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MY SHOT

Nick Paumgarten, in his piece about the recent measles outbreak in New York State, quotes Dr. Howard Zucker, the state’s health commissioner, as saying that “we need to study vaccine hesitancy as a disease” (“The Message of Measles,” September 2nd). This statement reflects what I believe to be a profound truth that might be helpful in combatting the anti-vaccine movement. Like Dr. Zucker, I am surprised by how many highly educated people are anti-vaxxers. As a medical-school student and later as a primary-care physician, I encountered medical professionals who expressed hesitancy about vaccine use. I have since wondered how many more are among our ranks. It scares me that those who provide primary-care medicine might be, at best, tacitly supporting patients who are not vaccinating their children, or, at worst, spreading falsehoods about vaccines to their patients.

By framing “vaccine hesitancy” as a disease, we can address the paradox of physicians and other health-care providers who do not vaccinate or promote vaccination. Doctors are susceptible to other diseases, such as alcoholism and addiction, so why not “vaccine hesitancy”? The challenge is getting those who are affected into treatment.

Indira Konanur, D.O.
Watertown, Mass.

I was born in 1939, and, like many children who grew up during the mid-twentieth century, I had all the contagious illnesses we associate with that era, including measles, German measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, and mumps. I was eight or nine when I caught the measles; at one point, my temperature was a hundred and six. I remember lying in bed, feeling awful, and knowing that my mother thought I was going to die. She had good reason to be afraid of severe childhood illnesses: in 1912, her twelve-year-old brother, Edwin, had died of diphtheria. Growing up, I saw people dying too young all around me, including one of my peers, who died at thirteen or fourteen after contracting polio.

Measles, diphtheria, and polio—these were prevalent diseases at the time, but now they are preventable, thanks to vaccines. Why wouldn’t we want to spare our children such terrible fates?

Abby Adams Westlake
Ancram, N.Y.

CHANGING TUNES

Alex Ross, in his review of Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s musical œuvre, takes exception to the pejorative cliché “That sounds like film music,” arguing that the century-long history of soundtrack music has been too varied in style and instrumentation to deserve such lazy categorization (Musical Events, August 19th). It occurs to me, though, that eventually the term “film music” may no longer evoke in the average listener’s mind the lush symphonic output of legendary practitioners such as Korngold, Bernard Herrmann, Malcolm Arnold, Ennio Morricone, Max Steiner, Franz Waxman, and John Williams. People might instead equate “film music” with the currently popular mixture of strident synthesizers and pounding percussion. As the action, camerawork, and editing in many Hollywood films have become more assaultive on the senses, the soundtracks have followed suit. Compared with the aural head-banging inflicted upon audiences by wide-release movies, Herrmann’s shower-scene string shrieks in “Psycho” sound as lyrical as Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony.

David English
Acton, Mass.

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No character embodies the split genre of George Gershwin’s jazz-tinged opera “Porgy and Bess” better than Sportin’ Life. The other denizens of Catfish Row sing their hearts out with larger-than-life lyricism, but the silver-tongued dope peddler—a role shaped by such song-and-dance men as Cab Calloway—slithers about the triplets and tritones of “It Ain’t Necessarily So” like a snake in the grass. The American tenor Frederick Ballentine (above) slips into Sportin’ Life’s duds for the Metropolitan Opera’s season-opening production, on Sept. 23.
“Apollo’s Muse”
Metropolitan Museum
This absorbing exhibition celebrates, largely through photographs, the fiftieth anniversary of Apollo 11’s moon landing. Chronologically organized, it begins before the advent of photography, when Galileo’s seventeenth-century drawings (based on his observations through a homemade telescope) shattered the Western world’s image of the moon as a smooth orb, commencing the quest to document its craggy topography. Early attempts include the first lunar daguerreotypes, from 1840, which possess a talismanic beauty but little detail; illustrations by James Nasmyth, who photographed plaster models of his telescopic views to produce such breathtaking illusions as “Normal Lunar Crater,” from 1874; and Charles Le Morvan’s moon atlas, from 1914, comprising four dozen photographures of the Earth’s satellite waxing and waning in closeup. Among the pop-cultural representations on view are a charming grid of “Man in the Moon” postcards, which show the customers of boardwalk photo studios perched on smiling crescents, and Chesley Bonestell’s sweeping gouache moonscape, a study for a backdrop used in the groundbreaking film “Destination Moon,” from 1950. Of course, nothing captures the imagination quite like the radio-transmitted panoramas from NASA’s lunar orbits, or the Apollo astronauts’ epiphanic window views.—Johanna Fateman (Through Sept. 22.)

Elliott Jerome Brown, Jr.
Beauchene
DOWNTOWN This young artist’s titles are poetic companions to his lyrical photographs. “Syllables of joy and devastation” portrays a young person lounging in bed, regarding the camera with almost closed eyes. Neither posed nor candid, the shot captures an attitude of trusting indifference—an air of true intimacy. Many of Brown’s subjects are shown from behind, a perspective that might come off as voyeuristic, but instead seems deferential to their privacy. In “Oftentimes, justice for black people takes the form of forgiveness, allowing them space to reclaim their bodies from wrongs made against them,” a woman sits in church as comforting hands reach out to rest on both sides of her back. The point of view implies that Brown is attending the service, too.—J.F. (Through Oct. 6.)

Teresa Burga
Gray
CHELSEA In the delightful centerpiece of this exhibition, the octogenarian Peruvian Conceptualist presents two new sculptures based on her “Máquinas Inútiles” (Useless Machines) drawings, from 1974. The details of her careful schematics—a shapely vase that could never hold water, an ornate table lamp without a light-bulb socket—might escape notice on a smaller scale, but as Brodbergnagian welded-steel objects they are elegantly comic. A third piece, a mural depicting a checkered origami-like abstraction, dated 1989/2019, is based on one of Burga’s “Insomnia Drawings.” The artist executed such hypnagogic works during her long career in a customs office, an experience that informs her interest in labor, utility, and bureaucracy. Her recent drawings feature vibrant figures in traditional Andean dress, accompanied by strings of numbers in the margins—a log of the hours she spent making each one.—J.F. (Through Oct. 12.)

