to reboot the station’s instrumentation, she told me about her research and the ways that fire affects groundwater supply. Having more trees in the landscape depletes water resources—like having more straws in a drink. Furthermore, pine needles and bark on the forest floor can form a resinous layer that prevents snowmelt and rainwater from sinking in and building up groundwater reserves.

More than sixty per cent of California’s water supply originates in the Sierra Nevada, so anything that can preserve and increase that resource ought to be of immense value to the state’s residents. Brown says that he sees California’s water utilities and agribusiness as future converts to his cause and imagines a day when forest restoration could be paid for by a couple of extra cents on everyone’s water bill.

I left Rakhmatulina to her tangle of wires and wandered back through the basin. Long vistas extended in all directions, allowing views of snow-covered mountains. The “forest” felt more like a lightly wooded park—it has an average of fifty trees per acre, compared with the four to five hundred that are typical elsewhere in the Sierra Nevada—and I began to realize that saving these forests will require a profound adjustment in our sense of what nature looks like here. The dark, dense, wild forests of European fantasy translate, in the drier conditions of California, to a landscape that is both dying and deadly—but how many of us are ready to make that perceptual shift? The picnickers, hikers, and mountain bikers who fill the parking lots of the Sierra Nevada each weekend, and the wealthy summer-home owners who prize the privacy of Lake Tahoe’s emerald shores, will have to learn to appreciate more open, meadowlike environments. Logging jobs that have been lost could be replaced by new careers in fire management. Californians will have to forge a new relationship with their forest, and see the Sierra more as its native inhabitants once did—as a landscape that should be tended like a garden rather than harvested as a crop or protected as a wilderness.
THE SECRETARY OF TRUMP

How Mike Pompeo became a heartland evangelical—and the President’s most loyal soldier.

BY SUSAN B. GLASSER

In the winter of 2016, Donald Trump was roaring through the primaries, and Mike Pompeo was determined to stop him. Pompeo, a little-known congressman from Wichita, helped persuade Marco Rubio to make a late stand in Kansas. Like many Republicans in Congress, Pompeo believed that Rubio had the national-security knowledge and the judgment to be President, and Trump did not. Urged on by Pompeo, Rubio’s team pulled money out of other states to gamble on winning the Kansas caucus. It was one of the few remaining contests in which Rubio still hoped to beat Trump, who, he said, was a “con artist” about to “take over the Republican Party.”

On March 5th, Trump and Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas, arrived in Wichita for the caucus. Rubio left his closing argument to Pompeo, who told the crowd at the Century II arena, “I’m going to speak to you from the heart about what I believe is the best path forward for America.” An Army veteran who finished first in his class at West Point, Pompeo cited Trump’s boast that if he ordered a soldier to commit a war crime the soldier would “go do it.” As the audience booed, Pompeo warned that Trump—like Barack Obama—would be “an authoritarian President who ignored our Constitution.” American soldiers “don’t swear an allegiance to President Trump or any other President,” Pompeo declared. “They take an oath to defend our Constitution, as Kansans, as conservatives, as Republicans, as Americans. Marco Rubio will never demean our soldiers by saying that he will order them to do things that are inconsistent with our Constitution.”

Listening backstage, Trump demanded to know the identity of the congressman trashing him. A few minutes later, Pompeo concluded, “It’s time to turn down the lights on the circus.”

Pompeo’s stinging rebuke of Trump got barely a mention in the local press, and Rubio finished third in Kansas. “We got smoked,” a former top Rubio campaign aide told me. Days later, Rubio’s campaign was over. In May, Trump secured the delegates needed for the nomination, and Pompeo reluctantly joined the rest of Kansas’s congressional delegation in endorsing him. Still, Pompeo had told the Topeka Capital-Journal, in April, that Trump was “not a conservative believer,” and, a few weeks later, he said, on CNN, “A lot of his policies don’t comport with my vision for how I represent Kansas.”

At that point, Pompeo had never met Trump. Like many Republicans who called Trump a “kook,” a “cancer,” and a threat to democracy before ultimately supporting him, Pompeo disagreed with much of Trump’s platform. He took issue in particular with Trump’s “America First” skepticism about the United States’ role in the world. Pompeo was a conservative internationalist who had been shaped by his Cold War-era military service, and he remained a believer in American power as the guarantor of global stability. Yet, after Trump won the Presidency, Pompeo sought a post in his Administration and did not hesitate to serve as his C.I.A. director. In 2018, after Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, by tweet, Pompeo happily replaced him as America’s top diplomat.

Pompeo, an evangelical Christian who keeps an open Bible on his desk, now says it’s possible that God raised up Trump as a modern Queen Esther, the Biblical figure who convinced the King of Persia to spare the Jewish people. He defines his own job as serving the President, whatever the President asks of him. “A Secretary of State has to know what the President wants,” he said, at a recent appearance in Washington. “To the extent you get out of synch with that leader, then you’re just out shooting the breeze.” No matter what Trump has said or done, Pompeo has stood by him. As a former senior White House official told me, “There will never be any daylight publicly between him and Trump.” The former official said that, in private, too, Pompeo is “among the most sycophantic and obsequious people around Trump.”

Even more bluntly, a former American ambassador told me, “He’s like a heat-seeking missile for Trump’s ass.”

Pompeo’s transformation reflects the larger story of how the Republican Party went from disdaining Trump to embracing him with barely a murmur of dissent. This account of how Pompeo became the last survivor of the President’s original national-security team and his most influential adviser on international affairs is based on dozens of interviews in recent months with current and former Administration officials, U.S. and foreign diplomats, and friends and colleagues of Pompeo’s; the Secretary did not answer repeated requests for comment.

Thirty-one months into the Administration, the relationship between Trump and Pompeo, born in derision and remade in flattery, has proved to be surprisingly durable. Trump often gushes about Pompeo, even as he has berated his hawkish national-security adviser, John Bolton, for taking similar positions. “I argue with everyone,” Trump told a reporter. “Except Pompeo.”

Fifty-five, burly, and barrel-chested, Pompeo lives with his second wife, Susan, and their golden retriever, Sherman, in a rented house on the grounds of a military base across the street from the State Department. A film buff and an AC/DC fan, he seems modest and approachable in settings where he’s comfortable. When challenged, especially about the President, he gets testy and red in the face. He favors baggy gray suits and close-cropped gray hair. Trump, who often talks about whether someone “looks the part,” has made a point of calling out Pompeo’s unglamorous...
Born in derision and remade in flattery, the relationship between Trump and Pompeo has proved surprisingly durable.
presence. At a recent appearance in South Korea, he summoned Pompeo to the stage with his daughter Ivanka, referring to them as “beauty and the beast.”

Pompeo’s background bears little resemblance to that of recent Secretaries of State, all of whom came to the job after long careers in public life and with extensive international experience. Pompeo, in contrast, has had a “meteoric rise,” as his friend Steve Scalise, the House Republican Whip, told me. A little more than a decade ago, he was unknown not only in Washington but also in his adopted home state, where he had just lost his first campaign, placing third in a three-way race to become chairman of the Kansas Republican Party. Trump often touts Pompeo’s credentials as a top student at West Point and at Harvard Law School, but in six years as a member of Congress he never chaired a subcommittee or faced a genuinely competitive election, and he served just over a year at the C.I.A. He spent much of his career running a struggling Wichita aviation company. Pompeo’s disclosure forms reveal that he is the poorest member of Trump’s Cabinet, listing family assets worth roughly, in 2018, between two hundred thousand and seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Born in 1965, Pompeo was one of three children in a working-class family in Southern California. His father, Wayne, was a Navy radioman in the Korean War. His mother, Dorothy Mercer, was one of ten children of small-town Kansas pool-hall owners. In conservative Orange County, Wayne was a passionate liberal, according to two sources who heard this from the future Secretary. Pompeo does not speak publicly about his political disagreements with his father, but they began early on: he has said that, as a teen-ager, he read Ayn Rand’s “The Fountainhead,” and became a staunch conservative. The valedictorian of his public high school, he was nominated for West Point by his congressman, Bob Dornan, a fiery hard-right favorite of the defense industry.

“That should give you a good idea of where I am coming from politically if ‘B-1 Bob’ chose me for West Point,” Pompeo told the conservative magazine *Human Events*, in 2011.

Pompeo thrived at West Point, where he majored in engineering management. “Man, it’s hard to be No. 1,” a classmate told me. “It’s not just being the smartest person. It’s being the person who shines your shoes the best and also has the most athletic skills.” After marrying his college sweetheart, Leslie Libert, the weekend he graduated, Pompeo took a prestigious posting as a tank commander in the U.S. Army’s 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, which patrolled the border between East and West in Germany. Five years later, with the end of the Cold War, the border was gone and Pompeo left the military, having risen to the rank of captain. He went to Harvard Law School, where he was an editor of the *Law Review*, then moved to Washington, D.C., and joined the blue-chip firm Williams & Connolly.

In the late nineties, however, Pompeo radically changed his life. He quit the law firm after two years and divorced his wife. (He kept the dog, Byron; she got the cat, Keats.) He moved to Kansas, his late mother’s home state, where, in early 1997, he and “three of my best friends in the whole world” from West Point, as he put it recently, started a company, Thayer Aerospace. Their aim was to acquire firms that manufactured specialized machinery for aviation companies clustered in Wichita, a city known as “the air capital of the world.” Pompeo became Thayer’s C.E.O.

While buying one of the companies for the new firm, he met Susan Justice Mostrous, a former Wichita State University homecoming queen. As the vice-president of a local bank, she was sitting on the other side of the negotiating table. “It’s true,” Pompeo told an interviewer, jokingly. “She took my money twice.” In 2000, he and Susan married and he adopted her son from her second marriage.

Pompeo became a deacon of Wichita’s Eastminster Church, an evangelical congregation that eventually quit the mainstream Presbyterian Church because of its support for gay clergy. Over time, Pompeo got to know some of the city’s wealthiest benefactors, including David Murfin, one of the largest independent oil producers in Kansas, and Charles and David Koch, the billionaire Republican donors and skeptics of environmental regulation, whose company is headquartered in Wichita. In 1998, the Kochs’ venture-capital fund made a key early investment in Thayer. Within a few years, Pompeo was a trustee of the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, which also has ties to the Kochs, and he was an early recruit for the Kochs’ national political organization, Americans for Prosperity.

In 2010, amid the Tea Party backlash to President Obama, Pompeo made another career switch, running for an open Congress seat in the state’s Fourth District. The establishment climber from California had become a heartland evangelical. Pompeo ran a nasty race against the Democrat, an Indian-American state legislator named Raj Goyle, who, unlike Pompeo, had grown up in Wichita. Pompeo’s campaign tweeted praise for an article calling Goyle a “turban topper,” and a supporter bought billboards urging residents to “VOTE AMERICAN—VOTE POMPEO.” In the heavily Republican district in a heavily Republican year, he won easily. “Pompeo’s singular ability is in navigating power,” Goyle told me. “On that I give him massive respect, the way he mapped Wichita power, the way he mapped D.C. power, the way he mapped Trump.”

The narrative of Pompeo’s transformation has been rewritten over the years, or never told at all. Most notably, the Kochs were far more significant backers of his business than he has publicly acknowledged. In 2011, the Washington Post reported that, according to Pompeo and his aides, the investment by the Kochs’ venture-capital fund “amounted to less than 2 percent” of Thayer’s total. Their statement was highly misleading. Corporate documents for 2003 filed with the Kansas secretary of state but not previously reported show that the Kochs’ fund had a nearly twenty-per-cent interest in Thayer. The Kochs were also involved in the firm’s management. Both the president and the chief financial officer of the Kochs’ venture fund sat, at various times, on Thayer’s board of directors, and in 2000 the fund helped se-
cure loans of up to four million dollars for the firm to buy property. The Kochs’ extensive involvement was not a secret: their fund announced on its Web site that it was part of Thayer’s “equity sponsor group,” adding that it had given Pompeo’s firm wide-ranging support, including “acquisition capital, strategic input at the board level, and guidance in environmental risk issues.”

The environmental risk turned out to be significant. Air Capitol Plating, an aircraft-parts processing company that Thayer took over in 1999, had for years been the subject of environmental complaints because of its use of the toxic chemical trichloroethylene, or TCE, dangerous traces of which had leaked into the local groundwater. In 2000, Thayer entered into a legal consent order with Kansas authorities, in which it admitted to the pollution and agreed to clean it up.

To address the problem, Thayer had brought in another Koch-backed firm, Cherokee, which specialized in “risk management services” for firms “that face environmental challenges.” A new entity, Cherokee Thayer, assumed liability for the cleanup, although it appears that little if any cleanup was carried out. Instead, the company and the authorities spent years arguing over the extent of the contamination and what to do about it. Meanwhile, the firm continued to pollute, failed to file required reports in 2003, 2004, and 2005, and was fined more than a hundred thousand dollars by the Environmental Protection Agency. In 2005, the state found high levels of TCE in nearby residential wells, resulting in a “threat to human health,” and the E.P.A. named it a High Priority Violator. According to the State of Kansas, this month, twenty years after Thayer purchased A.C.P., a permeable barrier will finally be installed to insure that no additional TCE flows from the site into the water supply.

In speeches, Pompeo often describes Thayer as a “small” company and himself as a “small businessman.” He has reminisced about Thayer as “a small, dirty, smelly, beautiful machine shop.” In fact, by 2000, according to a press release that year, the Kochs and other wealthy backers had invested ninety million dollars in the firm. Despite that funding, Thayer struggled financially when Pompeo ran it—another aspect of his past that Pompeo has publicly sought to revise. During his first run for Congress, in 2010, one of his Republican primary rivals, a local millionaire named Wink Hartman, claimed that Pompeo was “forced out” of Thayer after having mismanaged the company into financial trouble, the Wichita Eagle reported. Pompeo denied the accusation, saying that he left Thayer on “excellent terms,” while acknowledging some difficulties, which he blamed on a downturn in the aviation industry after the 9/11 attacks.

But the company’s problems began before 9/11 and continued well beyond. In 1999, the Thayer subsidiary Air Capitol Plating started going downhill. According to testimony from Randy Birchfield, a West Point classmate whom Pompeo recruited to run A.C.P., business had slowed and there were layoffs, cutbacks in bonuses and health-care benefits, and rumors of imminent bankruptcy. “Clearly, the trend lines were moving in a direction that wasn’t comforting for anyone,” Birchfield said, in a deposition in a lawsuit between Thayer and A.C.P.’s former owners. The firm’s difficulties persisted. Thayer’s former human-resources manager, Kenneth Bollinger, said that he “directed the systematic layoff of nearly half the employees after 9/11.” A company balance sheet showed that, as of May, 2004, Thayer had just thirty-one thousand dollars in cash on hand and a negative “net worth” of almost thirty-three million dollars. In 2005 and 2006, vendors sued Thayer for more than three hundred thousand dollars in unpaid bills. In both years, Thayer authorized new shares to be issued, which would raise needed capital but could also dilute the stakes of early shareholders such as the Kochs’ fund.

By April of 2006, Pompeo was no longer leading the company. The firm’s post-Pompeo president lists on his résumé today the “successful turnaround” of Thayer, which was renamed Nex-Tech Aerospace and sold to the private-equity firm Highland Capital, in April, 2007, with the assistance of a company that advertised expertise in the “wind-down” of “overleveraged and underperforming companies.” The same month as the sale, the Wichita Business Journal reported that the new C.E.O. described his job as being to “rebuild a reputation damaged by an era of missed deliveries and slow supplier payments.” Pompeo personally held a ten-per-cent interest in the firm as of 2003, but his financial-disclosure forms and his modest net worth suggest that he did not make much money from selling it.

Pompeo, however, soon landed with one of his Wichita contacts, David Murfin, the Kansas oil tycoon. Murfin named

“Let’s make a pact—if neither of us is married by thirty, we read an article about how many people are getting married later these days anyway.”
Pompeo president of Sentry International, an oil-services firm that manufactured parts in China and elsewhere and sold them in the U.S. One Sentry joint venture was with a subsidiary of the Chinese national oil firm Sinopec, although Pompeo later told the Senate that he had no business ties to foreign government-owned entities. Like the Kochs, Murfin was a major player in Kansas Republican politics. Kelly Arnold, at that time the Sedgwick County G.O.P. chairman, told me that Murfin was “a key person for anybody running for office.” In January, 2007, Pompeo ran for the chairmanship of the Kansas Republican Party, against Tim Huelskamp, a future congressman, and Kris Kobach, a firebrand who represented the Party’s anti-immigrant right wing. “Pompeo’s pitch to the Party was: I’m going to run this thing like a business,” Dan Rasure, who helped Pompeo in that race, told me. “To the rest of the world this may sound crazy, given how much Pompeo has catered to the ultra-conservatives once he became elected, but, in Kansas terms, Pompeo is just straight-up what would be considered a moderate.” Coming into the state G.O.P. convention, Pompeo believed that he “had the race sewn up,” Rasure said, but Kobach flipped a bloc of votes, and won.

Rasure stayed in touch with Pompeo, and persuaded him to become the first investor in his new alternative-energy startup, Sunflower Wind, which planned to make wind turbines. Pompeo, who personally invested as much as a hundred thousand dollars, served on the board and was a key adviser to the young C.E.O., who considered his advice invaluable. “I would never bet against Pompeo,” Rasure told me. But the firm went bust after one of its turbine blades cracked, and everyone involved lost money.

Pompeo had better luck in politics. By 2010, Wichita’s U.S. representative, Todd Tiahrt, had decided to run for the Senate. In the crowded Republican primary to succeed him, Pompeo was again backed by the city’s business elite. Murfin became his campaign co-chairman. Pompeo won the primary with thirty-nine per cent of the vote.

Soon after arriving on Capitol Hill, in 2011, he was the subject of articles in both the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post, in which he was portrayed, as one Kansas professor told the Post, as the new “congressman from Koch.” That Post article is where Pompeo and his aides misrepresented the Kochs’ investment in Thayer as an almost negligible two per cent. Pompeo would never again be directly challenged about Thayer. When he ran for reelection in 2014, he aired a campaign ad touting his “remarkable success” leading the company.

His positions evolved along with the story of his past. When Pompeo got to Congress, he argued that wind power was an expensive boondoggle and campaigned to end a production tax credit for wind technology, even though, not long before, he had personally invested in Sunflower Wind. By the time Pompeo joined the Trump Administration, he had written Sunflower out of his history, omitting from his Senate confirmation questionnaire his position as a member of its board.

In Washington, Pompeo found a way onto the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the critical panel for the business interests of his Kansas patrons. He appointed a former Koch lawyer as his chief of staff and acquired a reputation as a fierce defender of the Kochs. “Stop Harassing the Koch Brothers” was the title of an op-ed that he wrote in 2012, in which he dismissed attacks on them as “evidence of a truly Nixonian approach to politics.” Two years later, he called the Kochs’ “great men.” His loyalty was rewarded: according to the Center for Responsive Politics, in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 he received more campaign funds from the Kochs’ network than any other candidate in the country.

But Pompeo hoped to make his mark in Congress on national security, and the Intelligence Committee was the panel that he most wanted to serve on. He got there in part by aiding the committee’s chairman, Mike Rogers, who sought Pompeo’s help in quelling an incipient rebellion by his fellow Tea Party members over the renewal of the wide-ranging surveillance authorized in the U.S.A. Patriot Act after 9/11.

On the committee, Pompeo was regarded by his colleagues as smart and hardworking, “very bright, very politically shrewd,” as Adam Schiff, a Democrat, put it, “with a certain pugnacious quality to his persona.” Pompeo gained attention as one of the most partisan promoters of conspiracy theories about the killing of the U.S. Ambassador and three other Americans at a diplomatic post in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012. For years, Pompeo criticized Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s handling of the incident, and, when the select committee that was created to investigate it issued a bipartisan report clearing her, Pompeo and Jim Jordan, Republican of Ohio, were the only dissenters, arguing that Clinton knew Benghazi was a “terrorist attack” but, with the 2012 Presidential election only two months away, she covered it up.

Pompeo confronted Clinton when she testified before the panel on October 22, 2015. He badgered her about why she had given her private e-mail address to her outside political adviser, Sidney Blumenthal, but not to the Ambassador to Libya. Their encounter was widely seen as a disaster for Pompeo, and he later told a local Republican club in Kansas that even his wife, Susan, had given him an F for his performance. “He was a Benghazi crazy,” a former senior intelligence official who dealt with Pompeo told me. Although his allegations were discredited, the investigation revealed that Clinton had deleted thirty thousand e-mails from a private server that she used while she was Secretary of State. Given that a subsequent F.B.I. investigation into Clinton’s e-mails hung over her 2016 campaign, the former official said of Pompeo, “at the end of the day, he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.”

Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran was another obsession. Pompeo befriended the Arkansas senator Tom Cotton, a younger fellow Harvard graduate and Army veteran, and they argued that not only would the deal fail to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon; it was also an appeasement of the world’s worst sponsor of terrorism. In 2015, they travelled together to Vienna and then revealed what they said were “secret side deals” that the Obama team had agreed to with the Iranians. Pompeo’s pronouncements on Benghazi and on the Iran deal led to new media prominence on Fox News and other right-wing outlets, where he became one of the fiercest critics of Obama’s foreign policy. He trafficked in outlandish theories and engaged in slashing personal
OPEN GESTURE OF AN I

I want to give more of my time to others the less I have of it, give it away in a will and testament, give it to the girls' club, give it to the friends of the urban trees.

Your life is not your own and never was. It came to you in a box marked fragile. It came from the complaint department like amends on an order you did not place with them. Who gave me this chill life.

It came with no card. It came without instruction. It said this end up though I do not trust those markings. I have worn it upside down. I have washed it without separating and it did not shrink. Take from it what you will. I will

—D. A. Powell

attacks. On “Meet the Press,” Pompeo called Clinton’s role in Benghazi “worse, in some ways, than Watergate.”

But Pompeo grew restless in the House. In 2014, according to a Kansas Republican he consulted, Pompeo briefly considered challenging Kansas’s senior senator, Pat Roberts, in that year’s primary. In the spring of 2016, he publicly flirted with a challenge to the state’s other Republican senator, before dropping that, too.

By the 2016 Republican National Convention, Pompeo had, at least in public, changed his mind about Trump. “I am excited for a commander in chief who fearlessly puts America out in front,” he told the Wichita Eagle while in Cleveland as Trump accepted the nomination. He expressed even more excitement about Trump’s running mate, Mike Pence, whom Pompeo considered a “friend and mentor” from their time together in Congress. Pence, too, had strong ties to the Kochs, and Pompeo found a connection to Pence’s campaign in Marc Short, a veteran operative for the Kochs’ organization. Although the Kochs had opposed Trump in the Republican primaries, Short signed on as an adviser to Pence and is now his chief of staff. “Marc knows Mike well,” a Republican friend of Pompeo’s told me, and Short got Pompeo to help Pence with debate preparation that fall. When Trump won, Pence repaid the favor by recommending Pompeo.

The weekend after the election, Pompeo called a Kansas Republican who had worked for Trump and told him that he hoped to become either a C.I.A. director or Secretary of the Army. The two decided that he should work his ties to Pence and to a West Point classmate, David Urban, who had run Trump’s campaign in Pennsylvania. Urban was also hearing from Steve Bannon, Trump’s ultranationalist chief strategist, who called Urban to suggest that he urge “the old man” to name Pompeo to the C.I.A. post. Urban did so.

On Wednesday, November 16th, Pompeo was summoned to Trump Tower for an interview with the President-elect. The men had never met, and still disagreed about key issues, such as Russia. Trump wanted to lift sanctions on Vladimir Putin’s regime, and disdained the U.S. intelligence community’s finding that Russia had intervened on his behalf in the election. “You’re wrong about Putin,” Trump told Pompeo, according to an account that Pompeo later offered to Republican insiders. “No,” Pompeo said. “You’re wrong.” Two days later, Trump announced that Pompeo was his nominee for the C.I.A. job. Trump seemed to know little about him, and Representative Devin Nunes, a member of Trump’s transition team, later said that he didn’t think Pompeo had even filled out a vetting questionnaire.

After the announcement, Jeff Roe, Ted Cruz’s former campaign manager, called Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and reminded him of Trump’s fury at Pompeo’s Kansas caucus speech. As Tim Alberta recounts in his book, “American Carnage,” Kushner put the call on speaker, so that Trump could hear. “No! That was him? We’ve got to take it back,” the President-elect roared. “This is what I get for letting Pence pick everyone.” But the appointment stood. Two weeks later, Pompeo was hanging out with Trump in Urban’s box at the Army–Navy football game.

Pompeo reminded other Republicans that he and Trump had a common enemy: Barack Obama. “He just made his political peace with reality—this is our President,” a former official in the George W. Bush Administration told me. Just months earlier, Pompeo had compared the “authoritarian” Obama to Trump, but Pompeo now saw joining Trump’s Cabinet as “an opportunity to kind of right the wrongs,” the former Bush official said. On January 23rd, Pompeo was confirmed, in a 66–32 vote. By then, he had deleted his entire congressional Twitter account, including a plea to the President-elect, days before Trump named him C.I.A. director, to “make the undemocratic practice of executive orders a thing of the past.” Trump, of course, did no such thing.

When Pompeo arrived at the C.I.A., he faced a political furoir generated by the new President. Days before his swearing-in, Trump had compared the U.S. intelligence community to Nazi Germany for its handling of a secret dossier on Trump’s Russia ties. Then, at a welcoming ceremony in the lobby of C.I.A. headquarters, the President had attacked the agency again and made false claims about the size of the crowd at his Inauguration. Still, Pompeo managed to soothe the C.I.A. bureaucracy. He promised members of the Directorate of

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Operations that they would no longer be micromanaged, as they were under Obama. He vowed “to serve as an important bridge, if not a heat shield, not just from the White House but from any sort of political attacks,” Juan Zarate, a former U.S. official whom Pompeo asked to lead his transition to the C.I.A., told me. Pompeo also personally delivered the President’s Daily Brief to Trump, giving the C.I.A. valuable access to a skeptical President. “Mike got them in the room every day, and that is the most important thing the agency expects to have with its director,” the former senior intelligence official said. Pompeo used the sessions to establish a friendly relationship with the President, a contrast to Trump’s friction-filled dealings with other top national-security advisers. “He clicked with Mike early on, and Mike has had the benefit of that. Mike gets the President,” Christopher Ruddy, a friend of Trump’s, told me. Steve Scalise said that he remembers White House meetings in which “the President would look to Mike Pompeo before he even looked to Tillerson to get his assessment on different hot spots. That told me the President had incredible trust for Mike’s judgment, and it’s well founded.”

Pompeo and his wife, who played an active role both in his office on the Hill and at the C.I.A., cultivated relationships not only with Trump but inside Trump-world. One of these was with the Cabinet’s glitziest couple, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and his wife, Louise Linton. They made a seemingly odd foursome—the poorest member of Trump’s inner circle and one of its richest, an evangelical Kansan and an actress who got in trouble for vamping in opera-length black leather gloves at the U.S. Mint. Yet Linton recently told Los Angeles magazine that her favorite thing in Washington was dinner with the Pompeos. When the interviewer seemed incredulous, she replied, “But Pompeo is fun! He’s warm; he’s gregarious; he’s a great storyteller. He’s a lovely man. I love his wife, Susan.”

Pompeo seemed to relish the C.I.A. job. He told a friend that, while flying around the world to meetings on a U.S. government plane, he would read the agency’s secret histories of wars in places like Afghanistan and Central America. Still, the former senior intelligence official said, “he wasn’t satisfied with being C.I.A. director. He wanted to be national-security adviser or Secretary of State.”

By the fall of 2017, Rex Tillerson was in trouble with the President. That summer, he had called Trump a “fucking moron,” and he often disagreed with Trump on policy decisions, such as withdrawing from the Paris climate accord and moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. When Trump demanded an immediate withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, Tillerson pushed for more time. Most other advisers agreed with Tillerson, but Pompeo, a former senior official told me, twice sat in the White House Situation Room and supported leaving the Iran deal, sidelifing his agency’s concerns about doing so.

The Iran deal was one subject on which Trump and Pompeo were closely aligned before 2016. Another former senior intelligence official told me that Pompeo gave “strong brushback” to experts on the Iran desk at the C.I.A. after they concluded that Iran was complying with the terms of the deal—a sore point, since Trump was claiming that Iran was not doing so. The first former senior intelligence official told me that Pompeo challenged the agency’s Iran analysts: “He would ask, ‘What evidence? Are the Iranians cheating?’”

At the White House, Pompeo waged what the former senior official saw as a “concerted campaign” to replace Tillerson. The escalating internal fight over Iran played into it. “Pompeo was working it hard. He saw and heard from the President how much he was souring on Tillerson,” the former official told me. “He was making the case to Trump: You’ve got a whole lot of people around you who don’t agree with you. I’m your guy.”

An important proponent of Pompeo was Jared Kushner, who repeatedly clashed with Tillerson after Trump assigned his son-in-law an expansive portfolio that included everything from China to Mexico to Mideast peace. At a Washington social event in late 2017, a guest commented to Kushner on Tillerson’s troubles with Trump. “The problem will be solved very quickly if I have my way,” Kushner responded. When another guest suggested that Pompeo, who was present, should get the job, Kushner replied, “Of course.”

Several months later, in March, 2018,
Tillerson was returning home from a trip to Africa when Trump fired him and announced Pompeo as his replacement. “We’re always on the same wavelength,” Trump said. “The relationship has been very good, and that’s what I need.”

In the spring of 2018, on his first day as Secretary of State, Pompeo invoked the bluster of the Second World War general George Patton, vowing that the U.S. would “get its swagger back.” The reference to such an undiplomatic figure was odd, unless you knew that Patton is Trump’s most admired general and that the hagiographic movie about Patton’s life is one of his favorites. Pompeo followed up with a social-media campaign that featured photos of himself and Patton, and a State Department logo with a new motto: the “Department of Swagger.” Diplomats quickly surmised, as a former senior department official put it, that Pompeo’s opening pitch was to a “constituency of one.”

Managing Trump as Secretary of State, however, would prove harder for Pompeo than it had been. As C.I.A. director, Pompeo spent many hours with the President, and he could punt difficult questions by saying that it was not his role to offer policy advice. Now he would often be away travelling, while Bolton, the new national-security adviser and a veteran bureaucratic infighter, had daily Trump time. The State Department was also in disarray from Tillerson’s tenure. Waves of experienced Foreign Service officers quit or were forced out, as Tillerson insisted on an extensive reorganization plan, instituted a hiring freeze, and accepted crippling budget cuts. The White House also blocked State from hiring any of the hundred and forty-nine G.O.P. national-security officials who signed “Never Trump” letters during the campaign.

With State in crisis, Pompeo reached out to some veteran diplomats who had quit or been pushed aside, promoted a career Foreign Service official to serve as the department’s No. 3, lifted Tillerson’s hiring freeze, and consulted all the living former Secretaries of State, including Hillary Clinton, who took his call even though he had savaged her over Benghazi. The gestures helped smooth his Senate confirmation. In the end, Pompeo received even more Democratic votes, seven, than Tillerson had.

Pompeo used his standing with the President as a selling point for a department in need of White House clout and a semblance of stability. “The department appreciates the fact that they have a Secretary who the President trusts,” Fred Fleitz, who served as Bolton’s chief of staff at the National Security Council, told me. Democrats noticed, too. “Morale is better at the State Department. It’s still at a historic low watermark, but people feel better,” Chris Murphy, a Connecticut senator who has vehemently opposed Pompeo on issues such as U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, told me. “There are some silver linings to Pompeo’s time at State that even critics like me can’t ignore.”

Yet Trump’s impulsive style created constant complications for Pompeo, as it did for other officials. Trump undercut Pompeo with his abrupt decision, last December, to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria (which led to the resignation of Defense Secretary James Mattis); his unilateral recognition of Israel’s post-1967 annexation of the Golan Heights (a day after Pompeo, who was in Israel at the time, publicly said that he knew of no such plans); and his spur-of-the-moment decision to cut U.S. foreign aid to Central America. On North Korea, Pompeo was “very skeptical,” according to a former senior U.S. official, that Trump’s talks with Kim Jong Un would produce a breakthrough on denuclearization—a problem, since Trump’s first assignment to Pompeo was to oversee those negotiations. Trump has made a practice of alarming longtime allies, mussing about cancelling the mutual-defense treaty with Japan, threatening to pull U.S. troops out of South Korea, deriding Europe’s largest powers as NATO deadbeats, and dismissing the European Union as a “foo.” All of this has made for tense Pompeo visits in normally friendly precincts.

In Washington, though, Pompeo has managed to maintain Trump’s confidence while remaining on speaking terms with a foreign-policy establishment that is deeply unsettled by the President. “He’s in a sense become the real adult in the room,” Ian Bremmer, the founder of the geopolitical advisory firm the Eurasia Group, told me. “It is less the case than he would like, but vastly more the case than anyone else.” Pompeo’s Republican friend told me, “He’s not an enabler of Trump. He does a lot to try to manage him.” Others believe that Pompeo is merely posturing. He is a politician who knows his audience; he wants to give the impression that “he generally agrees but he’s working with this wild man,” another former senior State Department official, who has met with Pompeo privately, told me. “He always has this sheepish ‘I know,’ but won’t show his hand.” He suggests, without being specific, the former official added, that he’s got “his finger in the dike.”

When it comes to personnel, Pompeo has sent the right signals to the G.O.P. establishment by hiring a few Republican opponents of the President. He tapped Elliott Abrams, who wrote an anti-Trump op-ed in 2016, to be his special envoy to Venezuela. (Trump blocked Tillerson’s attempt to hire Abrams.) He asked Jim Jeffrey, George W. Bush’s deputy national-security adviser, to serve as the special envoy for Syria, even though he signed a Never Trump letter. This spring, Pompeo appointed the Fox News contributor Morgan Ortagus to be his spokesperson, although she, like Pompeo, had publicly opposed Trump in 2016, prompting the conservative magazine The National Interest to observe that “Mike Pompeo’s house has become a hall of Never Trump.”

In each case, Pompeo carefully managed the President. “He’ll be meeting with Trump about something else and then, like, at the end of the meeting he’ll be, like, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m bringing on Jim Jeffrey,’ “Oh, by the way, I’m bringing on Elliott Abrams,’” the Republican close to Pompeo told me. Trump agreed to the moves, but only because the jobs did not require Senate confirmation. “It’s fairly clear he has a deal with the President where if there’s no confirmation hearing, where people can talk about the 2016 race, then he can hire whoever he wants,” a senior Administration official told me.

Fifteen months after Pompeo took over the State Department, the question is not whether he has stayed in Trump’s good favor but to what ends Pompeo is using the relationship. He “agrees certain things the President has mandated don’t make any sense,” a third former senior department official told me. When Trump
unilaterally cut two hundred and thirty million dollars that was meant to help stabilize parts of Syria where U.S. forces were present, Pompeo "went to the President several times to fix it. He just lost," the former official said. He concluded that this typified Pompeo’s approach. "He will go at Trump to try to change his mind, but if he can’t he’ll go, ‘O.K., we’re doing what the President has said.’” "

Pompeo’s own ideological agenda is also becoming clearer, as indicated by recent controversies over orders to U.S. diplomatic missions not to fly the gay-pride flag; the creation of a new State Department commission stocked with conservatives to review human-rights policy based on “natural” rights; and comments by the Secretary that were skeptical of climate change at an international climate-change conference. In the end, Pompeo may be remembered as the most conservative, ideologically driven Secretary of State ever to serve. He is certainly no sentimentalist about the world, and, while he does not share Trump’s affinity for dictators like Putin and Kim Jong Un, he has remained notably silent on human-rights abuses in places such as North Korea. In Saudi Arabia, he smiled during a photo op with the Crown Prince soon after the gruesome killing of the dissident columnist Jamal Khashoggi, and angered many members of Congress, including some in his own Party, by appearing to dismiss concerns about it. Pompeo and his advisers had thought that the episode would be a repeat of China’s 1989 massacre of protesters in Tiananmen Square: a controversy that produced outrage in Congress but then passed. Instead, Pompeo was “struck and frustrated by how it hasn’t blown over,” the Republican friend told me.

Pompeo is also more political than any other recent Secretary, with the exception, perhaps, of Hillary Clinton. In some ways, he’s approached the job like a future Presidential candidate, hosting Republican strategists such as Karl Rove and wealthy patrons such as the former Goldman Sachs C.E.O. Lloyd Blankfein at regular “Madison Dinners,” named for the fifth Secretary of State (and fourth President). The dinners are orchestrated by Pompeo’s wife, Susan, who travels frequently with him and whose unusual requests are now being investigated by congressional Democrats after a whistle-blower complained that the couple was inappropriately using government resources and treating Pompeo’s security detail as “UberEats with guns,” CNN reported.

At times, Pompeo’s concern for his political image can seem to shape policy decisions. Last September, he ordered the closure of the U.S. consulate in the Iraqi city of Basra, despite objections from some State Department officials. “He did not want Basra to be his Benghazi,” a former senior U.S. official who discussed the decision with Pompeo said. Another former senior U.S. official, with experience in Iraq, told me, “Absolutely, it was an overreaction. He wears Benghazi around his neck.”

In a recent speech at the Claremont Institute, in California, Pompeo outlined his version of the Trump doctrine, claiming that “realism” “restraint,” and “respect” guided the President’s approach to the world. It was his most ambitious explanation yet of the Administration’s foreign policy, asserting that renewed nationalism is necessary as the U.S. faces a new era of great-power competition with China and Russia. It sounded plausible, Republican, and entirely unlike the President.

“The problem with the speech is that it doesn’t reflect Trump’s foreign policy,” said Brett McGurk, a former State Department official who oversaw the anti-Islamic State coalition, until he quit in protest over Trump’s decision to pull out of Syria. “It’s not based on realism. It’s not based on restraint. It’s based on declaring grand objectives, few of which the Administration is willing or able to meet.” This gets at a central challenge of Pompeo’s tenure: turning Trump’s tweets and “instincts” into a coherent foreign policy, as his policy-planning chief often put it. Pompeo insists on that goal, though doing so often involves essentially ignoring the President himself. On Syria, for example, Pompeo, Bolton, and other officials disagreed with Trump’s order to immediately withdraw U.S. forces, but they sought to manage him rather than confront him, as Mattis did, while enlisting other allies, such as the Israelis and members of Congress, to lobby Trump for a reversal. In public, Pompeo defended the decision, arguing, in defiance of the facts, that it constituted a continuation of Trump’s policy. Eventually, Trump agreed to keep some troops in Syria.

The episode was one of many in which Pompeo has struggled to avoid coming into public conflict with the President. In recent months, Pompeo has repeatedly tangled with members of Congress and journalists who ask about the President’s policies and his inflammatory statements. Such questions, he has said, are “silly,” “bizarre,” “ticky-tack,” “insulting and ridiculous and frankly ludicrous.” Yet none of the people I spoke with thought Pompeo harbored any illusions about the President. In private, Pompeo’s gripes sometimes echo those expressed by fired predecessors, among them H. R. McMaster, Trump’s second national-security adviser. One of the former senior officials told me that he had heard identical complaints from Pompeo and McMaster: “We put together carefully crafted policies on things and the President blows it up with a tweet, and I have to go in and put Humpty Dumpty back together.”

Until now, Pompeo has derived his power by being better than anyone else at anticipating where Trump is going to end up and managing to get himself there. As Senator Chris Coons, a Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, put it, Pompeo has cultivated a “special skill,” figuring out “how to get Trump moving in the direction he wants.”

The risks of getting publicly out of synch with Trump, however, have gone up for Pompeo this summer, as tensions with Iran rise. The President, a self-styled grand global dealmaker, has said that his goal after withdrawing from the nuclear deal is to bring Iran back to the negotiating table for a better deal. Pompeo, an Iran hawk far longer than he has been a Trump supporter, has been driving the Administration’s hard-line “maximum pressure” strategy. The possibility of a real divide with Trump emerged in June, after Iran shot down a U.S. drone.
Pompeo and his internal rival Bolton, a longtime advocate of Iranian “regime change,” initially backed a retaliatory military strike, and Trump agreed, only to reverse himself when planes were already in the air. Even before that incident, Fred Fleitz, Bolton’s former chief of staff at the N.S.C., had told me that Bolton and Pompeo are closely aligned on Iran, at least. “He and John are on the same sheet of music,” Fleitz said.

Whatever their ideological convergence on Iran, relations between the two seem to have worsened in recent months, to the extent that the former White House official was told recently that they are “not even on speaking terms” and communicate largely through intermediaries. Pompeo, asked last month about his relationship with Bolton, noted, “There’s always tension among leaders of different organizations.”

But for now it’s Bolton, not Pompeo, who appears to be the odd man out. In a sign of Pompeo’s ability to remain in Trump’s good graces, the President publicly bristled at Bolton, not him, after the aborted Iran strike. Then, with Pompeo by his side, Trump made an unprecedented, hastily arranged visit with Kim Jong Un to the North Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone, while Bolton went off on a previously scheduled trip to Mongolia.

In March, Pompeo returned to Kansas for a State Department summit on global entrepreneurship. Amid speculation about whether he will run for a Senate seat next year, Pompeo was asked how long he planned to serve at State. “I’m going to be there until he tweets me out of office,” he responded, to knowing laughs. A few weeks later, Pompeo celebrated his first anniversary as Trump’s Secretary of State, hardly an assured accomplishment in the President’s ever-changing Cabinet. Pompeo marked the occasion with an unusual all-hands pep rally in the lobby of the State Department, “Uptown Funk” blaring as he entered. The Secretary, referencing his own pledge, a year earlier, to stress “swagger,” now redefined the department’s job even more explicitly as serving Trump—“the premier agency delivering on behalf of the President of the United States.”

The capstone of the event was the unveiling of a banner, hanging two stories high, containing a new “professional ethos” statement that Pompeo read out loud to the diplomats, requiring their “unfailing professionalism,” “uncompromising personal and professional integrity,” and “unstinting respect.” The ethos was Pompeo’s personal project, overseen by Ulrich Brechbuhl, his friend since West Point and a co-founder of Thayer Aerospace, who is now serving as his State Department counsellor. The oath stirred controversy about why it was needed, given that diplomats already swear an oath to the Constitution. An early draft was seen as a loyalty oath aimed at leakers. As one of the former senior officials, who saw it, told me, “I ended up feeling like we were in ’84,’ not to mention it being incredibly condescending.” Another of the former senior officials attributed the oath to Pompeo’s concern that “he had to show the President [State] is adding value to what the President is trying to accomplish.” That, too, seemed to be the goal of the new departmental motto that Pompeo had adopted: “One team, one mission.”

The word “mission” was the tell. Pompeo in public often refers to the “mission set” he’s been assigned by Trump, presenting himself as a mere executor of the President’s commands. “He’s very focused on whatever the mission is. He’s a West Point guy: Trump wants a deal, so I’ll get a deal,” another of the former officials said. The official noted that Pompeo uses the language of “an Army captain, a guy who went to West Point and got out before he became a general.”

This behavior is the reason that Pompeo has succeeded in becoming the lone survivor of Trump’s original national-security team. At the start of his Administration, the President had bragged about “my generals.” But, now that he has pushed out the actual generals who served as his chief of staff, his national-security adviser, and his Defense Secretary, it seems clear that Trump was uncomfortable with such leaders, and rejected their habits of command and independent thinking. He wanted a Mike Pompeo, not a Jim Mattis, a captain trained to follow orders, not a general used to giving them.