Mitch Epstein
Sikkema Jenkins
CHELSEA After completing his epic project “American Power,” about the presence of the energy industry in the landscapes of twenty-five states, this photographer spent a year at home, in New York City, taking pictures of trees. He was looking, he wrote, for a subject “to honor, rather than mourn.” The twelve magnificent images in his new series, “Property Rights,” do both as they reflect pressing issues ranging from immigration to our threatened environment. Epstein commemorates activists protecting their land during a snowy vigil on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, in North Dakota, and reveals the spartan conditions in a refugee halfway house in El Paso, Texas. This past year, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he photographed the high-school student and Sunrise Movement leader Ashton Clatterbuck, secured to a tree with a homemade tool of resistance.—Andrea K. Scott (Through Oct. 5.)

Judith Hopf
Metro Pictures
CHELSEA In this Berlin artist’s début with the gallery, smooth boulder-size pears, rest on the concrete floor, looking more like austere mete- orites than like fallen fruit. They seem to belong outdoors. The title of a matching wall sculpture, “A Hole and the Filling of the Hole,” references a circle that’s been excised from it; the cutout piece lies close by, suggesting a surreal narrative:

Is someone coming to reunite these elements? Has someone already tried to do so and failed? In the back gallery, a number of red aluminum tongues arc off the wall, darting out like a short carpet or standing upright to bewly lolling eff. This bright series is a bracing complement to the more gnomic works it accompanies.—J.F. (Through Oct. 5.)

Josiah McElheny
Cohan
DOWNTOWN The profoundly beautiful work of this American sculptor—a 2006 MacArthur Fellow whose mediums are glass and reflection—inaugurates the gallery’s new mother- ship, in Tribeca, a neighborhood that has become an undeniable force in the New York art scene. On the walls, McElheny hangs magic-trick pictures of infinite galaxies, fash- ioned with lapisd precision from thousands of translucent rods. If the past two years of American life have left you feeling blue, you’re not alone: the show’s centerpiece is a sixteen-foot-long curved wall of glass bricks, a glimmer of azure, cerulean, cobalt, midnight, and sapphire. The artist conceived the nearly nine-foot-tall arc as a haven for listening: music and poetry performances, organized by the invaluable nonprofit Blank Forms, take place there on Wednesdays at 6:30 and on Saturdays at 2.—A.K.S. (Through Oct. 19.)

THE THEATRE
American Moor
Cherry Lane
Who is Othello to a black actor? The famous Moor, a character who is now almost exclusively played by a black man (the Laurence Olivier

IN THE MUSEUMS

The Jazz Age never ends at the Whitney Museum. Duke Ellington recorded his last live album there, in 1972; more recently, in 2016, the quicksilver pianist Cecil Taylor (who died in 2018) was the subject of a ten-day jubilee. Jason Moran (pictured) is best known as a composer and a pianist, but his interdisciplinary experimentations extend to the visual realm. On Sept. 20, the Whitney opens an exhibition of his solo works alongside many of his collaborations with other artists, from Joan Jonas to Lorna Simpson. (The show originated at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis.) A trio of Moran’s sculptural installations revisit legendary jazz haunts—the Savoy Ballroom, the Three Deuces, and Slugs’ Saloon—and double as stages for a concert series he’s arranged: “Jazz on a High Floor in the Afternoon.”—Andrea K. Scott
days behind us), may become a means to some representation of blackness. In Red Bull Theatre’s “American Moor,” the playwright, Keith Hamilton Cobb, stars as an actor faced with the role and challenged by the microaggressions of a white director. Most of the play is a monologue for the actor, with light cues indicating shifts between his exterior presentation and his interior thoughts. Cobb’s classical training shines through when he slips into Shakespeare (one Othello passage is mesmerizing), but it occasionally renders his other modes stiff. The show is a thought-provoking mix of racial and social commentary and literary criticism; as directed by Kim Weild, it swells with different registers of diction, accents, and tones, but Cobb’s streams of invective and rancor become tiresome, and his occasional put-on of a “black voice” feels, ironically, like a performance of blackness.—Maya Phillips (Through Oct. 5.)

**Betrayal**

**Jacobs**

In this enjoyable, astringent revival of Harold Pinter’s love-triangle—told backward, from 1978, the director, Jamie Lloyd, strips the production bare, leaving the play to speak in a near-vacuum, a head without a body. Emma (Zawe Ashton) and Jerry (Charlie Cox) have carried on an affair for seven years; Robert (Tom Hiddleston), Emma’s husband and Jerry’s good friend, hasn’t been as much in the dark as Jerry thinks. The implication of the show’s placelessness is that its tangle of sly loves and fading affections is an ever-unfolding human pattern, occurring not only in England in the nineteen-seventies, where Pinter placed it, but everywhere and all the time. Unanchored from the world that helped birth it, the play becomes a parable. Ashton is particularly deft at using Pinter’s pauses as ramps into and out of sonorous line deliveries, and the playwright’s words and tones—his native, brutal idiom—shine through.—Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 9/16/19.) (Through Dec. 8.)

**Eureka Day**

**Walkerspace**

This new play, written by Jonathan Spector, directed by Adrienne Campbell-Holt, and produced by Colt Coeur, is brilliantly yoked to the flighty politics and the deadly folly of the current American moment. Eureka Day is a hyper-progressive private elementary school in Berkeley, California, stewarded by an unbearably well-intentioned board of directors. It’s headed by a hippieish guy named Don (Thomas Jay Ryan), who reads quotes from Rumi during meetings. Eli (Brian Wiles), a rich ex-techie, is worried about “othering” or “negating” potential applicants with the school’s drop-down menu of possible ethnicities. Somebody catches the mumps, and a large number of the parents reveal their opposition to vaccinations. When the board convenes a live stream in order to discuss the crisis with the school’s parents, the board bickers while, online, the comments section turns into a free-for-all. “Eureka Day” shows how, despite all our cushioned language and practiced maxims, “right-thinking” people have lately inched dangerously close to the limits of liberalism.—V.C. (9/16/19) (Through Sept. 21.)

**L.O.V.E.R.**

Pershing Square Signature Center

When this one-woman show opens with Lois Robbins, its playwright and star, sprawled across a vibrating washing machine, in the throes of orgasmic bliss, one expects an exhibition of unabashed raunchiness. But the machine—or, rather, the protagonist’s sexual rapaciousness—serves as a kind of Chekhov’s gun that doesn’t quite, well, go off. Granted, there is talk of sex, though tame and minimal, and a list of relationships, with several proposals and affairs, but, in a world of Jacqueline Novaks and Phoebe Waller-Bridges—and even Carrie Bradshaw—“L.O.V.E.R.,” directed by Karen Carpenter and presented by Kaleidoscope Creative Partners, doesn’t distinguish itself in its narrative or its telling. Brusque transitions, with loud interjections of contemporary music and shifting neon lights, only highlight Robbins’s failure to conjure such energy, and the show takes an unfortunate turn into the self-help aisle for its resolution.—M.P. (Through Nov. 2.)

**Only Yesterday**

59E59

In September of 1964, the Beatles took a weather-induced break from a gruelling tour of America. The first-time playwright Bob Stevens uses this moment of relative quiet to imagine the long day and night that John Lennon (Christopher Sears) and Paul McCartney (Tommy Crawford) spent holed up in a cheap motel room in Key West. The two young men play out scenes of exhaustion, boredom, cheekiness, anger, drunkenness, and discovery, with, of course, music (and a killer Elvis impersonation), as both actors strum and sing appealingly. Apart from the Liverpudlian accents, Sears and Crawford don’t imitate Lennon and McCartney, but they do capture their alternately clashing and complementary personas. Some of the jokes have a sitcom-y, prefab (sorry) construction, but, in this production from Vermont’s Nor- thern Stage, directed by Carol Dunne, there’s plentiful insight into what drew these two brilliant lads together, and what pulled them apart.—Ken Marks (Through Sept. 29.)
See You
New Ohio
If Sartre were to write a play in our age of social media, he might end up somewhere in the realm of the Bridge Production Group’s fascinating “See You.” The show, directed by Max Hunter, with text by Guillaume Corbeil (translated from the French by Steven McCarthy), is less a play than an experiment in the empty, disingenuous parlance of Internet-speak. A group of unnamed acquaintances spit out caption-size descriptions of their exploits, as documented online—parties with celebrities, jaunts around the world—but the stylized bramble of Insta-approved language is manic, overwhelming, and purposely inconsequential. The conceit of the play, that our online façades mask despair, insecurity, and, worse, nothingness, is clear from the start, and the play’s breathless delivery of its cynical raison d’être is as unrelenting as a Twitter feed, losing track of anything human.—M.P. (Through Sept. 21.)

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

Kimya Dawson
The Market Hotel
Many people remember the plainspoken tenor of Kimya Dawson from her work on the soundtrack for the film “Juno,” from 2007, and as part of the beloved anti-folk duo the Moldy Peaches. The singer and guitarist has continued stacking up a quiet but impressive collection of acoustic-driven solo projects that capture her unfiltered, stream-of-consciousness approach to writing. Her voice remains so warm and wistful that it can both comfort and pulverize your heart at the same time.—Julysa Lopez (Sept. 18.)

Heathered Pears
Public Records
You can glean just which sort of dance-music classicism the Ann Arbor-born producer Jakub Alexander, who works as Heathered Pears, espouses from the title of his four-song release “Detroit, MI 1997-2001,” from 2017. With each track named for an iconic local party spot—“The Packard Plant,” “Under the Bridge”—the EP’s bendable bass lines and echo-laced synth pads uncannily call up the musty minimalism of the city and that era without aping its sticky R. & B.-flavored house and pointillist techno. As a d.j., Alexander mines a similar palette.—Michaelangelo Matos (Sept. 19.)

Ellen Allien
BASEMENT
The German d.j. and musician Ellen Allien has authored one of dance music’s most formid- able catalogues, releasing eight full albums and a soundtrack in just under two decades. Her titles “Berliner,” from 2003, and “Orchestra of Bubbles,” a collaboration with her compatriot Apparat, from 2007, remain some of the most instantly accessible techno around. In May, she released “Alientronic,” which evokes the dirty, analog sound of the genre during the early nineties—a first for her.—M.M. (Sept. 20.)

Tinariwen
Webster Hall
For two decades, Tinariwen, the marquee musical export of the nomadic Tuareg people of North Africa, has been hypnotizing Western audiences with its trippy Saharan guitars. Though the band’s story is one of high drama—warfare, exile, Qaddafi—it’s music maintains a sense of cool that could shame any balladeer who has ever wept over a busted romance. The group recorded its new LP, “Amadjar,” while convoysing through the desert in the wake of a sandstorm, lending the album a naturalistic air that’s highly meditative yet salted with portent.—Jay Ruttenberg (Sept. 21.)

Claire Daly Quartet
Smalls
The subterranean baritone saxophone is a bear of a horn; to coax gruff beauty from its guts takes a musical poet like Claire Daly. When all cylinders are charged, Daly, who leads a quartet that features the pianist Jon Davis, calls to mind such paragons as Gerry Mulligan and Serge Chaloff.—S.F. (Sept. 22.)

Cross Record
Trans-Pecos
Let other young artists wait tables. Emily Cross, who croons ethereal laments as Cross Record, recently turned to the mother of all day jobs: a death doula, who aids people nearing the end. She also performs “living funeral” ceremonies for daring participants who crave a glimpse of what lies beyond. Her music reflects her occupation, with vocally driven songs so soothing they turn unsettling. You can hear Cross Record at Trans-Pecos—or watch the singer conduct a living funeral,
It seems paradoxical, to say the least, that an initiative intent on reviving the chamber-music concert experience should be called Death of Classical—a play, of course, on the presenter’s two chosen venues. “The Crypt Sessions,” hosted in a subterranean space under Harlem’s Church of the Intercession, comes back to life, on Sept. 18, with the cellist Joshua Roman and the pianist Conor Hanick, who connect for sublime Arvo Pärt works and a contemplative sonata by Alfred Schnittke. In the catacombs of Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery, the “Angel’s Share” series follows suit, Sept. 24-27, alternating the intrepid pianists Jenny Lin and Adam Tendler at one piano, under a constellation of mirrors, to divide the labors of “Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses,” a seldom encountered ten–movement cycle of metaphysical solo pieces by Liszt. All the events are prefaced with a complimentary wine or whiskey tasting.—Steve Smith

hours earlier, at the Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural and Educational Center.—J.R. (Sept. 24.)