The pep rally gave Pompeo an opportunity to show the President that his troops were loyal, too. There were no references to Iran or North Korea or America’s global role, only the vow to serve Trump as his “premier agency,” and the promise of fealty. This, in the end, may be Mike Pompeo’s real mission set. Just as he rewrote his business troubles into a success story, he has reinvented himself as the ultimate soldier for Trump. As he left the celebration, the Secretary shook hands and posed for selfies. Playing on loudspeakers was a song by the Canadian pop star Shawn Mendes: “There’s Nothing Holdin’ Me Back.”
TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Big Tech searches for its soul.

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

There are two kinds of people: those who know nothing about Esalen and those who purport to know everything about it. To find out which kind of person you’re talking to, simply utter the three syllables (stress on the first, slant-rhyme with “mesa-line”) and wait. In response, you’ll get either an uncomprehending stare or an effusion of tall tales. Have you heard the one about the poet and the astrophysicist who met in the Esalen hot springs and eloped the next week? How about the accountant who visited for the weekend, cured his depression with a single dose of ketamine, and became a Zen monk? The secret full-moon dance parties? The billionaire-C.E.O. sightings? “This isn’t a place,” a staffer told me while rolling a joint on a piece of rough-hewn garden furniture. “It’s a diaspora, a guiding light out of our collective darkness, an arrow pointing us toward the best way to be fully human.”

To be clear, it is also a place: twenty-seven acres of Big Sur coastline, laid out lengthwise between California Route 1 and the Pacific, a dazzling three-hour drive south of San Francisco. Its full name is the Esalen Institute—a tax-exempt nonprofit, founded in 1962. All visitors must announce themselves at the gatehouse, where a staffer wearing performance floppy is likely to dispense a Northern Californian bundle of mixed messages: *Namaste, the light within me bows to the light within you, let me confirm that we’ve received your credit-card deposit and then I’ll point you to your cabin and/or Tesla Supercharger.* There’s a redwood dining hall, appointed in the ascetic-chic style; there are pine groves and an organic vegetable farm; there are yoga studios and massage tables and a wrought-iron fire pit; there’s a Warren of hot tubs fed by sulfurous underground springs, so when the wind shifts in a northerly direction, the ambient aroma of lavender and patchouli sometimes takes on a middle note of rotten eggs.

The iconic image of Esalen is of its central lawn, as brilliant as an emerald, ringed by oceanside cliffs. This is where, in the sixties, Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary facilitated sessions of “drug-induced mysticism”; where the psychotherapist Fritz Perls led “Gestalt workshops,” often involving crying and primal screams; where Joni Mitchell sang “Get Together” and Ravi Shankar gave George Harrison a sitar lesson. Esalen’s co-founders, Dick Price and Michael Murphy, were Stanford grads turned spiritual seekers. (Both came from families of means; Esalen was built on land that was owned by Murphy’s grandmother.) They described their venture as a “laboratory for new thought”—an independent think tank for the counterculture. Even later, as much of the country acquired the greed-is-good eighties and the end-of-history nineties, Esalen clung to its exceptionalist vibe. The world was awry, and Esalen wanted to help bring it into alignment. “Our whole intention was, and still is, to allow people to get out of their inherited orthodoxies and into the business of discovering truth,” Murphy, who is eighty-eight, told me recently. “That could be an individual’s psychological truth, or a timeless spiritual truth, or the ethical truth of how we ought to behave in society.”

Still, some orthodoxies went largely unquestioned. Esalenites, for all their comfort with sex and drugs and ecstatic encounters with the divine, were less comfortable talking about politics or money, or the politics of money—that is, about their fraught relationship with capitalism. In practice, the institute largely functioned as a retreat center for the wealthy. A weekend of room and board now costs four hundred and twenty dollars, and that’s if you’ve brought your own sleeping bag; the higher-end accommodations cost around three thousand dollars. (There are also scholarships, and a work-study program.) Another iconic image of Esalen is a fictional one: the final scene of “Mad Men.” Don Draper sits, cross-legged and ill at ease, on the Esalen lawn. He closes his eyes, relaxes, and smiles. Has he achieved satori? Not even close. He has used his mental clarity to think up a new way to sell sugar water.

There are many upscale New Age retreat centers (Kripalu, in Massachusetts; Feathered Pipe Ranch, in Montana) where stressed-out executives can spend restorative weekends before returning to work with looser hip flexors and a clearer conscience. But Esalen is just outside Silicon Valley, so the executives who visit it have come from the likes of Intel and Xerox PARC—and, more recently, from Apple and Google and Twitter. Esalen’s board of trustees has included an early Facebook employee, a Google alumnus, and a former Airbnb executive. Presumably, had there been such conspicuous overlap between a countercultural think tank and captains of any other industry—fast food, say, or clean coal—there would have been an outcry, or at least some pointed questions. But Big Tech was supposed to be different. It was supposed to make the world a better place.

Then came Brexit, the 2016 election, and the Great Tech Backlash. “Donald Trump Won Because of Facebook,” a headline in *New York* declared. A law professor at Stanford published a paper that asked, “Can Democracy Survive the Internet?” Suddenly, a board with several Silicon Valley executives didn’t seem entirely unlike a board with several Atlantic City casino bosses. Even after it became apparent that Facebook posts were fuelling the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, the company dithered for months before taking decisive action. Clearly, all was not in alignment.

Esalen seemed perfectly positioned
Silicon Valley is reckoning with the effects of its technology. Is this evidence of deep introspection, or of canny P.R.?
to help. In 2017, the institute’s C.E.O. was Ben Tauber, a thirty-four-year-old former project manager at Google. “There’s a dawning consciousness emerging in Silicon Valley as people recognize that their conventional success isn’t necessarily making the world a better place,” he told the Times. “The C.E.O.s, inside they’re hurting. They can’t sleep at night.” If the tech tycoons were already going to Esalen for ethical and spiritual guidance, then perhaps Esalen could guide them toward a less rapacious business model. “How do we scale our impact as an organization?” Tauber continued. “We do it through impacting the influencers.”

There was skepticism, to put it mildly. (“They should teach that yoga pose where Facebook and Google execs can yank their heads out of you-know-where,” a comment on the Times piece read.) And yet few denied that “impacting the influencers” might be a step in the right direction. For a long time, the prevailing posture of the Silicon Valley elite was smugness bordering on hubris. Now the emotional repertoire is expanding to include shame—or, at least, the appearance of shame. “They can’t decide whether they ought to feel like pariahs or victims, and they’re looking for places where they can work this stuff out,” a well-connected Silicon Valley organizer told me. “Not their boardrooms, where everyone tells them what they want to hear, and not in public, where everyone yells at them. A third place.”

Esalen is one such place. Another is 1440 Multiversity, a sleek campus in Santa Cruz County—the boutique hotel to Esalen’s summer camp. Spirit Rock, a meditation center in Marin County, recently held a gathering to discuss “technology as an existential threat to mindfulness.” There are invitation-only dinners, private caddy parties, conferences called Responsible Tech and Wisdom 2.0. “There’s a lot of debate about what to call it,” Paula Goldman, who runs a new department at the software company Salesforce called the Office of Ethical and Humane Use, said. “Ethical tech? Responsible tech?” If the name is one source of confusion, the substance is another. Is it a movement, or the stirrings of what might become a movement? Is it evidence of cann P.R., or of deep introspection?

“A few people around the Bay are starting to wake up,” Tauber, who now works as an executive coach, told me recently. “They’re acknowledging where things have gone wrong, and their role in that, and they’re trying to get their peers to do the same.” Many of the conversations, Tauber acknowledged, would not play well in Peoria. “It can get kind of out there,” he said. “There are folks exploring mindfullness, bodywork, psychedelics. Personal growth can take many forms. But ultimately if a handful of people have this much power—if they can, simply by making more ethical decisions, cause billions of users to be less addicted and isolated and confused and miserable—then, isn’t that worth a shot?”

Near the end of a placid April morning in San Francisco, a nonprofit called the Center for Humane Technology convened more than three hundred people in a midsized amphitheatre named SFJAZZ—co-founders of Pinterest and Craigslist and Apple, vice-presidents at Google and Facebook, several prominent venture capitalists, and many people whose job titles were “storyteller” or “human-experience engineer.” One attendee was Aden Van Noppen, who carried a notebook with a decal that read, “Move Purposefully and Fix Things.” She worked on tech policy in Barack Obama’s White House, then did a fellowship at Harvard Divinity School, and now runs Mobius, a Bay Area organization dedicated to “putting our well-being at the center of technology.”

“The Valley right now is like a patient who’s just received a grave diagnosis,” she said. “There’s a type of person who reacts to that by staying in deflect-and-deny mode—How do we prevent anyone from knowing we’re sick? Then, there’s the type who wants to treat the symptoms, quickly and superficially, in the hope that the illness just goes away on its own. And there’s a third group, that wants to find a cure.” The audience at SFJAZZ comprised the third group—the concerned citizens of Silicon Valley.

Before the presentation, Van Noppen hosted a breakfast for a few members of the audience, including Justin Rosenstein, a former Facebook employee and a co-inventor of the Like button, and Chris Messina, a former Google employee and the inventor of the hashtag. Messina wore a polo shirt, revealing a tattoo on each arm: a hashtag on the right, a Burning Man logo on the left. “It’s not nearly widespread enough yet,” he said, of the industry’s capacity for self-critique. “But even to get a group of people together like this and publicly acknowledge the depth of the problem? That would have been impossible a few years ago.”

“A few months ago,” Rosenstein said. They put on laminated nametags and made their way to their seats. A string trio took the stage, playing a selection of pop hits that traced an emotional arc from grunge-era ennui (“Bitter Sweet Symphony”) to hopeful ambivalence (“Wonderwall”) to soaring idealism (“Imagine”). Behind the musicians was an enormous screen displaying a series of alarming statistics (“1.6 billion swipes per day on Tinder alone”) and inspiring, possibly apocryphal, quotations (Albert Einstein: “The human spirit must prevail over technology”).

A meditation teacher walked onstage, closed her eyes, and began a gerund-based incantation. “Taking a deep breath in and out,” she said. “Appreciating this chance to be alive.” Next came Tristan Harris, C.H.T.’s executive director, wearing a chambray button-down, gray jeans, and a cordless microphone. “This is a civilizational moment in a way that I’m not sure we’re all reckoning with,” he said. Harris believes that, just as the environmental crisis was wrought by extractive energy companies, so has an attentional crisis been wrought by extractive technology companies. If Al Gore, in “An Inconvenient Truth,” was the harbinger of the former crisis, then Harris seems poised to become the harbinger of the latter one, and in more or less the same way: by pacing across a stage dispensing easily digestible phrases about the urgency of the moment.

In 2013, Harris was a project manager at Google, working on Gmail. “Here is this product that a billion people use,” he said. “My hope was that there would be
an overriding conversation about intent: ‘How should we make sure we’re ethical about exercising this control over people’s brains?’ Instead, it was ‘How can we make this more engaging?’ The previous summer, Harris had gone to Burning Man, where he practiced vulnerable communication, eye-gazing, and Russian martial arts. Returning to his normal life, he experienced a crisis of conscience. ‘I’d been living with a narrower view of reality than I had previously understood,’ he said. He considered leaving Google. Instead, he channelled his doubts into a slide deck that went viral. ‘I’m concerned about how we’re making the world more distracted,’ it read. ‘We should feel an enormous responsibility to get this right.’ The latter sentence was spread across three slides and superimposed on a stock photo of a man holding the world in his hands.

If a person, a company, or an idea threatens Google’s business model, Google often tries to acquire it. Within a few months, Harris had been appointed Google’s first “design ethicist,” tasked with “researching what the problem was and suggesting ways Google could fix it.” Few of his ideas were implemented. “Not that people were twirling their mustaches and saying, ‘We’d never do that, because we’re greedy,’” he said. “It was more a sense of, ‘This is hard, it’s confusing, it’s often at odds with our bottom line.’” Two years later, he left. “I thought I’d be more effective on the outside,” he said.

He founded a nonprofit whose name, Time Well Spent, was also a mission statement and a meme. He gave a TEDx talk in Brussels called “How Better Tech Could Protect Us from Distraction.” He gave a TED talk in Vancouver called “How a Handful of Tech Companies Control Billions of Minds Every Day.” He gave interviews to “60 Minutes” and NBC News. (Harris is aware of the central irony of his career: in order to critique the attention economy, he is constantly in pursuit of more attention.) In January, 2018, the journalist Casey Newton wrote, on the Verge, “‘Time well spent’ is shaping up to be tech’s next big debate.”

Five months later, Newton published a follow-up piece called “The Time Well Spent Debate Is Over. (Time Well Spent Won.)” The tech behemoths had heard the public outcry and had “reacted with shocking speed.” Both Apple and Google were starting to add attentional controls to their phones’ software, making it easier for users to tie themselves to various masts: muting push notifications; limiting how much time they could spend on certain apps; setting the phone to fade to gray scale, rendering its candy-colored icons less seductive. Mark Zuckerberg had written a long Facebook post that began, “One of our big focus areas for 2018 is making sure the time we all spend on Facebook is time well spent.” Among critics of the attention economy, Zuckerberg is regarded as the Dark Lord of the Sith. Once he had co-opted Harris’s mantra, many of Harris’s friends assumed that his work was done.

But Harris considered this only a small step toward victory. “It’s great that Zuck was made aware of ‘time well spent’ and felt it was important enough to repeat it,” he said. “It’s great that phones are slightly less addictive than they were. It is progress. But it’s not nearly enough.” Perhaps he had framed the problem too narrowly.

Time Well Spent morphed into the Center for Humane Technology, and Harris started grasping for a new meme that was equal to the scope of the crisis. “In the seventies, you had people talking about pollution, other people talking about acid rain,” Harris said. “It didn’t become a climate movement until there was holistic language to show how it all fit together.” Today, he continued, “there’s this cacophony of grievances about tech—polarization, outrageification, FOMO, narcissism—but we have to show how it’s all actually one big thing.” According to Nick Thompson, writing in Wired, Harris and a co-founder of C.H.T., Aza Raskin, “went down to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, and covered the walls of their room with paper.” Harris told me, “It’s not like this brainstorming work can only happen in these privileged, New Agey places. But being in a big natural space, detached from your normal life, is a quick way to escape that messy fun-house mirror that social media creates.”

In April, on the stage at SFJAZZ, Harris unveiled his new meme: “human downgrading.” After the presentation, everyone filed into the lobby, and C.H.T. staffers passed out slips of white paper bearing the definition (“Human Downgrading: A societal reduction of human capacity caused by technologies that dominate our human sensitivities”). Audience members nitpicked. Was “downgrading” specific enough? And, beyond articulating the problem, wasn’t it time to start talking about solutions? On Twitter, the
critiques were far more barbed. “The sheer CLUELESSNESS of this event is mind boggling,” Rumnman Chowdhury, a data scientist and an A.I. developer, tweeted. “And I was just told that he workshopped this talk at Esalen. If you know what that is, that explains everything.”

In the lobby, I chatted with Tom Coates, a co-founder of an A.I. startup. These days, he said, before he tells a stranger that he works in tech, “I generally try to say some version of ‘I wasn’t one of the bad guys!’” He added, “That should be printed on our nametags: name, job title, which side of history you’re on.”

For all the talk of Esalen becoming a beacon of moral guidance for the tech elite, the institute’s public schedule looks much as it did in the seventies. There are workshops on a variety of esoteric subjects (“Know Thy Selves: Past Lives,” “Wild Eros in a Fragmented World,” “SoulCollage”). After the piece about Esalen ran in the Times, a new C.E.O. was installed in Tauber’s place, and Esalen’s leadership tried to reassure its Aquarian customer base that their beloved sanctuary would not be overrun by tech bros. The institute’s promotional photos feature a lot of gray ponytails and very few Silicon Valley luminaries. “With the most pathbreaking stuff, you’re never gonna see it on the Web site,” one Esalen insider told me. “A lot of what they’re doing you’ll only hear about years later, in history books.”

There’s some precedent for this. In 1980, Mike Murphy and his wife, Dulce, established the Esalen Soviet-American Exchange Program. They facilitated meetings between American astronauts and Russian cosmonauts, and between agents of the C.I.A. and the K.G.B. Most of these meetings were conducted in secret; many involved nature walks and cross-cultural soaks in the hot springs. (A Newsweek headline, in 1983, referred to “Esalen’s Hot-Tub Diplomacy.”) In 1989, Boris Yeltsin, who had recently resigned from the Politburo, visited the United States on a nine-day trip sponsored by Esalen. He met with President George H. W. Bush, toured the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, and stopped at a run-of-the-mill supermarket on the outskirts of Houston, where the abundant display of pudding pops affected him so strongly—“Even the Politburo doesn’t have this choice! Not even Mr. Gorbachev!”—that he vowed to dismantle Bolshevism once and for all. “Esalen played its own part in the collapse of Soviet Communism,” Jeffrey Kripal, a professor at Rice University, wrote in his 2007 book, “Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion.” If hot-tub diplomacy could help thaw the Cold War, surely it can help diminish human downgrading.

Earlier this year, I scanned Esalen’s course offerings. My past lives and my wild eros seemed like things that I could explore on my own time. Instead, I enrolled in a weekend-long workshop called “Digital Detox: Unplug and Reimagine Your Life.” The facilitators were Allie Stark, Brooke Dean, and Adam (Smiley) Poswolsky—all public speakers or life coaches or some combination thereof, all in their thirties. They were happy to let me tag along but asked me to stay undercover “just to maintain the container of that space.” They would e-mail the fifty participants ahead of time to explain that there would be a journalist in their midst, and then, at the end of the weekend, they’d invite me to reveal my identity. I made a halfhearted attempt at subterfuge, packing a few items of clothing that were not black or gray and taking care not to bring along any New York–branded tote bags. When I walked into the Friday–night opening session, I looked down and noticed that I was carrying a WNYC tote bag instead. “So I guess you’re the journalist,” a woman next to me said, with a beneficent smile.

We sat in a circle in a large dome-shaped tent. Outside was the ocean, invisible but shockingly loud. Dean led a five-minute meditation. "Feeling your body in this space," she said. When it was over, she asked, “O.K., how many of you spent half that time wondering whether that’s the sound of the ocean or some kind of digital white-noise machine?” I raised my hand.

Poswolsky proposed a few ground rules for the weekend. “But let’s call them agreements,” he said. “‘Rules’ sounds so boring.” He uncapped a marker and stood next to an easel pad. “When we talk about building a healthier relationship with our phones, we often talk about it in negatives—no screens after 10 P.M., that sort of thing,” he said. “When we say no to digital technology, what are we saying yes to?” “Openness.” “Vulnerability.” “Being courageous.” “Being vulnerable.” “Vulnerable?” Poswolsky said. “I love that!”

The main rule (sorry, agreement) was, of course, a phone ban. This was relatively easy to adhere to, because Esalen is so remote that it’s impossible to get cell reception. The facilitators also imposed some conversational content moderation: we were asked to avoid “W-talk,” “W” being short for “work.” “When you meet someone, let’s not start with ‘What do you do?’” Dean said. “Maybe start with ‘What makes you feel most alive?’” Real names were discouraged. People adopted nicknames for the weekend: Down, Penultimate, Emo Biscotti. (In 2016, Tristan Harris attended a Digital Detox event, as reported in The Atlantic. During a conversation about digital sabbaticals, Harris protested, “For me, this is W-talk.”)

We returned to the lodge for dinner—college-co-op-style pad Thai, an artisanal peanut-butter-and-jelly station, and a condiment table featuring several varieties of nutritional yeast. After dinner, most of the group proceeded toward the hot tubs. I did, too, navigating by following the sulfur smell. The tubs had been billed as “clothing optional,” but I was the only person who’d even bothered to bring a bathing suit, much less put one on.

The next morning, back in the dome tent, the facilitators debriefed us on our first few hours of phonelessness: “Anyone having any withdrawal symptoms?” They’d brought along a few co-facilitators to lead workshops—“except we call them playshops,” Stark said. Zev would organize a face-painting playshop. Ian would lead a hike to a waterfall. Ramesh Srinivasan, a U.C.L.A. professor, introduced himself: “My research is focused on how technology impacts the world.” “No W-talk!” “Oh, right,” he said. “My workshop will be on—” “Playshop!” “Sorry,” he said. “I’ll be talking about how a lot of the power of technology has been distributed unequally, and how marginalized communities are trying to develop innovative responses to that. But I’ll try to keep it playful.”
I joined Poswolsky’s playshop. A dozen people sat in dappled sunlight, and Poswolsky passed out blank sheets of paper. “On one side, draw the way you present yourself on social media,” he said. “On the other side, draw how you really feel.” The point was that there was a discrepancy. “The game of Instagram is to make it look like, as Kanye said, ‘My life is dope and I do dope shit,’” he said. “But we don’t always feel that! Sometimes we feel lonely and scared.”

One young woman, a professional yogini, said, “For my W, it’s kinda necessary to have an Instagram presence. I personally find it annoying—the yoga babes doing backbends on the beach—but it keeps people coming to the classes.”

“My W is in digital marketing,” a man said. “On the drive down here, I was listening to a podcast about the surveillance economy, about how Google sucked up all our data and is using it for profit and power, and I thought, I’m helping them do that! I don’t work at Google, but everyone who works in my field is a cog in that machine.”

Poswolsky mirrored these concerns, using gentle, empathetic language. “I understand feeling the need to be on social media to do your work,” he said. “I only knew about this weekend because I follow you on Facebook,” one man said.

“Exactly,” Poswolsky said. “It’s a kind of exposure.”

Anytime the discussion veered toward politics, someone would change the subject. Once, Poswolsky mentioned Donald Trump, and several people visibly winced. “Dude, I thought this was a safe space!” one of them said, only slightly joking. Throughout the weekend, systemic analysis was discouraged in favor of self-care. Many participants reported that news notifications on their phones made them feel panicked or overwhelmed; their response, in almost every case, had been to stop reading the news. Remaining engaged in public life, and trying to change it, is the work of true democratic citizenship. At Digital Detox, discussing this work was just another kind of W-talk.

“What’s coming up for me, thinking about all these big forces we’re up against, is a sense of anxiety and helplessness, like I felt before I quit Insta,” one man said. “I came here to be encouraged and to feel whole, but this is starting to be a bit of a bummer.”

As it turns out, some of the most powerful people in tech have had similar experiences. On the first October weekend of 2016, Tristan Harris and Ben Tauber facilitated a workshop at Esalen that was not announced to the public. “A small group of technology leaders and thought leaders will set out for the weekend to begin a conversation on a new kind of technology design, a design that puts awareness and maximizing each user’s human potential at the forefront,” read an invitation, since deleted, on the site of the Return, an Esalen-affiliated group that conducts “experiments in modern community.” “Have you been hand selected for both your interest in the topic and your unique ability to influence entire markets.” At the bottom of the invitation was a list of planned activities, which included “salon-based conversations,” “cliff side hot springs,” “roaring fires,” and “Big Sur Magic.” After the weekend, another page, also since deleted, described the participants by occupation: co-founders of Google, Slack, and Tinder, “members of the early Apple executive team,” and a “Facebook executive”—not Zuckerberg or Sheryl Sandberg but someone on the company’s next-highest rung of leadership.

Tauber and Harris implored me, in a series of tense phone calls, not to mention the retreat, which had been convened with an expectation of confidentiality. But several other attendees were
willing to discuss it. “Apart from a few nature walks and trust exercises, it wasn’t the most woo-woo thing,” one of them said. “We talked about our hopes and dreams and what we aspired to be when we were children. We journaled. No aya-huasca or Illuminati rituals or anything.”

“It accelerated a lot of questions I’d been asking myself but not necessarily prioritizing,” a co-founder of a popular mobile app said. “I didn’t spend a lot of time in the hot tub—I got more out of just talking to everyone, honestly and openly, without us being distracted by our phones.” Like most mobile companies, his measures how much time its users spend on the app; the implicit assumption was that this metric should be maximized. “Afterward, I started thinking, Maybe our goal should actually be less time on the app,” he said. “Maybe the best way to serve our customers is to get them off the phone, building relationships in the world.” This realization didn’t become corporate policy overnight. “It’s never easy to reverse course, especially when it’s a decision with financial implications,” he said. “But it’s also the case that no C.E.O. wants to go to sleep at night thinking, I built something that is causing massive psychological harm.”

At the time of the retreat, Facebook’s mission was “to make the world more open and connected,” the assumption being that this would naturally yield beneficial outcomes. But it was becoming harder to believe that assumption in light of recent phenomena—for example, the campaign of Donald Trump, who was then losing in most national polls but winning in most metrics of social-media engagement. “We had a really frank conversation about where the industry may have taken wrong turns, and how, given enough time, we could course-correct,” one attendee told me. Eight months later, Zuckerberg announced that Facebook was changing its mission. “It’s not enough to simply connect the world,” he said. “We must also work to bring the world closer together.”

A few hours after the talk at SFJAZZ, a select group of attendees was invited to a private dinner at Taohaus, a former town house that is now an event venue. The guests trickled into the parlor, gazing out the window at the receding evening light. Harris stepped to the front of the room and clinked a wineglass. “Unlike climate change, it only takes about a thousand people to reverse human downgrading,” he said. “In this room, right now, are many of those people.”

At dinner, Harris was beset by constructive criticism. “Saw the presentation,” Scott Forstall, an early Apple employee who was once considered Steve Jobs’s heir apparent, said. “You didn’t really say what you’re gonna do. What’s the next step?”

“I value that feedback,” Harris said.

In another room, about a dozen people entangled themselves in what they called an amoeba hug. (“It’s a San Francisco thing,” Guillaume Chaslot, a former YouTube engineer turned whistle-blower, explained, standing outside the amoeba.) Taohaus is also billed as a co-living space and a “creative sanctuary.” Two of the partygoers were not invited guests but permanent residents, a distinction they made visible by roaming around barefoot. One of them, a long-haired young man, wore wooden amulets around his neck, which clinked together like wind chimes as he walked. Several guests, wineglasses in hand, followed him downstairs to the workshop—a recording studio and “design-thinking lab.”

“So who lives here?” Caterina Fake, a co-founder of Flickr, asked him.

“Mmm,” he said. “That’s a deep question. You could say we’re all people who are interested in exploring community and in compounding our capacity as creatives. You could join a company, you could co-live, but what does it mean to combine these vectors?”

He sat behind a drum kit, switched on some recording equipment, and started to sing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Don’t down grade} \\
\text{Gotta make a new world} \\
\text{Create a new way to be} \\
\text{With technology.}
\end{align*}
\]

Earlier this year, Harris was interviewed by Kara Swisher, the gadfly journalist and frenemy of the tech industry, who asked him to explain what C.H.T. did. “Some of the work is in public,” Harris said. “But a lot of the work’s behind the scenes.” He was unstinting in his criticism of various tech C.E.O.s—Zuckerberg; Susan Wojcicki, of YouTube—but more circumspect when it came to Jack Dorsey, the C.E.O. of Twitter. “That makes sense, because Tristan spends a lot of time with Jack behind the scenes,” a tech insider who knows them both told me. “Tristan sees it as a long-term project, trying to coax Jack away from the dark side.”

Late last year, Dorsey went on a si-
lent ten-day meditation retreat in Myanmar. When he got back, he posted a Twitter thread about his experience, including photos of his spartan living quarters, his mosquito bites, and biometric readings from his Apple Watch and Oura ring. The thread seemed to incite disdain from just about everyone: human-rights advocates, chronic-pain sufferers, many members of the general public. “I get that it’s tone-deaf to do it in Myanmar, but I think the outcry was a bit much,” one entrepreneur told me. “Would people have preferred if he was on a private island somewhere doing coke?”

“It’s not enough, on its own, for tech leaders to meditate,” Van Noppen, the director of Mobius, told me. “What matters is whether it leads to wiser decisions and less harmful products. The risk is that meditation can be misused as a numbing agent—a way of making yourself more productive at the thing that is causing the world pain.” Van Noppen has organized confidential dinners where the guests included prominent tech executives, meditation teachers, and neuroscientists who study compassion. Last year, a team of Facebook researchers working on well-being—mitigating depression, tech addiction, and the like—invited Mobius to the company’s Menlo Park headquarters to lead a four-hour discussion about how “well-being” ought to be defined. The researchers were asked to write down their intentions—what kind of world did they hope to bring about? “We read those intentions out loud, and then put those pieces of paper in the middle of the table,” Van Noppen said. “It felt like a very intimate space after that.”

The ethical tech movement is growing increasingly difficult to ignore. In June, the Senate held a hearing about “persuasive technology” online, and Harris testified. “I found that it’s only been external pressure—from government policymakers, shareholders, and media—that has changed companies’ behavior,” he said. Some critics deride Harris’s focus on media—on what he calls, more broadly, “a mass cultural shift”—as squishy or subjective. To reform the financial system, or the energy sector, you wouldn’t invent a meme, or gather a group of executives to journal about their feelings; you would regulate companies, sue them, or otherwise alter their financial incentives.

Big Tech may need regulation, but treating it as if it were any other industry underestimates the depth of the problem. Unlike many other executives, tech executives actually believed their Utopian hype. Now that their innovations have failed to bring about Utopia, they are experiencing a range of conflicting emotions. Someone has to help them translate those emotions into responsible actions. “I find a lot of Tristan’s stick pretty annoying,” one of Harris’s former colleagues at Google told me. “I could do without all the self-aggrandizement and fanfare. And yet, having said that, what he’s doing is super important.”

Tech executives respond to incentives, but not all incentives are financial. “Zuck wants money, he wants power, but more than anything he wants to be admired,” Tavis McGinn, who once worked at Facebook as Zuckerberg’s personal pollster, told me. “If you can affect his ability to walk into a room and command respect, that’s a real leverage point.”

In recent weeks, Instagram users in Canada, Australia, and five other countries started to see a new pop-up message: “We want your followers to focus on what you share, not how many likes your posts get.” To achieve this, the app would stop displaying a post’s total number of likes—just the photo, with no indication of whether it was winning or losing at virality. Tallies of likes are precisely the kind of gamification techniques that social-media platforms use to get consumers hooked. Arturo Bejar, formerly a director of engineering at Facebook and now a freelance consultant, told me that Instagram’s willingness to forgo such an addictive tool is a very hopeful sign. It might decrease user engagement, or time on site, or revenue, at least in the short term. But it’s the right thing to do.”

On my last trip to Esalen, I spent an afternoon in the lodge with Mike Murphy, the institute’s co-founder. A gardener placed a bucket of dahlia bulbs just outside the door—“Free! Take One!”—and passersby kept exclaiming with delight. Murphy’s wife, Dulce, joined us, but she couldn’t stay long; she was facilitating a five-day workshop, not listed on Esalen’s public schedule, about “consciousness and technology.” The two dozen participants included a Zen master, a Middle East peace activist, a TV executive, and a founder of a blockchain company. “She spent a couple of hours trying to explain the whole blockchain concept,” Dulce said. “I can’t say we all fully understood it, but we’re getting there.”

As afternoon turned to evening, Murphy ordered a bottle of red wine and expounded on William James, Maslow’s pyramid, and the state of the world. “Given where we are, geographically and temporally, tech is the big gorilla in the room,” he said. “You ought to talk to Dave Morin about that stuff.”

Morin, a recent addition to Esalen’s board, was an early and influential employee at Apple and Facebook, and he still refers to his former bosses as “Steve” and “Mark.” He then founded Path, a social network that tried to take on Facebook and failed; he now runs Sunrise, a startup whose mission is to cure depression. He showed up at dusk, wearing a cowboy hat and a smart ring. “My Tesla had to reboot three times on the highway,” he said, by way of apology. “Amazing piece of design, that car, but there are still a few bugs to be worked out.”

We sat at a picnic table outside, and Morin took a photo of the sunset with his phone. “You cannot capture it with this,” he said. “I keep trying, though.” He gestured northward, toward a steep cliff and a row of ponderosa pines. “Over that ridge, in a valley up there, a bunch of people invented the Internet,” he said. “Best invention we’ve ever had. And it’s also had all these terrible consequences. So what do you do with that?” He looked me in the eye for long enough that I started to wonder whether his question had been nonrhetorical. But then he went on, “What is the potential of a human? What can we unlock? You know, Steve called the computer the bicycle of the mind. How do we get back to that?”

He pointed to his smart ring. “This is a pretty simple piece of tech,” he said. “And yet it gives me data on my sleep patterns, heart rate, tells me which days to do yoga and at which times, and now I feel stronger and healthier than ever before in my life.” He brushed a firefly away from his face and gazed out over the ocean. “I think we’re figuring out how to find a balance,” he said. “How to make these tools our friends, not our enemies. I think we’re gonna get back there, man.”
The Loop

J. ROBERT LENNON
Divorced, fired from adjunct teaching after a botched attempt to unionize, and her only child lost to college, Bev had, for the first time in decades, more freedom than she knew what to do with. The empty house, hers alone, disgusted her: she sold it, against her daughter’s wishes, and moved to a two-bedroom apartment in a new building downtown. Between the house money and the monthly support payments from her ex—he was fucking his assistant and had signed these things away with the heedless joy of a rabbit sprung from a trap—she’d been given the opportunity to think carefully about what to do with the rest of her life. This quickly came to seem like torture. So she volunteered for Movin’ On Up.

This was the charity she’d donated her ex-husband’s study desk to—a non-profit whose volunteers drove a big yellow truck around town, collecting the castoffs of the well-to-do and delivering them to people in need. After her move, settled into her newly purposeless life, she realized that she actually missed the moving—she was good at it, enjoyed the physical effort, the strategic Tetris of bureaus and bookshelves and chairs and lamps, the packing and unpacking. She recalled the energetic good cheer of the Movin’ On Up crew, understood that she envied them, and gave the organization a call. Turned out they needed a driver. Could she do it?

Yes, she could. She reported for duty in the parking lot of a storage facility on the edge of town, where the Movers (as they called themselves) stored mattresses, bed frames, sofas, and dining tables in donated lockers the size of rest-stop bathroom stalls. She was assigned a couple of big strong kids—teen-agers from the high school, looking for something besides football to put on their college applications—and given a clipboard of addresses to visit. Every other Saturday she drove a rotating duo of student athletes around town, and supervised as they hauled heavy objects out of the basements and attics of the rich and up narrow staircases into the third-floor walkups of the poor. The donors were generally cheerful, embracing the opportunity to feel magnanimous while being relieved, by strangers, of a burdensome chore. They occasionally tried to tip the teens, who had been trained to refuse but probably did not when Bev was out of earshot.

The recipients of the donated furniture were sometimes angry or paranoid, the result of mental illness or methamphetamine addiction. But most of them were delighted. They were people in transition, often fresh out of unemployment or the hospital or rehab, with just enough money to rent a cheap place to live and not a penny more to furnish it. The deliveries made them feel as though they were that much closer to having their shit together. Almost all of them were women.

The only time Bev felt that she had her own shit together was every other Saturday. The rest of the time she spent catching up on the recreational reading she’d failed to do for the past twenty years and idly perusing the Web sites of various professional and technical schools—welding, computer science, nursing. She took long walks with her sweatshirt hood up and her hands deep in her pockets, listening to political podcasts and trying to gin up the fury that she used to be capable of, and which had made her feel so alive. But the ex-husband had ruined it—she was tired even of rage. She took a cooking class and bought a video-game console. She called her daughter every day, and felt lucky when the girl picked up on the fourth or fifth attempt. She counted the days until Saturday.

This Saturday began as they all did. She drove her car to Kim’s house to collect the truck keys. Kim was the administrator; she spent her working hours padding around her living room in wool socks, arranging pickups and drop-offs with her phone in one hand and a placid toy poodle cradled in the crook of the other arm. As always, Bev idled her car at the curb, jogged up the porch steps, accepted the keys through the half-opened door, and saluted her farewell. Back in the car, she executed a slow U-turn in the cul-de-sac at the end of Kim’s street.

It would not have occurred to her to remember this experience, the deliberate and careful arc around this bulb of pavement—but it was something she would later be forced to give a lot of thought to. The cul-de-sac was separated from a busy county highway by a chain-link fence and a drainage ditch; highway traffic massed there behind a red light—on this day, a garbage truck, an old brown sedan, a pickup flying a tattered Confederate flag. To the right stood a porta-john, attendant to a nearby construction site: Kim’s neighbor was erecting a barn that Bev suspected would actually serve as a stealth rental cottage. Between the two houses, a cluster of traffic cones was scattered, one lying on its side; behind them, a pile of muddy gravel assumed a Vesuvian shape. On the left, the brutalist concrete walls of the university’s ag-school cooperative extension shone dully in the diffuse sunshine; somebody in a Buffalo Bills jacket was carrying a ragged-looking, buff-colored hen through its door. A pickup truck was parked out front; it probably belonged to the chicken’s keeper. The cul-de-sac was cracked and pitted, and filthy water pooled in the potholes. The wheels of Bev’s car communicated every flaw in the pavement. She considered having the suspension checked.

At the storage lockers, Bev was to meet this week’s Movers, a boy and a girl. But the boy was a no-show. Bev had his cell number on her clipboard; she texted him and then, a few minutes later, called. Someone answered with a groan and immediately hung up.

She and the girl stood, blinking at each other in the autumn air. Did they have the muscle to go it alone? “Wiry” is what Bev’s ex-husband once called her, pushing her unfinished bowl of ice cream closer. The girl, Emily, looked half asleep, resentful, so it surprised Bev when she agreed to work without the hungover defensive lineman.

“You sure?” Bev said. “There’s two love seats, some beds. A bookcase.”

“I need this,” the girl replied. “For my A in Government.”

“Keep your back straight, use your hips and knees.” Emily nodded.

“All right. Let’s go.”

Movin’ On Up liked to minimize the amount of furniture kept in storage—the lockers were infested with bugs and mice and flooded easily—so Kim had scheduled this morning’s donations to be distributed in the afternoon, along with a few items that were already packed into the truck. First stop was at the northern edge of town, up on the lake: a greened and groomed strip of mini-mansions, each paired with a matching boathouse and dock. Small yachts bobbed on the wind-raised chop. A woman was
donating a love seat and an end table. “Thank God,” she said, “the new sofa will be here any minute,” as though she were irritated with them for being late, which they were not. The love seat was discolored and shredded; its odor implicated a cat. The rules forbade pet dander but everyone ignored them.

Bev and Emily grunted their way up the truck’s narrow ramp, taking frequent breaks, and shoved the love seat against the truck’s wall. On the way back to the county two-lane, they passed the van delivering the new furniture; the driver honked at them, annoyed at having to pull over on the access road to let them by.

Next up, a king-size mattress in an affluent suburb. A note on the spreadsheet read “Do not knock. Take from garage. Door code is 3912.” Low-hanging maple boughs scraped the truck as Bev backed down the driveway; a man in a necktie—on Saturday!—scowled at them through a bay window. The mattress was rolled up, held fast by bungee cords and stained by the oil that saturated the garage floor. As they flopped it into the truck, the man came out to claim, indignantly, his bungees.

A friendly old guy working on a motorcycle across from the public library helped them hoist his coffee table into the double-parked truck as peevish motorists honked and roared past. A trio of graduate students surrendered a sagging bookcase from their creekside rental with obvious relief. Just half a block away, Bev knew, her ex and the assistant shared a charming renovated carriage house behind a towering Victorian owned by some university dean or other. She hated herself for occasionally strolling by, as though inadvertently. The cottage was shaded by a huge and ancient sycamore tree; a chrome orb, perched upon a wrought-iron stand, stood in a neatly maintained rock-and-moss garden. Was the orb the assistant’s? Did she subscribe to New Age principles and styles? From where they were dragging the grad students’ bookcase, Bev could see the assistant’s sporty red coupe, parked obediently at the curb.

B ev was relieved to move on to the next donor, a jolly downtown lady with a queen mattress, box spring, and frame; a tired-looking teen-age boy, surrounded by books and papers, glanced up from the sofa as they inched the bed down the hall. Seeing the boy, Bev experienced a jolt of sorrow. She wanted to bring him a cup of tea or a slice of buttered toast, even if the toast went uneaten and the tea grew cold.

“Maybe you know my daughter,” Bev said to Emily on the way to their last pickup. “Celeste.”

The girl narrowed her eyes, whether in confusion or vexation, Bev wasn’t sure. The two couldn’t be more than a year or two apart in age.

“Celeste Dreyer?” Bev prompted.

“Oh,” came the reply. “I know of her.”

Bev had been flirting with the notion that this girl reminded her of Celeste—or, rather, of Rose, which was the name, announced via text message, that her daughter had for some reason chosen to be addressed by from now on. There was something in the guardedness of the eyes, the determined set of the shoulders. But Bev’s daughter was more prone to assert herself with her body than this girl was—a fleshier body than Bev had ever had, inherited from her bearish father, and quite like the assistant’s, Bev hadn’t failed to notice—and more reactive to the world around her. Celeste was a twitchy girl, easily upset, but also sharp-witted when she wasn’t angry, and quick to laugh. No, it would come to her, who it was that Emily reminded her of—but now it was time to get out of the truck and accept the final bed frame.

This one would be trickier, though.

The donor was a housebound woman, confined to a kind of mechanical cart; she was curled in on herself like a leaf in winter and her hands clutched the air. Accompanying her was a hired aide who was also caring for her own child, a round-headed six-month-old boy. The apartment, a one-bedroom in a subsidized complex out by the college, was cluttered with baby things—an enormous stroller, a playpen and a crib, a huge package of diapers. Empty baby-food jars and formula bottles filled the sink. The aide’s English was poor, and she used it to argue with the donor about which items she wanted to donate.

“No, no, you say the spring box.”

“No, Greta, I mean the frame, the metal frame.”

“Is no frame, only box.”

“No, there’s no box, just a metal frame, underneath the mattress.”

It soon became clear that the donor hadn’t actually been in the bedroom for some time; the cart prevented it. A hospital bed had been set up in the living room, among the child’s things. The donor was giving away her old bed, the bed of her healthier days.

“It’s only the frame you want to donate?” Bev asked.

“T’m keeping the mattress—my son wants the mattress,” the woman said, her speech effortful but clear. Bev wondered what the son thought of this arrangement—the aide and her child taking over the apartment, his mother an afterthought. She wondered what the donor thought of her son’s tolerating this.

The debate continued, pointlessly, for another minute, until Emily, who had stood in stunned silence since they entered, pulled her phone from her pocket.

“Why don’t I take a photo?” she said. “You can look at it and tell us what you want to give to us.” They waited in silence as Emily disappeared into the hall; they saw the flash and heard the synthetic shutter sound of the phone camera. The picture revealed that both women were right: the son’s future mattress rested on a box spring crookedly overhanging a low metal frame, its casters sinking into pile carpet.

“So you want us to take both things?” Bev asked. “The box spring and the frame?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“And leave the mattress behind for your son.”

“That’s right.”

She and Emily got to work in the bedroom, leaning the mattress up against the window and hauling the box spring to an upright position. They were trying to figure out the proper handholds when Bev happened to glance down at the floor. “Wait,” she said. “Where’s the frame?”

“What?”