Ambar Lucid
Mercury Lounge
A teen-ager writing a song called “A letter to my younger self” could, upon first inspection, seem indulgent and even a little c allowable, but the eighteen-year-old Ambar Lucid approaches her music with mature and levelheaded sincerity. The track is a padded return to her childhood, during which her father was deported to Mexico, and she alternates between English and Spanish, consoling herself with quiet memories and gentle encouragement. The melody is unvarnished and understated, an embodiment of the sensitive dream pop that propels her début EP, “Dreaming Lucid.”—J.L. (Sept. 24.)

Pop Smoke
Sony Hall
In December, Pop Smoke released his first track; this year, he had a song of the summer. The gravelly snarl of the Brooklyn rapper’s single

“Welcome to the Party” have been blaring from car speakers for months, but he is only now stepping into the spotlight—his début EP, “Meet the Woo,” from July, officially introduced his infectious brand of street rap to a steadily growing fan base and yielded another surefire record in the alluring “Dior.” His music encapsulates grandeur and menace, which is to say, it sounds exactly like New York.—Briana Younger (Sept. 24.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC

New York Philharmonic
David Geffen Hall
The New York Philharmonic and its music director, Jaap van Zweden, open the season with a world première and a bout of nostalgia. Shakespeare bookends the program, with Philip Glass’s newly commissioned “King Lear Overture” and movements from Prokofiev’s striking “Romeo and Juliet” orchestral suites. In between, the Tony Award-winning soprano Kelli O’Hara explores classical repertoire that complements her lyric voice with Barber’s

“Knoxville: Summer of 1915,” which translates a little boy’s awe at the perfection of a warm Tennessee evening spent with his family into rose-colored washes of sound.—Oussama Zahr (Sept. 18-19 at 7:30 and Sept. 20-21 at 8.)

O19
Opera Philadelphia
out of town Opera Philadelphia’s boldly curated September festival, held at various venues in the city, is designed to make a splash while other companies are still rubbing the summer from their eyes. To open the festival, Philip Venables and Ted Huffman—whose production of “Psychosis 4.48” left a searing mark at this year’s Prototype Festival—team up for “Denis & Katya,” a new opera based on the true story of two teenage runaways who, in 2016, live-streamed their tragic standoff with police. Joseph Keckler’s “Let Me Die,” which obsesses over operatic death scenes, is the other world première. Prokofiev’s deeply wacky modernist fairy tale, “The Love for Three Oranges,” featuring Barry Banks and Wendy Bryn Harmer in a production by Alessandro Talevi, and Handel’s sumptuous “Semele,” starring Amanda Forsythe in a staging by James Darrah, are as close as the festival gets to the operatic canon.—O.Z. (Sept. 18-29.)

Anastasia Clarke
The Old Stone House
Opening the seventh year of the composer Dan Joseph’s thoughtfully curated symposium and concert series Musical Ecologies, the performer and audio technologist Anastasia Clarke presents the newest iteration of “Crushed Matrices,” an ongoing site-specific project that mixes crystal singing bowls—both intact and shattered—with electronic accompaniment. Despite the requisite destruction, the resulting music sings, throbs, and sparkles to transfixing effect.—Steve Smith (Sept. 19 at 8.)

Félicia Atkinson
Le Poisson Rouge
The French composer and performer Félicia Atkinson refers to her powerful recent album, “The Flower and the Vessel,” as “not about being pregnant but a record made with pregnancy.” Alongside keyboard reveries influenced by her early exposure to Debussy, Ravel, and Satie, Atkinson uses electronics to evoke melancholy and isolation in tandem with close-miked ASMR vocal methods that fashion an intimacy that verges on invasive. The Brooklyn-based flutist and synthesizer player John Also Bennett, who earlier this year issued an otherworldly solo album, “Erg Herbe,” opens.—S.S. (Sept. 22 at 8.)

Five Boroughs Music Festival
Judson Memorial Church
Founders, an idiosyncratic quintet featuring versatile chamber-music players who double as singers and songwriters, offers a program inspired by Messiah’s “Quartet for the End of Time.” In a faithful yet fresh rearrangement, the group interpolates elements of Gregorian chant, folk music, and indie rock and underscores the iconic work’s fundamental influences, such as birdsong and apocalyptic scripture. In “Songs
for the End of Time," a complementary cycle, Founders members contemplate modern-day conflicts.—S.S. (Sept. 23 at 7:30.)

“Manon”
Metropolitan Opera House

For the Cours-la-Reine scene in Laurent Pelly’s production of Massenet’s “Manon,” the titular heroine’s over-the-top gown and plumed hat clearly nod to Eliza Doolittle’s getup for the Ascot racecourse in “My Fair Lady.” But it’s more than a cheap directorial trick. Like Eliza, Manon is being tested in a public display of her seductive powers, but, unlike Audrey Hepburn’s fowlmouthed flower girl, she triumphs, singing a gavotte that enchants the assembled spectators. The Cuban-American soprano Lisette Oropesa, ready to make an impression as Massenet’s demi-mondaine, returns to the Met following a string of successes in Europe. The cast also includes Michael Fabiano and Artur Ruciński; Maurizio Benini conducts.—O.Z. (Sept. 24 at 7:30.)

Robert Een
Roulette

A composer, cellist, and singer of striking originality, Robert Een celebrates the start of his fortieth season as a performing artist. He’s joined by the award-winning writer and illustrator Brian Selznick as he reprises selections from “Live Oak, with Moss,” Selznick’s theatre piece based on a private cycle of poems by Walt Whitman about same-sex desire and longing, which the poet subsequently reorganized and incorporated into “Leaves of Grass.” The program also includes recent and new music by Een and features the guest vocalists Katie Geissinger and Nick Hallett.—S.S. (Sept. 24 at 8.)

DANCE

New York City Ballet
David H. Koch

For a company that tends to eschew evening-length ballets, “Jewels,” created by the choreographer George Balanchine, in 1967, is an exception. More than a single ballet, it is composed of three separate but thematically connected works, inspired by the qualities of gemstones and by contrasting musical worlds. “Emeralds,” set to music by Fauré, is quietly mysterious. “Rubies,” with all sharp angles and brazenness, is meant to evoke the energy of New York. And “Diamonds” reflects the opulence and wistfulness of the Russian Balanchine’s imagination. In recent years, both Maria Kowroski and Sara Mearns have dominated “Diamonds”; Kowroski is remote and regal, Mearns urgent, almost feverish in her approach. The tall, phlegmatic Teresa Reichlen has come to define the cool glamour of “Rubies.” Few ballets give a better sense of the company as a whole.—Marina Harris (Through Oct. 13.)

Ivy Baldwin Dance
Manitoga

OUT OF TOWN Ivy Baldwin seems to be making a specialty out of dances that respond to isolated landmarks of modernist architecture. Her 2016 work “Keen (Part 1)” took place in and around Philip Johnson’s Glass House. Now, with “Quarry,” she takes on Manitoga, the former home and estate of the industrial designer Russel Wright, in Garrison, New York. Drawing on the site’s balance between the natural and the man-made, between inside and outside, and on the drama of the house and the garden, she sometimes positions spectators across vistas, far from her dancers, and sometimes up close, right next to them, in the woods.—Brian Seibert (Sept. 21-22.)

SITI Company and STREB
Alexander Kasser Theatre

OUT OF TOWN Collaborating for the first time, the physical-stunt choreographer Elizabeth Streb and the theatre director Anne Bogart find common ground in “Falling & Loving.” The production, premiering at Peak Performances, in Montclair, New Jersey, combines six actors from SITI Company and six dancer-athletes from the STREB Extreme Action Company. As always with Streb, there are contraptions: bowling balls swinging dangerously on strings, a Guck Machine that drops water, sand, confetti, and more. But, this time, there are also words to give the mess some meaning—love sonnets and other phrases, by Charles Mee, that hymn the cyclical nature of love.—B.S. (Sept. 24-29.)

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker
New York Live Arts

Before the Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker made her much admired and much imitated piece “Rosas Danst Rosas”—whose moves have even made their way into a Beyoncé video—she created “Fase, Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich,” in 1982, while studying in New York. It is this work, both minimal and lush, mind-bendingly repetitive and crisply plainspoken, that put De Keersmaeker on the map. In each section, a pair of dancers responds to Reich’s score—for piano, voice, string instruments, and clapping, respectively—with elegant loops of movement that evolve, gradually, over time. At New York Live Arts, her company, Rosas, will perform first “Fase” and then “Rosas” over a two-week period.—M.H. (Sept. 24 Through Oct. 5.)

MOVIES

América

This brisk, poignant documentary is centered on an elderly Mexican woman named América, who has dementia. She lives in the town of Colima; there, her son, Luis, is in jail on charges of neglecting her, but when her grandson Diego,
The ongoing tribute to Isabelle Adjani at French Institute Alliance Française continues, on Sept. 24, with "The Story of Adèle H.,” from 1975, in which Adjani starred, at the age of nineteen, and for which she received an Oscar nomination for Best Actress. This historical drama, directed by François Truffaut, is based on the diaries of Adèle Hugo, the French writer Victor Hugo's daughter, and unites Truffaut’s three central themes—doomed love, family conflict, and writing. The action, set in 1863, is centered on Adèle’s hopeless obsession with a British officer named Pinson (Bruce Robinson); she follows him to his new post in Halifax and takes increasingly delusional measures to persuade—or, if necessary, force—him to marry her. She lies to her disapproving father about her intentions; she also pours out her emotional turmoil in her diary and writes bitterly of women's dependence on their fathers and husbands. Adjani’s fiercely focused performance, augmented by Truffaut’s Hitchcockian stylings, captures the desperate ardor with which Adèle dashes toward humiliation and ruin.—**Richard Brody**

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**The Goldfinch**
This sprawling yet rushed adaptation of Donna Tartt’s novel is textureless and flavorless. It starts with a blood-splattered twentysomething bougie New Yorker named Theo (Ansel Elgort) contemplating suicide in a cozy Amsterdam hotel room; two-plus hours of flashbacks show what went wrong. As a thirteen-year-old (played by Oakes Fegley), Theo gets separated from his mother at the Metropolitan Museum just before a bomb goes off and kills her; in the resulting chaos, an elderly man gives him a Dutch-master painting that fell off the wall. Temporarily nurtured by a rich classmate’s mother (Nicole Kidman) before being whisked off to Las Vegas by his deadbeat father (Luke Wilson) and eventually running away to New York, Theo grows up to become an antique dealer, a drug abuser, and a fraudster—as well as the vanished painting’s secret custodian. He also suffers from unrequited love, an engagement of convenience, and additional bereavement; the teeming plot is trimmed to index-card snippets detached from a sense of place and performed with bland efficiency. Directed by John Crowley.—**R.B. (In wide release.)**

**Hustlers**
The writer and director Lorene Scafaria’s mild drama, about a ring of strip-club dancers who drug male clients and bilk them out of tens of thousands of dollars, is based on a well-known piece of investigative journalism by Jessica Pressler. The film stars Constance Wu as Dorothy, a.k.a. Destiny, a dancer whose income plummets after the 2008 financial crisis. But her former mentor, Ramona (Jennifer Lopez), has been doing well luring men to the club, and she brings Dorothy in on a new scheme—slipping the men knockout drops to gain access to their credit cards and personal data. The two women, in turn, recruit other women and rake in vast sums of money until they’re caught. Scafaria insightfully builds the action around Dorothy’s interviews with a journalist (Julia Stiles), but the duo’s methods—the elaborate webs of seduction, the employment of sex workers—and their canny business minds are all but elided in favor of a heartwarming tale of friendship, family, and shopping. Cardi B and Lizzo are brilliant in all too brief dramatic roles.—**R.B. (In wide release.)**

**Porgy and Bess**
Otto Preminger, filming George Gershwin’s opera in lifelike settings, kept the camera rolling in front of such artists as Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Pearl Bailey, and Sammy Davis, Jr., for vast, sculptural takes of four minutes or more. The starkly dramatic results could well be watched as a silent film, so quietly forceful is the acting; Poitier plays the disabled Porgy with the most heartrending of techniques—he walks on his knees. Preminger achieves a rare embodiment of substance in style: the stately, massed movements of the oppressed inhabitants of Catfish Row—while hinting at great social actions soon to come—evince a spiritual dignity as strong as the music’s, and suggest a hieratic pageantry of Old Testament power. The Gershwin estate sought to destroy all existing prints of Preminger’s film for its infidelities to the score. But that effort was misguided; Preminger and the cast overcome the opera’s contrivances and stereotypes to recapture Gershwin’s underlying humanistic vision of celebration and deliverance. Released in 1959.—**R.B. (Lincoln Center, Sept. 19.)**