“The metal bed frame. Did you move it somewhere?”

The carpet was empty of all but a few dead insects, some dust bunnies, and four depressions, the size and shape of cigarette lighters, that the frame’s casters had left.

Emily squinted at the floor, then at the bottom of the box spring, as though perhaps the bed frame had stuck to it. “I don’t get it,” she said.

“Is this the same room?”

“It’s the only one.”
They stared at each other. Then Emily took her phone out of her pocket and looked at the screen. "It was right here," she said.

"Is it . . . in the closet?" Bev asked, though the sliding closet door exposed a packed wall of junk into which even a pillowcase would be hard to wedge.

The girl scowled. "No!"

"O.K., O.K. Well. I guess . . . we just take the box spring?"

But Emily did not want to let it go. "Where's the frame?" she said.

"Is it . . . are you sure you showed them the right picture?"

"I only took the one!" She sounded as though she might cry.

"I mean, was there a different picture, already on—"

"No, Mrs. Dreyer, no. No! That was the picture I took!"

"All right."

"It was here!"

They fell quiet, realizing simultaneously that the other women had been listening to them argue. The baby cooed and the aide shushed him. Wordlessly, they lift the box spring and stutter-stepped it into the living room.

"It looks like there isn't a frame after all," Bev said. "So we'll just take the box spring."

The donor's face was blank. The aide frowned, eyes narrowed, as though worried she was being tricked, though it was unclear what the trick might be. As Bev watched, her expression softened into quiet triumph—she was right, after all, that there was no bed frame, only a box spring.

Bev handed the donor a receipt and they dragged the box spring out to the truck. It was time to give it all away.

Silence, as usual, presided over the ride to the first client's apartment, though a different silence from before. Emily, head hanging and foot twitching, seemed angry; a couple of times, she pulled out her phone and stared at the photo of the missing bed frame before putting it away with a sigh. As for Bev, she was accustomed to, and adept at, having to negotiate unexpected fissures in her life, and she had a knack for smoothing them over, making her world appear to have healed. Stability—that was what Bev had provided Celeste when her father moved out, during her junior year of high school, an ostensibly vulnerable time in any youth-ager's life. Which is why it bewildered her when the girl had seemed not merely to weather the rupture but to enjoy the novelty of it, to use it as a springboard to independence. Last summer, in the weeks before Celeste left for college, she would utter the assistant's name in Bev's presence with a casual, cruel insouciance that surely, surely she knew hurt her. Celeste would tell Bev that she'd gone to the pizzeria or the movies with her father and the assistant, that she'd taken a day trip to the city with her father and the assistant. As she talked, Celeste would jingle the thin silver bangles the assistant had bought her—a new, horrifying tic that it was apparently Bev's burden to ignore. Why? Why?

So Bev had it in her, here in the truck, to pretend that what had just happened hadn't: that the metal bed frame had not, in fact, mysteriously vanished from the woman's bedroom. Was Emily putting one over on her, maybe as some kind of retroactive, once-removed reprisal for something Celeste had said or done to her last year? But she knew it couldn't be so. The two hadn't known each other, and the girl was completely baffled.

The first client, an African-American woman of around thirty, was clearly thrilled to see them; she lived in the subsidized apartment complex overlooking the hospital and had the air of somebody getting a fresh start—new job, new place. She needed the love seat and the end table. She followed them out to the truck and helped them carry in the love seat. When Bev brought in the table, the woman put her hands on her hips and said, "Oh, oh. I'm sorry, I meant the other one. Can I get the other one?"

The table was a square of fake-woodgrain Formica with pitted chrome legs—not hideous, and sturdy enough. It was the only one they'd picked up earlier that morning, from the woman who gave them the love seat. Bev said, "I think this is the only one."

"No," the client said. "The little white one. The painted wood one."

The truck contained no such table. Bev was sure of it—she had literally just come from inside. But when she followed the client up the ramp, it was perched atop the mattress pile as though it had flown in and alighted there: a little white wooden drop-leaf, just as the lady had said. It seemed impossible that it had remained upright as they drove; and, anyway, it had not been there moments ago, when they'd exhumed the love seat from underneath
the mattresses. Bev could feel Emily’s body tensing beside her. “That one!” the client reiterated, pointing. Dutifully, Bev climbed back into the truck and gently carried the table down to her waiting arms.

After that, the run behaved better: nothing obviously inexplicable, or even out of the ordinary, occurred. An old lady in public housing whose grandson had broken her coffee table; a talkative Iraq War veteran living in a silver trailer in somebody’s back yard on a grassy hilltop, whose lumbar pain demanded a new mattress. A young couple with twin babies and only one crib. A lesbian couple in a converted hunting cabin who needed kitchen chairs. Later, Bev would have occasion to revisit these scenes, to try to figure out where the anomalies lay—she knew they were there, knew that something was different. She could feel the flaws in the day the way that, nearly twenty years earlier, she’d sensed that her water was about to break moments before it happened, ushering Celeste into the confusing and hostile world. But the flaws remained hidden. They couldn’t all be for her—this world created chaos for its own reasons, unknowable ones.

And, as they drove and lifted and schlepped, Emily came to seem more and more familiar to Bev, looked like somebody she used to know: a nervous flick of the tongue, fingers worrying at a scar on her knee. A fleeting glance from underneath the curtain of hair, which ought to have been pulled back for work but wasn’t, as though being able to hide were more important than seeing what she was doing. Bev wanted to ask, “Where do I know you from?” But the question would have been ridiculous, as the memories were certainly from before the girl was born.

They arrived, at last, at their final stop, where they were supposed to deliver a complete bed to a woman living alone in the development behind the Staples and the PetSmart. She would be getting only a mattress and a box spring—the frame intended for her was the one that disappeared.

“I can’t believe we’re almost finished,” Emily said, a rare unprompted remark, as they pulled up on the cracked and weedy asphalt apron that surrounded the apartment block.

**TELEPHONE YEARS**

There are gestures that have been lost. One was picking up a desk phone Using a couple of fingers To snag it under the little shelf where the receiver Rested when it was not in use; You’d carry the phone with you if you needed to pace, Perhaps with a studied restlessness that felt good: You were removing a solid object from its position And that had meaning. You gestured with it in hand, Or held it against your hip. Something both possessive and devil-may-care in it.

The disruption of a ring, the caller unknown, Was one of the day’s small dramas. We lived for them. There were hours unaccounted for, pages turned. Ticking of the heart between rings...

A feminine variant was to wear the curling receiver cord Sashed across your waist, over the elbow, up the arm So the curls were stretched long, the receiver Tight-tucked in the neck hollow and pinned to its job— To speak and to hear, companion of both mouth and ear. Maybe standing while talking, at a window.

The spreadsheet read “Do not knock, call instead.” Bev said, “You want to give her a ring?”

The girl unlocked her phone, then quickly dismissed the photos app, which still displayed the bed-frame picture. She keyed in the client’s number, held the phone to her face, waited. Bev, meanwhile, turned off the engine, jumped down to the pavement, and heaved up the truck’s rear door. No surprises: the bed lay alone on the floor, slightly askew, the mattress’s corner hanging over the box spring’s edge. She pulled out the metal ramp and greeted Emily as she came around the passenger side of the truck.

“No answer,” she said. “It was, like, ‘This number is unavailable.’”

“Hmm.” Bev peered at the woman’s door, fortuitously on the building’s ground floor: No. 43. It was slightly ajar.

“Uh,” Emily said.

“Let’s see.” Bev approached, taking note of a small face near the doorsill: an orange tabby, sniffing the air. The cat withdrew as Bev came near.

“Hello?” she called out, knocking. Her knuckles pushed the door open by another inch or two, and she was greeted by a gentle gust of air, extremely warm and dry, that carried the smell of cigarettes, wet cardboard, burned plastic, and ammonia.

The apartment appeared quite dark at first, and then, as Bev’s eyes adjusted, clarified into dimness. She was standing in a small living room. Its one window had been covered by flattened cardboard boxes held together with masking tape; a single shadeless table lamp glowed in a corner. If the room contained any furniture, Bev couldn’t see it. Household debris climbed in uneven piles toward the ceiling and walls: bulging trash bags, dirty clothes, plastic bins spilling children’s toys, scratched and battered saucepans, cereal boxes, aluminum-foil balls, baking trays, half-dismantled old televisions with shattered screens, plastic stereo equipment herniating skeins of wire, grilling utensils, and a dented hibachi bearing the logo of a hockey team. Cats—more than Bev could count—crept around the base of the junk mountain and into and out of gaps between the items.

It was very hot in here. Bev heard a banging noise from around a corner—the slam of a skillet against a metal sink. Water was running.

“Hello?”
A light pleasure in the binding, an intimacy
With the subject or the person listening
That he couldn't see.

And the pauses when neither of you spoke
Were alive, space-filling, somehow physical.

You could hear rooms.
Conversations were rooted in them.
They didn't move around.
You knew there was life in another house—doors slammed,
Supper bells, doorbells, messages scratched on pads, handwriting
that told,
People who left rooms and never came back.
People who might surprise you, come from so far there was no phoning them.

I don't mean that life was better then,
But our conversations were theatre.
Farewell, until
You didn't know when.

—Deborah Garrison

The banging stopped, and then, after a moment, so did the running water. A cat darted from the shelter of the hibachi into the harsh fluorescence emanating from the kitchen.

"Ma'am? We're here from Movin' On Up?"

The creature that stepped into the room was ghoulish, insectile: a woman of indeterminate age, malnourished, her single piece of clothing (a long T-shirt printed with cartoon characters) dangling from the wire hanger of her shoulder blades. And yet she moved with grace, as though she were even lighter than she appeared. Steam rose from the cast-iron skillet clutched, with maniacal intensity, in her right hand, and water dripped from it onto the floor, where a cat soon appeared to lick it up. She threw a glance over Bev’s shoulder and shouted, "Don't let the cats out!"

It was Emily the woman was shouting at; the girl stood frozen in the open door. Shocked into action, she slammed it shut.

The woman returned her attention to Bev. "What are you doing in my house?"
"We brought your bed."
"Huh?"

"We're from Movin’ On Up. You needed a bed?"
"The woman's eyes clouded, then cleared. "Yes. Yes. You got the bed?"
"Out in the truck."
"All right. All right," the woman said. "Bring it in. Don't let the cats out."

Muscling the box spring to the door, Emily said, "I don't like this situation, Mrs. Dreyer."
"No, it's not great."
"I think this lady is on drugs. I think she needs help."
"I agree."

The client’s bedroom lay around the corner; they would have to unspend the box spring to get it through the kitchen, which was little more than a narrow hall with a stove and a sink at one end. The clutter continued here, towers of food containers and cat-litter tubs sharing the space with piles of laundry, empty bleach bottles, and, incongruously, a tall stack of cardboard jigsaw puzzles in boxes, each one promising a lush landscape image when completed, the lower ones crushed, their pieces spilling out. Cat kibble crunched underfoot, and the oven was open, pushing blazing heat into the cramped space. Bev felt her sweat evaporating before it could even stain her clothes.

When they reached the bedroom, the reason for the client’s need became clear: the entire far corner of the space had caught fire, and part of the futon still lying on the floor had been consumed. The carpet, walls, and ceiling were blackened; the many empty cigarette packages scattered around the space suggested a cause. A melted electrical-outlet cover still had a cord trailing from it, attached to the charred skeleton of a table lamp.

The ruined futon was covered in cats. Emily said, "Um."
"You gonna take this out of here?" the client asked.
"No, Ma'am. We can't do that. Did you tell your landlord about what happened?"

The woman appeared to think the question over. "Yeah, he knows," she replied, unconvincingly.
"O.K."
"How do I get rid of this thing?"
"I'm not sure," Bev admitted.

They lifted up the futon, scattering the cats, and slumped it against the wall, blocking access to a tiny bathroom dominated by litter boxes. The clean area of carpet that was revealed looked bizarre: a rectangle of dark-blue berber empty of debris, save for a single scrap of pink paper. Bev picked it up: a movie ticket, from a superhero blockbuster she’d taken Celeste to see the week before she left for college. When Bev raised her head, the client was gazing at her expectantly. She couldn't toss the ticket back on the floor, it would seem like an insult. And she couldn't keep it, because it wasn’t hers. So she stood there, folding the ticket between her thumb and forefinger, for what felt like an eternity, until the client looked away. Bev shoved the ticket into the pocket of her jeans, and, with Emily, went out to the living room to collect the box spring.

It took longer than it should have. The thing could barely be wedged into the kitchenette; they had to move the puzzles and empty litter boxes, and even then they ended up scraping some paint off the corner of the wall. By the time they reached the bedroom, the futon had fallen back into its place on the floor.

Except it hadn’t. It was still sagging against the wall. But it was also on the
figure, arms crossed, as fiercely power-
less as a cornered tomcat.

That’s who Emily was like: herself, not Celeste. The lanky frame and coarse hair, the cluster of freckles over the long, humped nose. Now another image came to Bev, this time a photo her father had snapped at a high-school track meet: young Beverly frozen in the act of passing the baton to her team-
mate. It was objectively a great picture, dramatic and flattering and perfectly framed, but Bev remem-
bered the instant after it was taken, remembered let-
ting go of the baton too soon, a half second before her teammate’s hand would have closed around it, and the sound of it ringing
dully on the asphalt. This was the photo that her father had framed, that he still kept on the mantel along with snap-
shots of Celeste throughout her life and—vexingly, as though the divorce had never happened—a family portrait from Bev’s wedding day. “That’s how I like to remember your mother,” he ex-
plained, and that was that.

Bev and Emily carried the mattress to the door, and Bev dragged it through the apartment alone. She dropped it onto the box spring while the client stood, two cats cradled to her chest, watching with suspicion. “Are you going to be all right?” Bev asked as she backed out of the room, hazarding a final glance at the two identical burned futons, now collapsed into a mound on the floor. The client pretended not to understand the question.

The run was over. It was time to go home.

Emily said nothing during the drive back to the storage lockers. When they arrived, Bev signed her school form and thanked her for her help. “Sure,” the girl said, turning to leave. She climbed into an enormous dent ed S.U.V. and carefully made her way off the lot and back to her life.

Bev locked the truck and walked to her car. It was evening. Curtains of rain obscured the hills in the distance, but here honeyed light illuminated the nearby veterinarian’s office and the Turk-
ish restaurant and the D.M.V. Gulls

hopped and bobbed around a pile of French fries and their dropped paper basket, and a couple of kids made out in front of the defunct bowling alley. Bev’s freedom and loneliness felt beau-
tiful. She climbed in behind the wheel and headed for Kim’s house.

On the way, she passed a little red couple, its inhabitants scowling, their mouths moving: an argument. It was, of course, her ex, being ferried about by the assistant, her white fingers gripping the wheel, her golden hair tugged and flat-
tened by the air flowing through the open window. Bev ought to have felt a bitter satisfaction at glimpsing this moment of disharmony. See?, she could say, the new one’s mad at you, too. Instead, it reminded her of their fights over Celeste: his cod-
dling of the girl, his enthusiastic embrace of her new name, of “Rose.” She did all the work, he got all the glory! And a new woman to argue with, too.

Well, he could have it. Her ex’s eyes met hers and he kept them there, his head turning as the two cars passed, as though it were some kind of surprise to him that she still existed, that she would continue to haunt him as long as they both lived in this dumb town. A minute later she arrived at Kim’s. She turned over the keys and the clipboard, and rat-
ted out the final client while scratching theoodle’s head. Could the dog even walk? Bev had never seen it walk. Maybe it couldn’t. Maybe this was Kim’s cross to bear, to ferry her ailing dog from room to room for the rest of its life. Bev be-
came aware that she was jealous of Kim. She was jealous of the pooodle.

Later, she would wonder if it was the closing of Kim’s front door that marked the beginning of it—the perhaps unin-
tentionally heavy thunk of wood striking wood, the snick of the latch, the gentle clank of the pressed-tin welcome sign bouncing against the decorative cut-glass window. It felt appropriate, as a metaphor.

But eventually she would come to realize that it was the cul-de-sac where the shift took place. That slow circum-
navigation past highway and ditch, the mountain of gravel and the porta-john. Somewhere in there, evening shaded back into morning, because the end of it was always the same, with the pickup truck and the Bills fan with the sick chicken. It was the light, that’s how
she could tell—the angle of the light changed, not in a flash but in a gradual sweep, like a bare bulb swinging at the end of a cord. By the time she’d got around the cul-de-sac, it was morning again, that same morning, and she was on her way to the storage lockers to meet Emily, and they were to begin their run, to do it all over again—the house on the lake, the king mattress in the garage, the motorcyclist, and the grad students. The jolly mother with the quiet teen-age son. And then the disabled woman and her aide, and the missing bed frame, the little white drop-leaf table perched on the mattress stack. The old woman and the war veteran and the couples, and at last the tweaker with the cats and the charred bedroom, slowly filling up with identical futons like a bag of microwave popcorn. Then back to the lockers, and back to Kim’s, the ex and the assistant, and back to the cul-de-sac to start again.

It was as if there were two Bevs: the one who experienced the day for the first time, and this one, the one she regarded as herself, trapped inside the other. She could read the mind of her original, could see what she saw, could feel the body inhabiting her actions. But she couldn’t shout back, couldn’t compel the first Bev to change a single thing: not a movement or a perception, not a word or a thought. The first dozen cycles, the first hundred, she screamed silently at First Bev to wait, just wait, let me think, let me see. But eventually she gave up on that. It was clearly one of the rules of whatever was happening: nothing could change. She could only observe.

So she convinced herself that observation was the way out. There was something she was supposed to notice, something the forces of this mad world wanted her to perceive before she would be freed to finish her life, to experience newness every second until death. That’s what had been taken from her—the absolute pristine uniqueness of each boring moment of existence. For a long while (and who knew how much time was passing outside the loop—seconds? millennia?—or perhaps the universe was idling, just waiting for her to finish), she searched for whatever it was that she was supposed to find. Somewhere in the mundane chaos of that ordinary day there had to be something: a detail she’d missed the first time, and then again and again and again. In the jolly woman’s house, something written in the boy’s notebook. In the silver trailer on the hill, the yellow meadow of sticky notes adhering to the fold-down breakfast table—what did they say? The faces in photographs in the grad students’ rental. A voice on the radio from the motorcyclist’s kitchen window. She would discover the existence of a single detail, then spend the next dozen cycles waiting for the moment when she could seize it, perceive it, fix it in her mind’s eye. The day, she believed, was not infinite. If there was something to be seen, she would see it, and she’d be liberated, and relieved of the burden of this terrible, ancient memory.

At least, that’s how she felt in the beginning, or, rather, in what turned out to be the beginning: her enthusiasm for the task before her was motivated only by the promise of release. Then, gradually, she began to forget. First her memories of life before the loop faded, and were supplanted by memories of earlier cycles: particularly rewarding runs of observation and perception that resulted, initially, in extraordinary feats of deduction; and, later on, in the epiphany that it was not necessary to reach conclusions, only to observe and catalogue; and, later still, in the acceptance of the superfluity even of memory itself. Her powerlessness had become a new kind of power, an infinity lodged inside the finite. She wondered, while it was still possible to care about such things, why she couldn’t have performed this alchemy during her life before the loop, transforming her shortcomings as a mother, a mate, a teacher, into this magisterial indifference.

Was this how gods were born? Had she become one? A time arrived when she knew that’s what she was, a god, and with that knowledge came a contentment and a pleasure that she had never known in life. And eventually the knowledge faded, too. All that remained was the pleasure, disembodied and limitless, the loop itself nothing more than a decoration, like the pointless stars etched onto the bowl of the sky.

The Writer’s Voice Podcast
J. Robert Lennon reads “The Loop.”
The Critics

A Critic at Large

State of the Unions

What happened to America’s labor movement?

By Caleb Crain

Do you have rights at work? Franklin Delano Roosevelt thought you did. In 1936, while trying to haul America’s economy out of the bog that the free market had driven it into, Roosevelt argued that workers needed to have a say, declaring it unjust that

a small group had concentrated into their own hands an almost complete control over other people’s property, other people’s money, other people’s labor—other people’s lives. For too many of us throughout the land, life was no longer free; liberty no longer real; men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness.

For Roosevelt, a system in which bosses could unilaterally decide “the hours men and women worked, the wages they received, the conditions of their labor” amounted to “dictatorship.” He hoped that the New Deal would bring workers and managers together in a new form of workplace governance.

New Dealers drew on an idea known as industrial democracy, developed, in the late nineteenth century, by English socialist thinkers who saw workplace rights as analogous to civil rights such as due process and the freedoms of speech and assembly. Senator Robert Wagner, who wrote the National Labor Relations Act of 1935—also known as the Wagner Act—made the point explicitly: “Democracy in industry means fair participation by those who work in the decisions vitally affecting their lives and livelihood.” In their efforts to civilize the workplace, however, Roosevelt and his allies didn’t set up a new institution for workers to speak through. They relied on an existing one: the union.

Whenever the rate of unionization in America has risen in the past hundred years, the top one per cent’s portion of the national income has tended to shrink. After Roosevelt signed the Wagner Act and other pro-union legislation, a generation of workers shared deeply in the nation’s prosperity. Real wages doubled in the two decades following the Second World War, and, by 1959, Vice-President Richard Nixon was able to boast to Nikita Khrushchev that “the United States comes closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society.” America’s unions and workers haven’t been faring quite as well lately. Where labor is concerned, recent decades strongly resemble the run-up to the Great Depression. Both periods were marked by extreme concentrations of personal wealth and corporate power. In both, the value created by workers decoupled from the pay they received: during the nineteen-twenties, productivity grew forty-three per cent while wages stagnated; between 1973 and 2016, productivity grew six times faster than compensation. And unions were in decline: between 1920 and 1930, the proportion of union members in the labor force dropped from 12.2 per cent to 7.5 per cent, and, between 1954 and 2018, it fell from thirty-five per cent to 10.5 per cent. In “Beaten Down, Worked Up” (Knopf), a compact, pointed new account of unions in America, Steven Greenhouse, a longtime labor reporter for the Times, writes that the “share of national income going to business profits has climbed to its highest level since World War II, while workers’ share of income (employee compensation, including benefits) has slid to its lowest level since the 1940s.”