**Pull My Daisy**
This short film, from 1959, is a neat Beat pick-me-up set in the slaphappy bohemian pad of a railroad conductor whose pals include Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso—all of whom carry on, naturally enough, like poets in their youth. Jack Kerouac based the script on the third act of his play “The Beat Generation,” which was based on the real-life visit of a progressive clergyman to his pal Neal Cassidy’s house. But there’s no story to speak of, and, in fact, there’s no dialogue: the hilarity emerges from the way Kerouac’s non-stop voice-over narration gives breezy comic ripples to seemingly spontaneous shenanigans. Under the co-direction of Alfred Leslie and the photographer Robert Frank, who wields his camera with tipsy intimacy, the mostly amateur cast conjures an infectious, arrested-adolescent joie de vivre. The artist Larry Rivers plays the conductor, and Delphine Seyrig is his long-suffering wife; the painter Alice Neel plays the clergyman’s maid Michaela Drage (Streaming.)

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Pastis
52 Gansevoort St.

The other night, at the recently rebooted Pastis, a server who had just shouted “Sock it to me!” while taking my table’s dinner order leaned in conspiratorially. Lowering his voice to a near-whisper, he said, haltingly, “And—are we having bread?” Of course we were having bread, my companions and I sputtered. Did we look like no-bread people? His expression turned sheepish. “I just moved from Los Angeles, the no-bread capital of the world,” he explained.

In fairness, Pastis is the sort of place that attracts plenty of no-bread people, not to mention no-dairy people and no-sugar people. When the original Pastis opened, in 1999, in the meatpacking district, it became one of the Midas-like restaurateur Keith McNally’s most golden establishments, where the food, though more than serviceable, was not really the point. A convincing replica of an elegantly understated Parisian brasserie, it was, first and foremost, a hangout for A-listers like Sarah Jessica Parker and the Olsen twins, and a means for commoners to brush shoulders with them while spending lavishly for the privilege.

Pastis ratified the transformation of the neighborhood from industrial to industrial chic. In 2014, it closed, after the building that housed it was slated for major construction and the rent tripled; it was eventually replaced by a Restoration Hardware, one of the many luxury chains that have lent the area the feel of an open-air mall. This past June, McNally reopened it, in partnership with the flashy restaurateur Stephen Starr, in a new location a few blocks away.

This dining room is very similar to the old one: café chairs, marble tables, and ruddy leather banquettes; white subway tiles and tin ceilings; distressed mirrors glowing in the halogen light. (The shelves of cigarette packs are long gone. Overheard at breakfast: “I’m listening to you, but I’m also going to pick my Juul up off the floor.”) The no-bread people, donning Cartier bracelets and Louis Vuitton-print shifts, have come rushing back; in recent weeks, it’s been nearly impossible to get a table for dinner at a reasonable hour, and even at lunchtime on a Tuesday in the dead of August there was a thirty-minute wait. On that Tuesday, some celebrities had returned, too: the performer Sandra Bernhard walked out with the former Vogue editor André Leon Talley; the chef and Food Network host Anne Burrell posed for photographs.

But, where once Pastis had a sexy edge, it now seems merely to blend in, feeling something like the mall’s café. The new menu, which overlaps with the old one by about half, is overseen by Michael Abt, who last worked at Starr’s Le Diplomate, in Washington, D.C. Stick with the classics and a meal here can be joyful, in a theme-park sort of way, like getting Swedish meatballs at IKEA, if considerably more expensive. A cocktail called the Rouge Fumée—tequila, mezcal, watermelon juice, and chili honey—sounded tempting but tasted like water that had been used to clean vegetables, garnished with a waft slice of cumin-pickled watermelon rind. A brisk dirty Martini, on the other hand, was just right paired with satisfyingly simple versions of shrimp cocktail and steak tartare, and helped wash away the memory of a summer plat du jour featuring undercooked soft-shell crabs.

On one visit, frites were crisp and as coarsely salted as an icy highway in February; on another, they were considerably more limp but only marginally less enjoyable, accompanying plump mussels in an extra-buttery white-wine broth and a brawny hanger steak carved into juicy slices. Frites are a must, as are smashed pommes at breakfast. At a moment when New York’s French restaurants can feel exhaustingly ambitious, there’s something refreshing about reveling in plain potatoes. And do not forgo the bread, which, like the morning Viennoiseries (croissants, pain au chocolat, brioches), comes from McNally’s Balthazar Bakery. It’s a perfectly chewy, tangy pain au levain, served with tubs of whipped butter. Life is too short to be a no-bread person. (Entrées $17–$59.)

—Hannah Goldfield
We do it every day. Are we doing it wrong?

From Neville Chamberlain to Bernie Madoff, from Sylvia Plath to the cast of *Friends*, Malcolm Gladwell examines the way common encounters can have uncommon—and sometimes devastating—results.

“Gladwell is as close to a singular talent as exists today.”

—New York Times Book Review

Talking to Strangers

Malcolm Gladwell
Resilience in the face of a personal setback was the subject of the final question in last Thursday night’s Democratic debate, in Houston. When it was the turn of Mayor Pete Buttigieg, of South Bend, to answer, he spoke about the years in which he lived with the fear that, as a military officer and an elected official in a socially conservative community, revealing that he was gay would end his career. But he reached a point, he said, where he was “not interested in not knowing what it was like to be in love any longer,” and he came out during the final months of a campaign. “When I trusted voters to judge me based on the job that I did for them,” he said, “they decided to trust me, and reflected me with eighty per cent of the vote. And what I learned was that trust can be reciprocated.”

Buttifigieg’s story was moving on its own terms, but it also threw itself into relief a fundamental question of the Democratic primary race: What vision of themselves—and of voters—are the candidates willing to trust? At a basic level, that question has to do with being able to convince voters that they’re being spoken to without deceit. Former Representative Beto O’Rourke, of El Paso, has that ability, and it was on display in one of his stronger moments on Thursday. Asked whether he was serious when he said that he would require the owners of military-style weapons to sell them to the government, he replied, “Hell, yes, we’re going to take your AR-15, your AK-47.” Politicians are often anxious to offer assurances that no one is coming for anyone’s guns, but O’Rourke said he believed that these gun owners, too, were sick of seeing children dying in mass shootings. When he visited a gun show recently, he added, some people told him that they would be willing to give up their guns, because “I don’t need this weapon to hunt, to defend myself.” Doing the right thing, O’Rourke said, was not a separate task from bringing all Americans, including conservative Republicans, “into the conversation.”

The health-care segment of the debate also hinged on questions of trust. The Medicare for All bill, which Senator Bernie Sanders, of Vermont, wrote, and Senator Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, signed on to, includes a provision—as on page eight, as Senator Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota, helpfully pointed out—that would effectively ban most forms of private insurance. In this respect, the bill is far more restrictive than not only the “public option” but also the European universal-health-care systems that Sanders admires. Both Buttigieg, who favors “Medicare for All Who Want It,” and Senator Kamala Harris, of California, who introduced a plan in July that includes a longer transition and a larger role for private insurers, maintained that people should be trusted to choose their own option. (Harris has zigzagged on the issue—she originally signed on to Sanders’s bill—raising a different question of trust. Senator Cory Booker, of New Jersey, who co-sponsored the bill, has also backed away from elements of it.) When Sanders said that workers whose unions had agreed to wage cuts in return for private health-care coverage would be able to recover that money from their employers, Vice-President Joe Biden told him, “For a socialist, you’ve got a lot more confidence in corporate America than I do.”

That exchange, like several others on Thursday, was largely about how radical, or just how ambitious, the Party is prepared to be. Is sweeping, structural reform the best way to effect change, or is Obamacare worth building on? (Some factions in the Party have been busy rejecting parts of Barack Obama’s legacy—in the area of immigration, for example.) Pervasive doubt about existing institutions could make it easier to persuade people to commit to entirely new ways of doing things; it could also lead them to give up on a political system that they think is irredeemable, or just mean. Julián Castro,
the former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, did not help matters when, during a discussion of public-option insurance enrollment, he seemed gleeful at a chance to portray Biden as doddering—“Are you forgetting already what you said just two minutes ago?” he asked. Castro later said that his approach was the way the primaries are supposed to play out. But his gibe seemed a crude bit of gaslighting, since Biden hadn’t quite said what Castro claimed he had. As Klobuchar put it in an interview following the debate, the remark was “not cool.”

Castro barely qualified for the debate; he is averaging about one per cent in the polls. Of the ten candidates on stage, only three—Biden, Warren, and Sanders—are polling in the double digits. For some of the others, to continue competing seems to call for either an extraordinary amount of confidence in themselves or, especially in the case of Andrew Yang, in the resonance of their message. Yang, a businessman, presents a notable example of the twinned qualities of pessimism and hope. He believes that, in the face of automation, traditional responses to unemployment, such as retraining programs, are hopeless, but that, with a universal basic income of a thousand dollars a month and the “boot off of people’s throats,” Americans will not sink into inertia but remake their lives and their country. He undercut his own message on Thursday, however, by announcing, game-show style, that his campaign would give that money to ten American families so that they could try the plan. At its most developed, the strength of the case for basic income lies in how it would change the entire economic climate, not just the prospects of a few lucky winners.

There is also the reciprocal aspect of the trust equation: having faith in voters. The Democratic Party seems split on the question of how much of its resources should be directed toward certain voters, particularly white working-class men struggling with deindustrialization. The willingness of so many voters to cast their ballots for Donald Trump has been disorienting. But the case remains that some of those same people previously voted for Obama. The categories are rarely neat. As Buttigieg noted, “Where I come from, a lot of times that displaced autoworker is a single black mother of three.”

None of this is easy. Even Buttigieg’s decision to come out publicly, which he did in 2015, would likely have turned out very differently twenty years ago. But it is true that the victories surrounding L.G.B.T.Q. rights have been brought about by a combination of activism, litigation, and people telling their stories within their communities—through conversation, as O’Rourke put it, as well as confrontation. This is how primaries ought to play out. Every election is an exercise in trust.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

DEPT. OF DYNASTIES
FREAK FLAG FLYING

If you’re wondering how “Succession,” the HBO series about siblings fighting for control of a family empire—thought to be inspired by Rupert Murdoch’s family—ends, James Murdoch can tell you, despite never having watched the show. James, Rupert’s younger son, often referred to as “the smart one” in the clan, walked away last March with some two billion dollars—but no job—after his father merged most of the Murdochs’ Twenty-first Century Fox media empire with Disney. James’s brother, Lachlan, was chosen by their father to run the corporate bits that remained after the merger (chiefly, Fox News and Fox Sports). But no role had been carved out for James, who for years was the C.E.O. of Twenty-first Century Fox and Sky, P.L.C., and the deputy C.O.O. of News Corp, the publisher of papers such as the Post.

“It’s all good,” James, who is forty-six, said. “I just feel very lucky to have the opportunity at this point to make a clean break, and literally have an empty slate.” He was sitting in an upper floor of a modern office building in the West Village, the new headquarters of his private-investment company, Lupa Systems. (It is named for the mythical wolf who suckled the founders of Rome, one of James’s favorite cities, where he worked as an archivist’s assistant before attending Harvard.) The only newsprint publication on display was a copy of The New York Review of Books.

In May, James delivered a commencement address at the American University of Rome, and his remarks seemed as fitted to his own new life as to those of the graduates. “The outcomes in our lives are never predestined,” he said. He urged the students not to “let others define what your success will be,” and to “fly your freak flag high.”

So far, for James, this has meant investing in a smattering of tech and media enterprises and defying his family’s conservative politics. The challenge of waking up two billion dollars richer, as he described it, is figuring out “How can you spend your time and your resources trying to be useful?” He has bought a controlling stake in the Tribeca Film Festival; invested in Artists, Writers & Artisans, a company that produces comics and graphic novels; and put twenty million dollars into the Void, a virtual-reality-entertainment company, among other ventures.

He has also donated to the Democratic Presidential candidates John Hickenlooper and Pete Buttigieg. Of the latter, he said, “It’s clear to anyone who hears him speak that he has an extraordinary mind.” The 2020 election, he said, is “a really crucial moment” for liberal democratic values.

Having spent years working for his family’s company in the Far East and Europe, James said that he has grown worried about rising threats to democratic societies around the world. “There’d been a bet for a long time that economic liberalization would inevitably lead to political liberalization,” he said, “but it didn’t work out that way.” Instead, he said, authoritarian regimes are using digital disinformation tactics and other high-tech weapons to undermine democracies. “The connective tissue of
our society is being manipulated to
make us fight with each other, mak-
ing us the worst versions of ourselves,”
he said, sounding an awful lot like a
person describing Fox News.