One of the earliest heroes in Greenhouse’s book “The Big Squeeze” (2008), in which he portrayed a “broad decline in the status and treatment of American workers,” with such details as fingers chopped off in a yogurt-container factory, stockers locked inside a Sani’s Club overnight, and a Walmart cashier who “menstruated on herself,” as a colleague put it, after being denied bathroom breaks. (The colleague was disciplined for buying the woman sanitary napkins and a washcloth on company time.) “Beaten Down” adds new outrages to the list, including the shuttering of the Web sites Gothamist and DNAinfo by their owner after staff writers unionized, but Greenhouse’s emphasis this time is on remedy rather than indictment. A General Motors employee recalls the union legacy she inherited from her great-grandfather, who participated in a strike at the company in 1936 and 1937 that helped launch the golden age of American labor. “Nobody realizes that all that we have is because of what was done before,” she says. The book is a kind of primer for the woman’s peers, explaining how “the eight-hour workday, employer-backed health coverage, paid vacations, paid sick days, safe workplaces” arose—and what the prospects are for keeping them.
Since the fifties, the proportion of union members in the labor force has declined by nearly twenty-five percentage points.
the Twenty Thousand. At the time, there was little to stop bosses from dialling clocks back to steal time, or from charging employees for the water they drank, but the women won holidays, raises, a shorter workweek, and, at many factories, the recognition of their union, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. Among the holdouts was the Triangle Waist Company, which had a factory near Washington Square. In 1911, a bin of cotton scraps there caught fire, and a hundred and forty-six workers died, most of them women and almost half of them teen-agers, trapped because an exit door had been locked to prevent pilfering and unauthorized breaks.

One witness to the disaster was Frances Perkins, the head of the New York Consumers League, whose job involved lobbying against fire hazards, child labor, and overlong hours. “People who had their clothes afire would jump,” she later recalled. Outrage about the fire inspired a reform movement, and Perkins pushed New York legislators to institute a new fire code. By the time Roosevelt was elected governor of New York, in 1928, Perkins was chairing a board that oversaw industrial safety in the state. After the stock market crashed, in 1929, she urged Roosevelt to set up a public–works program, unemployment insurance, and a workers’–compensation program—and he did. When he rose to the White House, a few years later, Roosevelt invited her to be Secretary of Labor; Perkins was the first woman ever named to a Cabinet position. Before accepting, she warned him that she expected the same programs for the whole nation, plus a federal minimum wage, a shorter workday, and pensions.

Does Perkins belong in a history of unions? Greenhouse devotes most of a chapter to her, but she wasn’t a union person. Indeed, union leaders objected to her getting the country’s top labor post, and she herself admitted, “I’d much rather get a law than organize a union.” But perhaps the story of America’s unions can’t be told in isolation from larger stories of politics and governance. The General Motors strike in the thirties probably wouldn’t have prevailed if Roosevelt hadn’t been President, and it might not have even happened without the Wagner Act, which secured the right to unionize and barred employers from firing, blacklisting, or spying on workers who organized. When G.M.’s chairman reneged on a promise to negotiate with the strikers, Perkins was there to call him “a scoundrel and a skunk.” G.M.’s leaders couldn’t figure out how to quash the strike—violence, they worried, might imperil sales—and, to save face, they asked Perkins if Roosevelt could make a personal request that they meet with the workers.

Victory more than quadrupled the auto union’s membership and led to similar wins at Chrysler and Ford, setting a precedent for union contracts that established pay and benefit levels not only in the auto industry but across the manufacturing sector. By the postwar years, it seemed possible that America might realize a dream that Louis Brandeis had described in 1915, a year before he joined the Supreme Court: an industrial economy in which life meant “living not existing.” In the best of all possible worlds, Brandeis believed, every workday would be short enough, calm enough, and safe enough to preserve workers’ “freshness of mind,” allowing them to continue educating themselves throughout adulthood, as citizenship required.

Emily Guendelsberger gives a sense of how far we are from that dream in “On the Clock” (Little, Brown), a jaunty but dispiriting memoir of her work at three low-rung jobs: at a call center, a McDonald’s, and an Amazon warehouse. At the call center, she finds that her fellow-workers, caught between unpredictable customers and eavesdropping managers, suffer panic attacks so often that the local paramedic asks “Okay, who is it this time?” when he gets out of the ambulance. Chronic stress also predominates during Guendelsberger’s stint at McDonald’s. There are always too many customers waiting in line, and she constantly fears that their impatience may at any moment tip over into rage. Eventually, she realizes that the staffing shortfall has been carefully calibrated: “Understaffing is the new staffing.” The resulting stress, Guendelsberger warns, thwarts “logic, patience, paying attention, resisting temptation, long-term thinking, remembering things, empathy”—in short, all the faculties necessary for responsible citizenship.

At Amazon, a handheld scanner tells Guendelsberger what to do at every moment and tracks her even into the rest room. A training video warns of the work’s physical demands—“This is going to hurt”—and she’s disconcerted that painkillers are dispensed for free. But soon, she writes, “I pop Advil like candy all day.” Her shifts last eleven and a half hours, and she gets home too drained to even think of writing or reading. One day, slumped in front of “The Muppet Christmas Carol,” she finds herself “laughing almost involuntarily” at the realization that “Scrooge literally has a better time–off policy than Amazon.”

What went wrong? The labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, in his influential study “State of the Union,” published in 2002 and updated in 2013, argues that, even in the two golden decades that followed the Second World War, American unions were bargaining from a position of weakness. Manufacturers were fleecing the better-unionized North for the South, in a domestic version of the cost-cutting move now known as “offshoring.” Because unions in America were organized firm by firm, rather than industry by industry, as in Europe, their administrative costs were higher and their energies dispersed. Lichtenstein credits labor’s gains in those years to a willingness to strike rather than to collective bargaining, which he thinks suppressed internal dissent and encouraged people to see unions as serving their members’ self-interest rather than a larger political cause.

Unions fought hard for their members in part because of holes in the New Deal. Roosevelt and Perkins weren’t able to implement a universal health-care system, as they’d hoped, so auto unions wheeled medical benefits out of auto-makers. The first versions of Social Security and the Wagner Act excluded farmworkers and domestic workers, many of whom were black, because New Dealers needed support from white Southerners. (To this day, the occupations
remain outside the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board.)

Despite these exclusions—and despite racist “hate strikes” in the early twentieth century by white union members who objected to black co-workers—black workers joined unions in large numbers after the Second World War. By the nineteen-seventies, they were more likely than any other demographic to be in a union. The Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North had landed many of them in the sorts of low-wage, high-skill, large-firm jobs that were quickest to unionize. But, as the sociologist Jake Rosenfeld has shown, in his book “What Unions No Longer Do” (2014), they joined in even greater numbers than those factors would predict. The quest for workers’ rights ran in parallel with the quest for civil rights. The night before Martin Luther King, Jr.,’s assassination, he spoke in support of a sanitation-worker strike: “What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?” A black employee’s wage today is, on average, 16.4 per cent higher if she is in a union, but the wage gap between black workers and white workers remains large and persistent. Rosenfeld suspects that the black community was welcomed in too late to receive the full benefit of unions’ heyday.

Public approval of unions began to fade at the end of the nineteen-fifties. Robert F. Kennedy confronted the Teamsters president Jimmy Hoffa during a Senate investigation that exposed corruption, fraud, tax evasion, extortion, beatings, and murder. To hip leftist of the sixties, unions looked stodgily bureaucratic. In 1962, the activist Tom Hayden accused labor of “losing much of the idealism that once made it a driving movement”; at a panel discussion in 1967, Bill Clinton, then an undergraduate, asked George Meany, the head of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., whether collective bargaining was “merely another institution against which man must assert himself.”

Meany supported the Vietnam War, and at the 1968 Democratic National Convention he dismissed protesters who had been beaten by police as “a dirty-necked and dirty-mouthed group of kooks.” Meany, a former plumber from the Bronx, preferred looking after his own to chasing visions of workplace democracy. “Why should we worry about organizing people who do not appear to want to be organized?” he said, in 1972, shrugging off the evangelical spirit. It was Meany who coined the phrase “silent majority” to refer to working-class whites without a college education who felt alienated by anti-establishment disruption and progressive moralizing—and who would be crucial to Nixon’s political victories.

Though a number of these wounds look self-inflicted, Rosenfeld suggests that macroeconomic forces may have made union decline inevitable. In the past four decades, unionization rates have slipped across the developed world. In the nineteen-seventies, America’s manufacturers for the first time faced serious foreign competition, which stripped profit margins and put unionized companies at a disadvantage just when high unemployment was depriving workers of bargaining leverage. Federal deregulation in transportation and telecommunications whisked away profits that unions were hoping to share in. Manufacturing jobs were being replaced by service jobs, which were harder to unionize. And automation was steadily grinding jobs away. The story goes that a Ford executive once asked, as he showed off new robots to a union leader, “How are you going to collect union dues from these guys?” (“How are you going to get them to buy Fords?” the union leader replied.)

Some companies started to factor the cost of breaking the Wagner Act into their budgets. Under the law, any worker fired for supporting a union must be reinstated with back pay, but the company can deduct income he earns elsewhere in the meantime and owes no additional fine. (In some cases, the only penalty is having to admit wrongdoing on a bulletin board.) A 2009 survey found that union supporters were illegally fired at thirty-four per cent of companies where the management opposed a union. Greenhouse interviews a nursing-home employee in Florida who was awarded less than two thousand dollars at the end of a five-and-a-half-year investigation of his unfair firing.

In the 1980 Presidential election, a union of air-traffic controllers bucked tradition and endorsed the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan. The controllers, who worked for the federal government, were aggrieved about their salaries, whose value had been eroded by
inflation, and about the stress they worked under, which President Jimmy Carter’s aviation chief had pooh–poohed as no worse than that of driving a New York City bus. After Reagan took office, they demanded a hefty raise and a four-day workweek. The counteroffer from Reagan’s team was the most generous the federal government had ever extended to a union. Even so, in August, 1981, the controllers walked off the job.

It was illegal for federal workers to strike, though they had got away with it before. Reagan had led a strike himself as the head of the Screen Actors Guild, and, as the governor of California, where it had been illegal for state workers to strike, he had resolved more than a hundred walkouts without punishing strikers. Not this time. “They are in violation of the law,” Reagan told reporters, a few hours after the strike began. His Administration fired more than eleven thousand people, banning them from ever working for the federal government again, and decertified their union, fining it twenty-nine million dollars. Dozens of strikers and union officials were arrested; there were bankruptcies, divorces, and suicides. To return planes to the air, the government hired permanent replacements for the strikers, a tactic that had been legal since a 1938 court ruling but had been considered socially unacceptable.

“Suddenly people realized, Hell, you can beat a union,” the president of a copper mine later recalled. Almost overnight, strikes became scarce. There had been two hundred and eighty-nine large strikes a year, on average, during the nineteen-seventies, but there were only eighty-three a year in the nineteen-eighties. The yearly rate so far this decade is fourteen. After the Second World War, wages were more generous in sectors of the economy with a high rate of strikes, but that’s no longer the case, probably because strikes are more likely to fail. Collective bargaining has become “defensive” and “marginal to the real problems,” Lichtenstein writes. Accordingly, real hourly pay for the average American is lower today than it was in 1973.

In 2008, when the Democrats took the House, the Senate, and the White House, labor leaders hoped that politicians would level the playing field. But Barack Obama’s priority was health care. For decades, Rosenfeld writes, there hasn’t been “even one significant piece of pro-union legislation.” On the contrary, the tide lately has been in the other direction. In 2011, a law proposed by Scott Walker, then the governor of Wisconsin, stripped public-sector unions of most of their bargaining power; Greenhouse interviews the president of a Wisconsin local whose membership dropped from eleven hundred to eighty. Throughout the next half-dozen years, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Kentucky passed so-called right-to-work laws, which make union dues optional and were once common only in former slave states. Since 1961, union members have had the right to decline to fund their union’s political activities, but, in 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that government workers can’t even be required to pay for a union’s negotiations on their behalf.

Some labor groups have met the setbacks by refocusing on old ideals of economic justice and workplace democracy. That may sound utopian, but Rosenfeld suggests a hardheaded justification. Although unions often gauge their power by the premium that membership adds to a worker’s compensation—Greenhouse reports an estimate, from 2015, of 13.6 per cent—it’s not in a union’s interest for the wage premium to be too high; if a unionized company is put at a competitive disadvantage, it might go out of business. A more strategic goal is to establish a wage floor across an economic sector. That has been the aim of the Fight for $15, a grassroots movement to empower service workers. It began in 2012 with fast-food workers in New York City and a year later won a law, in a Seattle suburb, phasing in a fifteen-dollar-an-hour minimum wage. Similar laws now cover California, New York City, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. The Service Employees International Union helped launch the movement and put tens of millions of dollars into it, even though most beneficiaries aren’t union members and may never be.

The Fight for $15 has featured a new kind of strike, lasting only a day and designed not to deprive a company of labor but to draw media attention. Why try to shut down a McDonald’s when you can hold a sit-in at a shareholder meeting, or publicize the fact that the company’s help line advises cash-strapped workers to visit food pantries and sign children up for Medicaid? In a similar strategy, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a group that advocates for tomato pickers in Florida, boycotted one fast-food chain at a time in order to persuade the businesses to buy tomatoes only from growers certified as providing rest breaks, shade tents, drinking water, and fair pay.

Perhaps altruism and storytelling are the new union weapons. Greenhouse reports that a teachers’ union in St. Paul, Minnesota, won support from the community when it added the goals of students and parents, such as more nurses and fewer standardized tests, to the teachers’ demands for themselves. During the Red for Ed strikes that spread via social media last year, teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona made their economic plight part of a bid for broader political engagement.

Even weakened, unions continue to have benevolent effects on civic life. The children of union parents earn more when they grow up, and so do children merely raised in a neighborhood with many union families. Though unions are losing their capacity to reduce income inequality in the private sector, they continue to reduce it among government employees. Rosenfeld estimates that union membership increases voter turnout by five percentage points; the only other institutions capable of boosting it for voters of low socioeconomic status are churches. In a backhanded compliment to unions’ political efficacy, a 2018 study found that right-to-work laws, by impairing union activities, reduce turnout in Presidential elections by two percentage points—and reduce Democratic vote share by enough to have cost Hillary Clinton victories in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania in 2016.

In a world where technology allows an employer to script and oversee every decision, workers will need to help one another if they want to defend their dignity. It’s not at all clear what the unions of the future will look like, but it may be that grander aspirations are necessary to achieve smaller ones. ✦
Books

The Looking Glass

Are we at the end of the nature-nurture debate?

By Louis Menand

Not that long ago, Margaret Mead was one of the most widely known intellectuals in America. Her first book, “Coming of Age in Samoa,” published in 1928, when she was twenty-six, was a best-seller; and for the next fifty years she was a progressive voice in national debates about everything from sex and gender to nuclear policy, the environment, and the legalization of marijuana. (She was in favor—and this was in 1969.) She had a monthly column in Redbook that ran for sixteen years and was read by millions. She advised government agencies, testified before Congress, and lectured on all kinds of subjects to all kinds of audiences. She was Johnny Carson’s guest on the “Tonight Show.” Time called her “Mother to the World.” In 1979, the year after she died, President Jimmy Carter awarded her the Medal of Freedom.

Today, Margaret Mead lives on as an “icon”—meaning that people might recognize the name, and are not surprised to see her face on a postage stamp (as it once was), but they couldn’t tell you what she wrote or said. If pressed, they would probably guess that Mead was an important figure for the women’s movement. They would be confusing Mead’s significance as a role model (huge as that undoubtedly was) with Mead’s views. Mead was not a modern feminist, and Betty Friedan devoted a full chapter of “The Feminine Mystique” to an attack on her work. Mead mattered for other reasons.

One of the aims of Charles King’s “Gods of the Upper Air” (Doubleday) is to remind us what those were.

Mead was a cultural anthropologist, and the rise of cultural anthropology is the subject of King’s book. It’s a group biography of Franz Boas, who established cultural anthropology as an academic discipline in the United States, and four of Boas’s many protégés: Ruth Benedict, Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Cara Deloria, and Mead. King argues that these people were “on the front lines of the greatest moral battle of our time: the struggle to prove that—despite differences of skin color, gender, ability, or custom—humanity is one undivided thing.”

Cultural anthropologists changed people’s attitudes, King believes, and they changed people’s behavior. “If it is now unremarkable for a gay couple to kiss goodbye on a train platform,” he writes, “for a college student to read the Bhagavad Gita in a Great Books class, for racism to be rejected as both morally bankrupt and self-evidently stupid, and for anyone, regardless of their gender expression, to claim workplaces and boardrooms as fully theirs—if all of these things are not innovations or aspirations but the regular, taken-for-granted way of organizing society, then we have the ideas championed by the Boas circle to thank for it.” They moved the explanation for human differences from biology to culture, from nature to nurture.

A lot of this story has been told, but King is an intelligent and judicious writer, and he has woven a concise narrative that manages to work in a fair amount of context. His subjects were all unusual characters, and their lives are colorfully related. Obviously, legal and political actors had at least as much to do with the changes in social attitudes that King writes about as anthropologists did. But he makes a good case with the cards he has dealt himself. On the other hand, issues around race, gender, sexuality, and “otherness” are still very much with us, although in slightly altered form. And when people discuss them they no longer solicit the wisdom of anthropologists. What happened?

Boas was born and educated in Prussia. He moved to the United States in 1886, when he was twenty-eight, and a decade later, after some false starts, became a professor of anthropology at...
Columbia. For many years, he was institutionally embattled, at least partly because of his left-wing politics. King says that at one point the anthropology department was moved into three rooms up seven flights of stairs in the journalism building—one room for Boas, one for a secretary, and the third left empty.

Somehow, Boas managed to train an entire generation of scholars in what was, until after the Second World War, a tiny academic field. The historian Lois Banner has calculated that forty-five Ph.D.s in anthropology were awarded in the United States between 1892 and 1926, and that nineteen of the recipients studied under Boas. By 1930, she says, most American anthropology departments were chaired by Boas students.

Like two other influential professors, John Dewey and Thorstein Veblen, both of whom were his exact contemporaries, Boas was a turgid writer. But he was intellectually fearless; he had energy and charisma; and though he made a fierce impression—his face was scarred from sabre duels he had fought as a student in Germany—his students were devoted to him. They called him Papa Franz. He retired from teaching in 1936, but remained active professionally until his death, in 1942.

Boas was trained as a physicist. His student work was in psychophysics, the science that measures things like sensory thresholds, and his dissertation was an effort to determine the degree to which light must increase in intensity for people to perceive a change in the color of water. This might seem an utterly sterile topic for research, but Boas reached an unorthodox conclusion: it depends. Our perception of color is a function of circumstances. Different observers have different perceptions depending on their expectations and experiences, and those differences are not innate. They are, consciously or unconsciously, learned. It made no sense, Boas decided, to talk about a general law of sensory thresholds.

It’s an academic adage that a scholar’s career consists of footnotes to the dissertation, and, in a way, this was true for Boas. He was an empiricist: he collected facts, and he was not inclined to theoretical speculation. But he thought that the basic fact about human beings is that the facts about them change, because circumstances change. Our lives may be determined, by some combination of genes, environment, and culture, but they are not predetermined.

Boas’s revolutionary work was a study, undertaken for a congressional committee and published in 1911, on the bodily form—head size, height, hair color, age at pubescence—of the children of recent European immigrants. The impetus was public anxiety that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe would, through intermarriage, dilute the racial stock (sometimes identified as “Nordic”). Boas’s finding, which was that the cranial index of children born in America differed from that of children of the same background born in Europe, rocked the field. It upset long-believed claims that racial differences, including what we would now call ethnic differences, are immutable. The evidence proved, Boas said, “the plasticity of human types.” It also showed that variations within groups are greater than variations between groups.

In 1911, this was not what most white scientists and politicians wanted to hear. Boas’s career spanned an exceptionally active period of Aryan supremacy. Boas witnessed the legalization of Jim Crow; the widespread acceptance of social Darwinism and eugenics; imperial expansion, including the American occupation of the Philippines; drastic restrictions on immigration; the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan; and the coming to power of Adolf Hitler. (Boas was Jewish.) Often, science was invoked as a justification for colonization, segregation, discrimination, exclusion, sterilization, or extermination. Boas devoted his life to showing people that the science they were relying on was bad science. “He believed the world must be made safe for differences,” Ruth Benedict wrote when Boas died.

If innate biological differences don’t account for the observed variety of roles and practices among human groups, then something else must be at work. Boas thought there were several factors, and one was culture.

Using the term required some redefinition. In the nineteenth century, “culture” was generally regarded as an attainment; it was something societies acquired as they advanced, marking a stage in the growth of a civilization. Boas is one of the people responsible for the sense we have in mind when we use the phrase “culture in the anthropological sense”—that is, the sense of culture as standing for a way of life. One of his major contributions was to show that pre-modern societies—“primitive” was the accepted term—have cultures in exactly the same way that modern societies have them, and that the minds of people who live in those societies are no different from the minds of everyone else.

Boas did his first field work with the Inuit living on Baffin Island, in northern Canada. He had intended to study hunting patterns and the like, but the more time he spent with the Inuit the more he realized that their particular way of doing things reflected a particular way of seeing the world. The Inuit way was not the European way, but it wasn’t inferior. In some respects, he thought, it might be better. The Inuit seemed, for example, to be more hospitable than Europeans. Immersion in Inuit life made him see his own culture from the outside. He learned, as he put it, “the relativity of all education.”

Boas eventually concluded that there is not one human culture but many, and he started referring to “cultures,” in the plural. He was engaged in ethnography, and he believed that the job of the ethnographer was to disappear, in effect, into the culture of the people being studied, to understand from the inside what it means to be male or female, to give or receive a gift, to bury one’s dead. The ethnographer needed to get the society’s jokes. This meant leaving one’s ethnocentrism at home. “Get nowhere unless prejudices first forgotten,” Ella Deloria wrote in her notes on one of Boas’s lectures. “Cultures are many; man is one.”

“All my best students are women,” Boas told an anthropologist friend in 1920. Columbia College did not admit women—it was the last of the Irvies to go coed, in 1983—but the graduate school and Teachers College did. And Boas also taught at Barnard, which is right across the street.

Ella Deloria came to Boas by way of Teachers College. She was born on a South Dakota reservation, and belonged to an eminent Sioux family. Her father was an Episcopal priest; her mother was
the daughter of a high-ranking U.S. Army officer. She went to Oberlin, then transferred to Teachers College, where she received a bachelor’s degree in 1915. In her final year, she received a summons from Boas, who enlisted her in a lifelong project of his, recording Native American languages.

Deloria was never officially a Boas student. But she worked as his assistant and attended some of his lectures, and he employed her to fact-check the work of early ethnologists and linguists who had studied the Plains Indians. Boas was not surprised to learn that a lot of their findings were worthless. In 1941, the year before Boas died, he and Deloria published “Dakota Grammar.” King says it is one of the few works in his career that Boas agreed to co-author.

Of the women King writes about, Ruth Benedict was professionally the closest to Boas. She had a bachelor’s degree from Vassar and got interested in anthropology when she took courses at the New School. She entered the graduate program at Columbia in 1921, and, after getting her degree, became what King calls Boas’s “lieutenant” in the department. Boas struggled to get her a regular faculty position; she was finally made an assistant professor in 1931.

When Boas retired, Benedict was the most famous member of the Columbia department. Her book “Patterns of Culture,” a study of three groups—the Zuñi (of the American Southwest), the Kwak’utl (of British Columbia), and the Dobu (of Papua New Guinea)—was published in 1934 and became one of the best-selling works of academic anthropology ever written. The university, it is almost unnecessary to say, decided to go with a man as the new chair. He was Ralph Linton, a critic of Benedict’s work. They did not get along.

In 1946, Benedict published a second fantastically popular book, “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,” a study of the culture of Japan. Linton left Columbia that year and Benedict was finally promoted to full professor in 1948. Two months later, she had a heart attack and died. She was sixty-one.

It was Benedict who recruited Margaret Mead to anthropology. Mead entered Barnard as a sophomore in 1920. She was an English major, then a double English and psychology major, but she

**BRIEFLY NOTED**

*Travelers*, by Helon Habila (Norton). The narrator of this novel is a Nigerian graduate student who moves from Virginia to Berlin with his wife, when she is awarded a fellowship to paint portraits of migrants. His literary perspective on migration is challenged by encounters with people from around the world who now live precariously, and far from their European dream. “Even in Berlin I miss Berlin,” one of them observes. When the narrator loses his documents, after picking up the wrong bag on a train, he finds himself in deportation proceedings, among those whose lives he previously contemplated from a seemingly secure position. The book’s elaborate depiction of a range of personal sacrifices brings into focus the human tragedies obscured by statistics and discussions of public policy.

*Screen Tests*, by Kate Zambreno (Harper Perennial). In the first part of this book, fifty-eight fictions eulogize the figures whose lives and work are a balm for the disillusioned author. Susan Sontag, John Wayne, Valerie Solanas, and Elena Ferrante all inspire the narrator’s meandering meditations on writing, aging, and failing. In the second section, four previously published essays reprise scenes from the first and consider life at the margins of society. As a published author, Zambreno frets over her own Wikipedia page and Googles herself compulsively, pitting a desire for success against her fascination with failure. The two sections cohere pleasingly, playing with the sometimes artificial distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

*Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, by Simon Critchley (Pantheon). “Every generation has to reinvent the classics,” the author, a prolific philosopher, writes. That’s not a radical statement, but it gains force through frank, personal readings of hallowed plots, including Euripides’ “Trojan Women” and Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. For Critchley, tragedy is neither a staid moral purgative—as Aristotle’s Poetics might suggest—not an ethical emergency, as the “savage critique” in Plato’s *Republic* would have it. Rather, it’s an expression of unsettled humanity, and an enduring corrective to what Critchley sees as philosophy’s traditional commitment to the “ideal of a noncontradictory psychic life.” Theorizing theatre, then, is “the very opposite of any and all kinds of cultural conservatism.” Pay attention and you can reinvent your life.

*And How Are You, Dr. Sacks?*, by Lawrence Weschler (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). A longtime staff writer at this magazine, Weschler set out a generation ago to write a profile of the British-bom neurologist Oliver Sacks. Weschler was alive to the doctor’s eccentric brilliance, compassion, personal quirks, and secrets. At first, Sacks was a willing subject, but then he pulled back, later writing his own memoir-confessional. This intelligent, strange, sometimes maddeningly digressive book is, in genre terms, neither fish nor fowl but, rather, some other odd, often delightful animal. It’s at once the story of a complicated man, of a lasting friendship, and of a failed project that is finally rescued.

*The New Yorker*, August 26, 2019
took an introduction-to-anthropology class with Boas in her senior year, and Benedict was her T.A. Benedict persuaded Mead to enroll in the graduate program. They also fell in love.

Benedict was fourteen years older than Mead, and Mead was married. So was Benedict. Their intimacy lasted for the rest of Benedict’s life, and through two more marriages for Mead. (That relationship is the subject of a book, by Lois Banner, called “Intertwined Lives.”) Mead’s choice to do her field work in Samoa, studying adolescence, was encouraged by Boas, who wrote a foreword to the book that resulted and that launched her career.

Zora Neale Hurston entered Barnard in 1925, when she was thirty-four. (No one knew her age; Hurston always lied about it.) After graduating, she spent two years in the doctoral program before dropping out, but by then Boas had got her started collecting African-American folklore in central Florida, where she had grown up. She published her findings in 1935, as “Mules and Men,” with a foreword by Boas, but the real importance of the work she did was that it provided material for the astonishing representation of African-American speech in her singular novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God.” That book was published in 1937 and slowly sank from view—Richard Wright accused Hurston of minstrelsy—but it was “rediscovered” in the nineteen-seventies, and is now a staple text in English-literature courses.

The anthropology these people practiced had two motives that might seem, from an orthodox scholarly perspective, extracurricular—except that knowledge is always pursued for a reason. One motive was to record ways of life that were rapidly disappearing. Even in the nineteen-twenties, it was almost impossible to find groups of humans untouched by Western practices. The island that Mead’s research subjects lived on was an American possession. It had an Anglo-American legal system, and the Samoans were all Christians.

Mead did her best to minimize these circumstances, because she wanted to capture behavior and mores that were remote from American Christian moral and legal conceptions—in particular, Samoan attitudes toward premarital sex, which is the part of the book that got all the attention. So she centered her account on what she took to be the distinctively “Samoan” aspects of her subjects’ lives.

Early-twentieth-century anthropologists were highly self-conscious about this recovery mission. They worried that the world was losing its cultural diversity. “Western civilization, because of fortuitous historical circumstances, has spread itself more widely than any other local group that has so far been known,” Benedict wrote. “This world-wide cultural diffusion has protected us as a man had never been protected before from having to take seriously the civilizations of other peoples.” The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who did his field work among indigenous groups in west-central Brazil in the nineteen-thirties, once suggested that the word “anthropology” should be changed to “entropology”—the study of the homogenization of human life across the planet. Cultural anthropology was the West’s way of memorializing its victims.

The other motive—and this is what accounts for the popularity of Mead’s and Benedict’s books, and of Hurston’s novel—was to hold up a mirror. What is of interest to the anthropologist is difference, but all difference is difference from something, and the “something” in these books is the anthropologist’s own culture.

This is true even for Hurston. She was raised in Florida, but she attended college in the North and was part of the Harlem Renaissance. She was cosmopolitan. She wrote “Their Eyes Were Watching God” because she wanted to show Northern readers a way of life that was barely conceivable to the integrationist mentality (which she did not share): African-Americans living happily in the South and having virtually no contact with whites.

The idea behind all these books is that we can’t see our way of life from the inside, just as we can’t see our own faces. The culture of the “other” serves as a looking glass. As Benedict put it in “Patterns of Culture,” “The understanding we need of our own cultural processes can most economically be arrived at by a détour.” These books about pre-modern peoples are really books about life in the modern West.

Given this aim, the emphasis falls, almost unavoidably, on the exotic, and for the nonprofessional audience exoticism is a big part of the appeal. The jacket illustration for “Coming of Age in Samoa” featured a topless girl. The trick was to turn this appeal inside out, so that what appear at first to be outlandish and sometimes repellent practices come to seem natural and sensible, and our own practices, whose reasonableness we had taken for granted, start to appear tribal and arbitrary. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, writing about Benedict, called this “portraying the alien as the familiar with the signs changed.”

Soon after Mead’s death, cultural anthropology began losing its voice in public debates. King thinks that the reason for this was the rise of anti-relativism. He points out that cultural relativism is the principal target of Allan Bloom’s “The Closing of the American Mind,” which was published in 1987 and helped launch the culture wars of the ensuing decade. Bloom attacked both Mead and Benedict, and the notion that teachers who preach cultural relativism are turning American students into unpatriotic nihilists has been a recurrent theme in political rhetoric ever since.

It’s true that Boas and Benedict spoke of “relativity,” and that at the end of “Patterns of Culture” Benedict refers to “coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence.” But everything else in Benedict’s book contradicts the assertion that all cultures are “equally valid.” The whole point is to judge which practices, others’ or our own, seem to produce the kind of society we want. The anthropological mirror has a moral purpose.

The term “culture” is responsible for some of the confusion. We think that to call something part of a group’s culture is to excuse it from judgment. We say, That’s just the lens through which
people in that society view the world. It’s not for us to tell them what to think. Our ways are not better, only different. What it all boils down to (to paraphrase Montaigne) is: We wear pants; they do not. That would be relativism.

But to say that a belief or a practice is culture-relative is not to place it beyond judgment. The whole force of Boasian anthropology is the demonstration that racial prejudice is cultural. The belief that some races are superior and some inferior is learned; it has no basis in biology. It is therefore subject to criticism.

Boas spent his entire life telling people that intolerance is wrong. King says that cultural anthropology pushes us to expand our notion of the human. That may be so, but it has nothing to do with relativism. King’s anthropologists are prescriptivists. They are constantly telling us to unlearn one way of living in order to learn a way that is better by our own standards.

Mead argued, for instance, that American families are too insular and put too much pressure on growing children. The example of Samoa, where families are extended and children can move around among the adult members, suggested that American teenagers could be healthier and happier if we relaxed our notions of how families ought to function. There was nothing natural and inevitable about American social structures.

But there were also changes within the field of anthropology itself. Soon after Mead’s death, the concept of culture began to be targeted. The arrows flew from multiple directions, and some of the criticisms exposed tensions within the Boasian tradition. Although the concept had been given an enormous amount of work to do, the meaning of “culture” was never settled on. In 1952, two anthropologists, Alfred Kroeber (who was Boas’s first Ph.D. student) and Clyde Kluckhohn, published “Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions.” They list a hundred and sixty-four definitions from the literature.

As an instrument of analysis, the term is impossibly broad. If we mean by “culture” something like the lens through which a group of people inevitably see the world, then “culture” becomes synonymous with “consciousness,” and it seems absurd to generalize about “Navajo consciousness” or “Western consciousness.” All distinctions are lost. On the other hand, if we do distinguish a group’s culture from, say, its social structure, then we dilute the term’s explanatory power. Culture becomes epiphenomenal, a reflection of underlying social relations.

And there are ethical issues, which, as King acknowledges, Boas and his students were mostly oblivious of. Mead spent nine months, interrupted by a hurricane, in Samoa; she interviewed fifty girls in three small villages on one of the five inhabited American Samoan islands; she never returned. Yet she wrote things like “High up in our list of explanations we must place the lack of deep feeling which the Samoans have conventionalised until it is the very framework of all their attitudes toward life.” She presumed to understand not only Samoan practices but the Samoan way of being in the world. She was speaking for Samoans.

Benedict had done field work with only one of the three groups she wrote about in “Patterns of Culture,” and she never set foot in Japan. Lévi-Strauss, after his time in Brazil, did hardly any field work. He got his facts from published books and articles. This kind of ethnography began to look like crypto-colonialism, the Western scientist telling the “native’s” own story, sometimes without even talking to a native.

There was also the question of how deep cultural difference really runs, an issue aired in the nineteen-nineties in a dispute between two anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins and Ganath Obeyesekere, over how to interpret the death of Captain Cook, in the Hawaiian Islands, in 1779. Were the islanders who killed Cook inside their own perceptual fishbowl, operating with a completely different understanding of how the world works from that of Cook and his crew? Or, underneath the cultural appurtenances of Hawaiian life, were the islanders behaving rationally and pragmatically, much as any other people might?

And there was the complaint, directed at Mead and Benedict, but also at Lévi-Strauss and Geertz, that the cultural approach is ahistorical. The cultural anthropologist freezes a way of life in order to analyze it as a meaningful pattern. But ways of life are in continual flux.

Boas was a firm believer in this: he was interested in what he called “diffusion,” the spread of forms and practices across space and time. Deloria, too, thought that the notion of recapturing

“Here in the Midwest, Hurricane Julia was caught having an affair with Tropical Storm Antonio, who may or may not have murdered Julia’s long-lost sister Grace, a strong wind heading south.”
Native American life before the arrival of the Europeans was delusional. Native American life was being lived right now, in an evolving mixture of pre-Columbian customs and twentieth-century American ways of life.

But Benedict was looking for patterns. In “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,” she wrote, “I started from the premise that the most isolated bits of behavior have some systemic relation to each other.” And from this premise she undertakes to explain “what makes Japan a nation of Japanese.” Japanese-ness is a rock, washed over by waves of history.

And what is gained from swapping out “racial difference” for “cultural difference”? As the South African anthropologist Adam Kuper has pointed out, cultural differences between blacks and whites were used to justify apartheid. Making the differences cultural enables people to say, “I’m not a racist—I just want to preserve our respective ways of life. I don’t want to be replaced.”

But all these criticisms of the premises of Boasian cultural anthropology (and there were others) had less impact than the direct attack made by the anthropologist Derek Freeman, a New Zealander, on “Coming of Age in Samoa.” Mead’s controversial finding in that work was that Samoan teenagers engage in full sexual relations before marriage, with multiple partners, and largely without shame or guilt or even jealousy. She gave this as one of the reasons that Samoan adolescents didn’t exhibit the angst and the rebelliousness that American teen-agers did. The point was that adolescence is a culturally determined phase of life, not a biologically determined one.

In two books published after Mead’s death, “Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth” (1983) and “The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead” (1998), Freeman claimed that Mead had been tricked by her native informants, and that Samoan sex life was far more fraught than she represented it. Freeman’s books kicked off a wave of reconsideration.

King consigns the entire controversy to an endnote, as he does later challenges to the reliability of Boas’s findings in his 1911 study of the bodily forms of the children of immigrants. He does this because subsequent investigations suggest that the accusers were wrong and that Mead and Boas were both substantially correct. But he therefore misses the significance of those episodes. For what was under assault was the whole culturalist account of human behavior, and what the disputes symbolized was a swing back toward biology.

The new biologists are not like the scientists Boas did battle with in the early twentieth century. They agree with Boas that “man is one.” But they think this means that there exists a single “human nature,” and that the success or failure of different forms of social organization depends on how faithful they are to this species essence.

This has become almost the default mode of analysis among social and political commentators, who like to cite work by cognitive scientists, endocrinologists, and evolutionary psychologists. In the most reductive version of the new biologism, life is programmed, and culture is simply the interface. Even the social science that is most popular, like Behavioral economics, is human-nature-based. Nurture is out.

And yet the issues on which Boas and Mead made their interventions, issues around race and gender, are now at the center of public life, and they bring all the nature-nurture confusion back with them. The focus of the conversation today is identity, and identity seems to be a concept that lies beyond both culture and biology. Is identity innate, or is it socially constructed? Is it fated, or can it be chosen or performed? Are our identities defined by the existing state of social relations, or do we carry them with us wherever we go?

These questions suggest that the nature-culture debate was always misconceived. As Geertz pointed out years ago, it is human nature to have culture. Other species are programmed to “know” how to cope with the world, but our biological endowment evolved to allow us to choose how to respond to our environment. We can’t rely on our instincts; we need an instruction manual. And culture is the manual.

Only we can tell us how to live. There is nothing that prevents us from deciding that the goal of life should be to be as unnatural as possible. “Human nature” is just another looking glass. ♦
I’m Not Finished

Sex, violence, and power in Edoardo Albinati’s “The Catholic School.”

BY PAUL ELIE

A very long novel—like Edoardo Albinati’s “The Catholic School” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)—complicates our sense of what a novel is. A thousand-plus pages, in the range of a million words: such a novel makes “Ulysses” and “The Golden Notebook” and “Gravity’s Rainbow” seem sleek. It resists our efforts to read it on the bus or in bed, to get lost in it, to finish it, as we were taught to do in school; even on an e-reader, it tries our twenty-first-century patience. Very long nonfiction books are typically justified by their subject matter. Not so the very long novel: impractical, gratuitous, it has to justify itself as it goes.

The very long novel is even more gratuitous in Italian than it is in English. Jhumpa Lahiri, introducing a new book of Italian short stories, observes that Italian literature has developed around the story, rather than the novel, which retains the feel of an import. In the shadow of Dante and Boccaccio, Italian literature has no domineering elder of the very long novel: no Cervantes, no Richardson or Fielding, no Dumas or Hugo. Primo Levi’s books are under three hundred pages, as are Italo Calvino’s, as is Giorgio Bassani’s “The Garden of the Finzi-Continis”; Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s grand novel “The Leopard” is only a little over. A very long Italian novel can seem an act of defiance; it is certainly an act of imposition. Albinati’s “The Catholic School,” originally published in 2016, occupies almost thirteen hundred dense pages. It became a best-seller in its native land, and was awarded the Strega Prize (previously given to Bassani, Elsa Morante, Levi, Natalia Ginzburg, et al.). The English translation, done with unflagging vigor by Antony Shugaar, presents readers with a very long novel that feels even longer than it is. The effect is surely intended. Of the novel’s many forays into ideas, the richest is its exploration of “the gratuitous,” la gratuità. It’s a mode of experience in which power and the absence of purpose meet; and, in the reading, this gratuitously long novel about religion, manhood, sex, and violence becomes a test of its own unruly philosophy.

Albinati was born in 1956 and was educated at a Catholic boys’ school in the prosperous district of Rome known as the Quartiere Trieste before completing his studies at a state-run, coeducational high school. “That was my time, yes, and these were my spaces,” the narrator, also named Edoardo Albinati, remarks, and the novel is formulated as a work of personal history that will disclose the inner life of contemporary Italy. So the Quartiere Trieste is a “battlemented, turreted citadel” for the ruling class; the Catholic boys’ school an incubator for Italy’s future leaders; and the Catholicism on offer there a distillation of the opiate that has drugged Europe since time began—a mixture of wealth, power, status, and moral scrupulosity, tempered by “a catechism that, on paper at least, preached something like the exact opposite.” The years during which Albinati comes of age are years of epochal change for Italy, for Catholicism, for ideals of manhood. Albinati and his classmates are “a theatrical troupe” who “find themselves acting out the Meaning of Life without yet having lived,” and their school is “a miniature theater or a laboratory, a workshop.”

In Italy, as in the United States, the social convulsions of the sixties and early seventies have been dramatized countless times (as in the affecting 2003 mini-series “The Best of Youth”). This may be why Albinati, even as he gestures toward a generational saga, focuses tightly
on adolescence. He opens with the story of his friend Arbus: pale, frail, skinny, and so bright that he is given "abstruse nicknames" such as the "unmoved mover." And Albinati intimates that the main concern of the novel will be a crime committed by some classmates of his in September, 1975: a rape and murder that became headline news in Italy the way that the Central Park rape case did in New York in the next decade.

A time, a place, an upbringing, a friendship, all shot through with violence: these elements recall Elena Ferrante's four Neapolitan novels. Similarly, the promise of an unpacking of the sacred and profane mysteries of postmodern manhood calls to mind Karl Ove Knausgaard's "My Struggle" series (whose sixth volume runs to eleven hundred and sixty pages). You may find yourself anticipating a work that does for Rome in the seventies what Ferrante has done for postwar Naples, and for male friendship what Knausgaard did for fathers and sons. But the anticipation is premature, the comparisons misplaced. The brilliant friend Arbus soon drops out of the text. So do the devices that novelists as different as Ferrante and Knausgaard rely on: characters, dialogue, incident, chronology, and, especially, the rendering of everyday life through precise, detail-flecked paraphrase.

For a few hundred pages, nothing much happens. The most dramatic incident Albinati relates from his school days involves some bullies whipping a weaker boy, as in a rite of flagellation. The rape and murder is treated in a dozen unspectacular pages. Two young men who went to school with Albinati abduct two young women after a double date and take them to a vacation house on Monte Circio, between Rome and Naples; joined by a third young man, they rape the women, kill one of them, wrap them both in plastic, and stuff them in the trunk of a car; then they drive to Rome and park the car overnight in the Quartiere Trieste, where the surviving woman, kicking and screaming in the trunk, is heard by a neighbor.

That crime is the novel's link to the conceit of the gratuitous. In fiction, the gratuitous descends from André Gide's 1914 novel, "Les Caves du Vatican," in which the callow young Frenchman Lafcardio, on a train between Rome and Naples, spots a man he knows slightly and pushes him off the moving train. For Gide and his modernist disciples, the "unmotivated crime," the gratuitous act, was a challenge to both the European civilization of the Enlightenment and the older Christian civilization, which in their different ways maintained that human behavior is shaped by reason, motive, and purpose. The term "the gratuitous" appropriated Christian claims about God's grace, freedom, and inscrutability, applying them to human actions in a godless world.

A century later, Albinati has fictionalized the crime his classmates committed and elaborated on it in the language of broad-brush cultural criticism. He calls it "the kind of scandal that disfigures an indelible fashion the space that it lays open to the glare of daylight," and goes on to cycle through rhetorical effects in an effort to register its significance. The crime, he writes, served at the same time as a warning against the evil detected, but also implicitly instigated others to commit the same crime by the force of a negative example, suggesting that by now the world was contaminated and there could be no respite from corruption and violence. Either you were victims or you were perpetrators (the slogan "We are all responsible," which dates back to distant Catholic roots, has had an incredible popularity in our country, and caused the damages I've already discussed: by summoning us all to accept glaring or hidden guilt, at the same time it dilutes that guilt in a sort of generic collective sin, which can be condemned equally collectively), or else both things together, perpetrators and victims, which leads to a sort of general amnesty. Stigmatized in words, the horror became accessible, within reach of one and all. . . .

Innocence was ruined for good. If innocence had ever existed.

That reflection comes three hundred pages after the account of the crime. In the interim, Albinati the author-narrator holds forth on many topics. He ponders "the morality of sacrifice," the nature of resentment, and the character of the bourgeoisie (such as their tendency "to minimize," as when his parents would say, "It's nothing... Let's drop it. Let's just forget about it"). He sees the rape and murder on Monte Circio as "gratuitous" because it was a crime that he feels any of his classmates could have committed—essentially date rape taken to a terrible extreme—and one in which they are, in a sense, collectively complicit. More broadly, he regards this notion of the gratuitous as a key that unlocks the mysteries of contemporary life. For him, as for Surrealists like André Breton, it is an action whose express purpose is to have no purpose. It is often characterized by excess, as in acts of cruelty and torture. Free of "necessity," it represents "nonconformism" and "abandonment." The terrorist violence of neo-Fascists in Italy in the nineteen-seventies, for example, was gratuitous, in that it did away with "any need to answer for its deeds" and kept them "uncontaminated by the leprosy of reason."

As these notions are developed over many pages, it becomes clear that "The Catholic School" is not a social novel about well-born Roman Catholics, and not a work of true crime. It is a very late entry in the long European tradition of the novel as a quasi-philosophical essay in disguise. Here and there, Albinati presses the essayish impulse into different forms: a long sermon by a priest of the school; Arbus's class notes on Machiavelli’s "The Prince"; a series of pensive supposed found in a notebook left by a beloved teacher. Mostly, though, he writes as Edoardo Albinati, an author in middle age who is struggling to finish a book. Weary of fiction, he expounds on whatever is on his mind, and the very long novel becomes a succession of slantwise essays about gender, sex, and power. He paraphrases thinkers from Freud to Judith Butler, he flirts with autofiction, making a record of his reflections through several Easters, as the parish priest, following Italian custom, shows up to bless his apartment (divorced, Albinati is back in the old neighborhood) and engages with him on the question of whether and what he believes.

Why is the novel called "The Catholic School"? The title, like so much else in the book, seems arbitrary. Albinati was never a fervent believer, and he stopped going to Mass in his early teens. All the same, Catholicism is a subject he cherishes. For him, as for many fallen-away Catholics, the further he gets from his Catholic upbringing, the more he has to say about it. "To have studied at a school run by priests was an original sin that would have to be scrubbed out," he reflects early on. In his own life, he sees the influence of his education in a double way. The priests schooled him
and his classmates in the practices of “unmasking” bourgeois society: “reversing appearances, overturing fixed hierarchies, overturing the money changers’ tables.” At the same time, they taught the boys how to thrive in a bourgeois society. Thus Catholic school raised them to be inwardly divided, set against themselves—at once desiring and despising worldly things. It taught them, Albinati writes, “to be masochists . . . to redeem our pain and sorrow by discovering in the end that they are pleasurable, to love the wounds of Jesus as if they had been inflicted on our own bodies.”

That is nothing new. Thinkers from Nietzsche onward have found fault with Christianity for exalting submission. What is new is the twist Albinati gives to the legacy of his schooling. As a boy, he says, he had masochism forced on him through the catechism; as a man, he finds that his education lingers, leading him to view its reciprocal, sadism, as the dark heart of society.

Rape, in this schema, is not “something exceptional or pathological” but a symptom of the way things are. Albinati discusses rape philosophically, the way another writer might discuss the role of friendship or physical labor in society: “Rape is the simplified paradigm of relations between the sexes, its energy-saving mode, its substantial diagram, and it lies at the foundation of every relationship, of every act of intercourse, not necessarily brutal ones.” Rape is a quintessential case of the gratuitous, in that it separates the male sexual impulse from every kind of necessity. This may be why Albinati the Catholic-school alumnus is fascinated by it: because rape is a brutal rejection of the traditional Catholic teaching that sexual intercourse is meant for the purpose of procreation in marriage and that all other sex is immoral—gratuitous. Or it may be that he is fascinated because rape, in the terms of the novel, is an unmistakable way for a man to overcome the masochistic habit of self-subjugation he acquired at school by sadistically asserting himself. He declares that the effect of rape is different from that of intercourse per se, for it is connected “with the subjugation of someone else’s will to your own . . . when we are capable of obligating others to do, not what they want to do, but what we want them to do.” He observes, “I can’t be certain that my witicism will make a girl laugh, or that my gaze will fascinate her, but for sure, a slap or a punch will make her cry.”

It’s enough to make you wonder whether you missed something—whether the author-narrator took part in the crime on Monte Circeo, and this book is meant to be the diary of a rapist.

Readers sometimes object to “gratuitous sex” or “gratuitous violence,” on the ground that the graphic depiction of these things can reduce complex relationships to carnal fundamentals. Often, that is the effect of the passages about sex in this novel, as Albinati forces the experience of a generation of men through the needle’s eye of his “sadomaso” interpretation. Some of Albinati’s accounts of his own sexual exploits seem so purely gratuitous, in this banal sense, that they undermine the more robust idea of the gratuitous on which his very long novel depends.

All that material is far from Catholic school, and that is the point of it. Henry James, writing, in 1879, about Nathaniel Hawthorne, spelled out some of the possibilities available to an American overshadowed by the “darkening cloud” of original sin that came with the Puritan heritage. Such a person could contrive to live comfortably beneath it, could suffer under it, could try to cast it off, or could “transmute” it into art, as James felt that Hawthorne had done. It may be that the best way to understand “The Catholic School” is as a middle-aged Italian man’s effort to cast off his Catholic upbringing at last. Fifty years after Albinati left Catholic school in Rome, the combination of countercultural religion and bourgeois morality impressed on him there still overshadows his life more than he likes. This novel is his effort to free himself from it—“to get rid of it, not to remember it,” he said after “The Catholic School” won the Strega Prize.

The novel’s unbounded intelligence, its cool take on sexual violence, and its disregard for conventions of character and plot are assertions of the author’s independence from Catholic and bourgeois expectations. So is its extreme length. At the same time, the length suggests how hard it can be for such a man to shed such an upbringing, even in supposedly secular contemporary Italy. He can’t just get rid of it once and for all; he has to assert his freedom from it again and again. ♦
THE ART WORLD

SKIN DEEP

Renoir's nudes.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Who doesn’t have a problem with Pierre-Auguste Renoir? A tremendously engaging show that centers on the painter’s prodigious output of female nudes, “Renoir: The Body, the Senses,” at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, sparks a sense of crisis. The reputation of the once exalted, still unshakably canonical, Impressionist has fallen on difficult days. Never mind the affront to latter-day educated tastes of a painting style so sugarly that it imperils your mind’s incisors; there’s a more burning issue. The art historian Martha Lucy, writing in the show’s gorgeous catalogue, notes that, “in contemporary discourse,” the name Renoir has “come to stand for ‘sexist male artist.’” Renoir took such presumptuous, slavering joy in looking at naked women—who in his paintings were always creamy or biscuit white, often with strawberry accents, and ideally blond—that, Lucy goes on to argue, the tactility of the later nudes, with brushstrokes like roving fingers, unsettles any kind of gaze, including the male. I’ll endorse that, for what it’s worth.

Renoir’s women strum no erotic nerves in me. There’s no beholding distance from their monotonously compact, rounded breasts and thunderous thighs, smushed into depthless landscapes and interiors, and thus no imaginable approach to intimacy. Their faces nearly always look, not to put too fine a point on it, dumb—bearing out Renoir’s indifference to the women as individuals with inner lives. They aren’t subjects, only occasions. (His models were often amazed at how little they recognized themselves in pictures that they had posed for.) Peculiarly, Renoir did grant the women wonderfully articulated hands, the body part hardest to render convincingly—good for doing things, perhaps around the house. In his later work, his most prominent models were his servants or other lower-middle-class women.

He’s great, though, according to the standard of art history that values the refreshment of traditions by way of radical departures from them. The brilliant curators of the Clark show, Esther Bell and George T.M. Shackelford, demonstrate Renoir’s pivotal place in French painting of the nude by interpolating apposite works by such predecessors as Boucher, Corot, and, especially, Courbet, whose nudes are like libidinous four-alarm fires; by Renoir’s contemporaries, the sardonic Degas and the conscientious Cézanne; and by members of the next generation, notably Picasso, Matisse, Valadon, and Bonnard. (The show is a romp for connoisseurship, illuminating, by abrupt contrasts, the core qualities of the respective artists.) Picasso adored and collected Renoir nudes, the more outrageous the better. I think that he responded to something about Renoir that he also found in the consummate religiosity of El Greco and in the hieratic integrity of African sculpture: downright, forthright art, uncompromised by social niceties and free of apologetic irony—a bit akin to what Kierkegaard wanted from God, the capacity “to will one thing.”

Everything in Renoir that is hard to take and almost impossible to think about, because it makes no concessions to intelligence, affirms his stature as a revolutionary artist. He stood firmly against the past in art and issued a stark challenge to its future. You can dethrone him without throwing overboard the fundamental logic of modernism as a sequence of jolting aesthetic breakthroughs, entitled to special rank on the grounds of originality and influence. The more politicized precincs of the present art world are bent on just such
a purge, and it’s hard to contest their point by sticking up for Renoir’s only too confident, even embarrassing, panache. But there’s no gainsaying his historic significance.

Class is key to understanding Renoir. He was born in Limoges in 1841, the sixth of seven children of a tailor and a seamstress. The family moved to Paris four years later. He left school at the age of twelve or thirteen to apprentice as a decorator of porcelain, quickly advancing to a mastery of rococo forms and images; that training persists in all his painting, in which he centers the subjects in space that goes vague toward the corners of the canvas. Meanwhile, he haunted the Louvre. Committed to fine art, he entered the École des Beaux-Arts in 1862. His schoolmates included Monet, Sisley, and Bazille. He produced strong works from the start, under the spell of Courbet’s audacious realism and Manet’s celebration of urbane modernity. (His earliest nude in the show, “Boy with Cat,” from 1868, isn’t only rare for him, with its male subject, but startlingly homoerotic.) This was the era when artists started to forsake aristocratic and institutional patronage—bucking the bias of the annual Salon while hungering for inclusion in it—in favor of support from a burgeoning middle class.

In contrast to his better-off peers, who chafed against their starchy upbringing, Renoir was bourgeois by aspiration, not by birth. Unconflicted, he swooned for the fashions and the pastimes of the new order in such touchstone masterpieces as “Dance at the Moulin de la Galette” (1876), which is outside the purview of the Clark show; the swirling crowd of chic merrymakers in dappled summer light has enticed innumerable youths, including me, long ago, into a passion for modern painting. (There’s an anticipation here of Andy Warhol, who jumped from lower-class depths to upper-class heights, eliding the middle altogether.) That social infatuation, plus the artisan roots of a style that bore traces, to the last, of ceramic embellishment, made Renoir an unprecedented artistic type, no more but also no less vulgar than the society that gave him a life and paid him a living. He was a parvenu’s parvenu.

It feels wrong to term Renoir a misogynist, though he was certainly patriarchal. “Misogyny” implies active animus. By all accounts that I’m aware of, including that of his adoring son Jean, the great film director, he got on pleasantly enough with the woman he married, in 1890—Aline Victorine Charigot, a dressmaker, almost twenty years younger, with whom he had already had one child and would have two more—and with models, a mistress, and an illegitimate daughter, born in 1870, whom he secretly supported for the rest of his life and, with a bequest, beyond it. He could be collegial with female artists, notably Berthe Morisot, but he gave no sign of regarding women as other than a species subservient to men. He deemed women who performed professionally “completely ridiculous”; in a letter to a critic, he explained, “In ancient times, women sang and danced for free for the pleasures of being charming and gracious. Today, it’s all for money which takes away the charm.” The airy assumption in that may be worse than misogyny, which at least credits women with power as antagonists. It marks no mere flaw in Renoir’s personality but an essence of it that dovetails with his attitude toward painting. Sex and art figured for him as practically interchangeable rewards for living. An argument is often made that we shouldn’t judge the past by the values of the present, but that’s a hard sell in a case as primordial as Renoir’s.

At the show, part of me felt as though I were writhing on a pin: again and again the carnal tapioca, the vacant gazes, the fatuous frolic. Arriving at a cool Corot nude in a darkling landscape or a crisp Picasso nude combing her hair was like gulping fresh air in a miasma. The prehensile touch with which Renoir molds female masses with color—instead of modelling them with tonal shading—awes the eye, defeating a self-protective impulse to perceive the figures as if they were cels from animated cartoons. The work tends toward silliness but never topples into it. He can really move paint around, and his colors attain complex harmonies even as you may crave sunglasses to mitigate their screeching chromas. He’s like a house guest so annoying that you might consider burning down the house to be rid of him. Let’s not do that. ♦
THE CURRENT CINEMA

TESTING THE LIMITS

"Where'd You Go, Bernadette" and "Good Boys."

BY ANTHONY LANE

In 2005, the Academy Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role—what a mouthful—went to Cate Blanchett, for playing Katharine Hepburn in “The Aviator,” opposite Leonardo DiCaprio, as Howard Hughes. “Aren’t we a fine pair of misfits?” Hepburn asks him, more amused than rattled by his wealth, and casually trounce-(Emma Nelson), and a golden retriever named Ice Cream. Bernadette has crisply cut dark hair, a smile loaded with mischief, and a Garbo-like penchant for shades—though not to ward off the sun, because she lives in Seattle, or to deter the inquisitive, because she’s not (as far as we can tell) a celebrity. So what does she need to hide? A roll call of her faults, her innovations. But some calamity struck, Bernadette renounced her calling, and she and the family now inhabit a hefty old wreck of a house on a hill. Water drips, creepers writh beneath the rug, and, I for one, was hoping to see a ghost. (To some extent, my wish is granted: Bernadette, hounded by insomnia, prows around by night.) The mansion comes across as a theatre of organic decay, in deliberate contrast to Elgie’s office environment. He works at Microsoft, developing Samantha 2, an adhesive patch that, once stuck to your brow, relays your thoughts onscreen. I was waiting for the patch to join the plot, spilling secret truths at tricky moments, but, for some reason, Samantha 2 keeps stum.

Nobody else displays the same discretion. “Where’d You Go, Bernadette” is a gabling, honoring the chatter of its source. The book was a choppy read, stuffed with e-mails, blog posts, and other ephemera, and the film, likewise, finds room for video clips, talking heads, and messages dictated by a flustered Bernadette to her all-purpose assistant, based in India; Bee’s voice-over, pensive but unnecessary, tops and tails the whole thing. The film’s sections of the novel were the swipes of social satire, aimed at easy targets (how difficult is it, really, to bring helicopter parents crashing down?), and the movie follows suit. Kristen Wiig does what she can with the role of Audrey, the Branches’ neighbor, who hires a “blackberry abatement specialist” to probe the underground between their homes, and fights to maintain what she calls the “correctitude” of the local school. “It’s a Kenyan pop song,” she declares, heralding the tuneless yowls of an all-white junior choir.

From “Slacker” (1990) onward, Linklater has been at his most fruitful when hanging out in his native Texas, so it’s disorienting, to say the least, that his latest film should begin at the bottom of the world. The opening shot shows Bernadette in a kayak, drifting amid the icebergs of Antarctica, and the movie returns there for its final act. We even get a southbound chase, of sorts, the object of which is to meld her family together and, in the process, thaw the frosty hearts of moviegoers. Some of these far-flung scenes seem oddly muffled and rushed, and fans of the book may worry that
Linklater was the wrong person to bring it to the screen, yet here’s the thing: “Where’d You Go, Bernadette” has to be seen, and demands to be believed, because of Cate Blanchett. Like “Blue Jasmine” (2013), which earned her a second Oscar, this new film lies at her command.

The most potent sequence, to my eyes, is the plainest. In a Seattle café, Bernadette bumps into a former colleague, Paul Jellinek (Laurence Fishburne), whom she hasn’t seen for twenty-one years. When he inquires what she’s been up to, she goes into motormode mode. You can almost hear the revving of her brain, and, better still, you can watch Paul watching her. The art of listening is the most delicate of the dramatic arts, ignored at one’s peril; Alec Guinness, rehearsing “Henry V” onstage, in his youth, was once chided by the older actor who played the King. “You just stand there looking at me. Don’t just look. Listen. Listen,” he said. Guinness never forgot that reprimand, and I thought of him during “Where’d You Go, Bernadette,” as Fishburne, one of the finest listeners in the business, registers every syllable that flows from Blanchett’s lips. At the end, he waits a beat, and asks, “You done?”

The solution to her misery, according to Paul, is clear. The reclusive architect should get off her hermit ass and build. “People like you must create,” he says. I have my doubts about such advice—are creative beings truly a race apart, with special privileges?—but, for narrative purposes, it makes solid sense. Elgie, meanwhile, hatches a more drastic plan for his wife, arranging a psychological intervention, with the aid of a sympathetic shrink (Judy Greer). “We’d like to present to you the reality of your situation,” they announce to Bernadette. Not only; it turns out, has she been hoarding her prescription meds in a jar, like jelly beans, but, to add to the bedlam, she may also be the victim of identity theft.

For Bernadette, of course, and for us, in the audience, the joke is not that her identity’s been stolen but that she has way too much of it. Just as the unstable hillside of her property slides down one day and floods the house next door with mud, so her self overflows the bounds of her regular life. That is why Blanchett’s performance, like that of Katharine Hepburn, in “Bringing Up Baby” (1938), treads so joyfully close to excess—never quite over the top, yet savoring the pleasures of the brink. What these actresses offer is a kind of ecstatic warning: as your taste for experience grows avid and unconfined, and as your laughter peals like a bell, people will fall in love with you, then fear you, and eventually find you mad.

Time and again, during Gene Sulpitsky’s “Good Boys,” I asked myself what Richard Linklater would have done with it. Being the guy who gave us “School of Rock” (2003) and “Boyhood” (2014), Linklater is wise to the apprehensions that seize the young, as they approach one threshold after another, and the three protagonists of “Good Boys” are faced with the most daunting threshold of all: a kissing party. Spin the bottle, and get ready to mash faces with the kid to whom it points. What happens, though, if you don’t know how to kiss? Won’t that be hell?

Max (Jacob Tremblay), Lucas (Keith L. Williams), and Thor (Brady Noon) are twelve years old, and inexpressable—that is to say, unable to imagine when or why their friendship could ever end. They recently started sixth grade, with its solemn rites of passage; the matter of how many sips of beer a boy can take, for example, is treated as reverently as an Arthurian quest. It’s the looming smooth, however, that baffles Max, and so, seeking inspiration (and maybe a demonstration), he borrows his dad’s drone and flies it over the house next door. “My neighbor’s a total nymphomaniac,” he explains. Lucas is perplexed. “She starts fires?” he says.

We get a handful of these malapropisms, the most touching of which is Thor’s plaintive cry: “Two weeks into sixth grade, and I’m already a social piranha.” But the team behind the movie, with Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg among the producers, is pretty much the gang responsible for “Superbad” (2007) and “Sausage Party” (2016), and, by my calculation, their combined sense of humor is twice as juvenile as that of Max and his pals. How funny is it, to say, to have the lads lark around with sex toys, under the impression that they’re merely normal toys? Is there not something suspect in the adult urge to get one’s kicks from innocence? On the other hand, “Good Boys” is worth catching for those rare and wrenching points at which emotional honesty breaks through. Any viewer who is the product of a ruptured marriage will grimace in the dark as Lucas, whose favorite things include “rules, anti-drug programs, and grilled cheese,” quietly informs the others that his parents are getting a divorce. Back comes the instant reply: “What’d you do?”

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.
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 Harry Bliss, must be received by Sunday, August 25th. The finalists in the August 5th & 12th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week’s contest, in the September 9th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK’S CONTEST

“...”

THE FINALISTS

“I’m a rat. What you need is an ophthalmologist.”
Joseph Muretta, Minneapolis, Minn.

“Trust me, I know the plague when I see it.”
Joseph Lardizabal, New York City

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t prescribe anything I haven’t tested on myself.”
Doug Higbee, Matthews, N.C.

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Terry Keshner, Forest Park, Ill.
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