Is James taking aim at his father?
““There are views I really disagree with
on Fox,” he said. “But I wouldn’t cast
it as some reaction to that.” He is
backing a program at the Center for
a New American Security, a biparti-
san think tank. The aim of the pro-
gram, called Countering High-Tech
Illiberalism, as it’s described on the
Web site for the Quadrivium founda-
tion, founded by James and his wife,
Kathryn, is “to craft effective, practi-
cal, actionable, and ambitious policies
domestically and abroad” that impair
illiberal populism, such as fighting
disinformation and electoral interfer-
ence. (Fox News hosts have down-
played Russia’s interference in the
2016 election.)

Quadrivium also supports nonprofit
groups seeking to increase American
voter turnout by making it easier to
register to vote and safeguarding vot-
ing rights—steps that could help de-
feat Trump. “But this is not just a
Trumpian problem,” James said. “G en-

James did not want to comment
on his relationship with his father,
but said that they’d seen each other
recently at a corporate board meet-
ing. Asked whether the two talk, he
said, “There are periods of time when
we do not.”

Like his five siblings, James is the
beneficiary of a family trust that holds
the remaining News Corp and Fox
stock, but it is unclear whether he will
ever exercise any control over the
companies. “Succession” offers no clues. “I
don’t watch Succession,” he said. “Not
even a peak. Why would I?”

He also hasn’t seen “Ink,” the
Broadway play about his father’s Lon-
don tabloid, the Sun, or “The Loudest
Voice,” the Showtime series based
on Gabriel Sherman’s book about
Roger Ailes, the disgraced former
head of Fox News. “There are only
so many things you can watch,” he
said, shrugging.

—Jane Mayer

"Yup, it's bedbugs. You must have forgotten to sleep tight."

DEPT. OF MOVES

SLIDE

L ast week, a few miles from the Pen-
tagon, at a dance studio in a strip
mall, Sean Spicer slid several feet on his
knees across a polished wooden floor. A
producer wearing khaki shorts with pine-
apples on them coached him from the
sidelines: “When you’re done sliding,
hold it for five seconds,” he said. Spicer,
President Trump’s former press secre-
tary, was rehearsing for his debut as a
contestant on ABC’s “Dancing with the
Stars.” After resigning from his White
House job (Trump’s counsellor Kelly-
anne Conway invented the phrase “al-
ternative facts” to describe Spicer’s
press-conference style), he taught at Har-
was beginning to realize I had misspo-
enk badly”), and is now moving on to
reality television.

“This wasn’t part of the plan,” Spicer
said, standing in the mirrored studio.
He was wearing green athletic shorts, a
gray T-shirt, black ballroom shoes, and
no makeup. “Frankly, I’m just making
money, trying to enjoy life.” To dance
on television, he will be paid at least a
hundred and twenty-five thousand dol-
lars—more each week that he does not
get eliminated. “They try to have a di-
verse cast,” he said. “Mark Cuban, sports
people, Hollywood folks, Tom DeLay”—
the former Majority Whip, who ap-
peared before being convicted on money-
laundering charges—“Rick Perry, Tucker
Carlson, Bristol Palin. They’ve had a
lot of conservative-slash-political folks. I’d
say I’m in that lineage.”

He was joined that day by his profes-
sional dance partner, who has been fea-
tured on many seasons of “Dancing with
the Stars.” (Her name will be revealed on
the season première.) “Sean’s really
persistent, but he doesn’t have a lot of
upper-body-isolation movement,” she
said. She wondered if he’d been practic-
 ing. “Be honest. Did you work on this
while I was gone?” she asked him. Then
she said, “‘We got a shimmy down—like
a little chest pop—but his body just does
not move that way. It’s not even that he
needs to learn how to do it, it’s just that
he doesn’t have the flexibility for it.”

Spicer defended his learning style. “I’m
very visual when I learn,” he said. “I’m not one of those people who can, like, read directions. If I get a set of directions, instead of reading it, I YouTube it.” Spicer likes to watch a tape of each day’s rehearsal and study what he needs to improve.

Did he see any parallels between dancing on TV and his tenure as press secretary? “None,” he said. “Well, maybe puns: like, dancing around things?” He said that, when he watched clips of himself giving press briefings, “I would go, Oh, wow, I didn’t realize I came off that way. I should’ve kept that answer tighter.” The rehearsal studio is on the other side of the Potomac from the Holocaust Museum (Spicer once referred to Auschwitz as a “Holocaust center”) and from the Martin Luther King, Jr., memorial (he once told the press that “just the other day” Trump “sat down with civil-rights leader M.L.K., Jr.”).

The producer wanted to shoot a reel of Spicer and his partner rehearsing, to use on the show. He filmed Spicer putting on his knee pads, which were dinged from days of practice.

“Do you know what a tango is?” Spicer’s partner asked him.

“No,” he said. “Well, I know that it’s fast, and a little Latin.”

“It’s a sharp, accented dance,” she told him. “We saw the fun Spicery, but this is serious.”

The producer wanted to start again at the knee slide. Spicer’s partner gave him some notes. “I’d rather you slide only, like, two inches, and have a big moment,” she said. “I’d rather have it be a mini slide than a massive fall.”

Afterward, they solemnly watched the first take on a monitor.

“The slide looks like it’s just checking the box,” Spicer said, dejected.

“You’re O.K.,” his partner said. “Nothing’s worse than a cringey moment, and I’m not seeing you do that. It looks clean, and it doesn’t look painful.”

They’d been rehearsing six days a week. “For my wedding, my wife and I took a lesson or two,” Spicer said. “And then we thought, This is silly, we’ll just wing it. I basically didn’t dance at my own wedding.”

Spicer’s dance partner counted out, “Five, six, seven, eight,” and then she and Spicer tangoed across the room. “Elbow up, drop the shoulder,” she instructed him. After ninety minutes, Spicer was breathless and sweaty. Eyes closed in concentration, he took a few spins around the studio, partnerless, going over the routine on his own.

His partner gave him more tips. “Everything needs to be regal and upright,” she said. “Think of it as though you’re walking under a small ceiling. And what did I tell you to do if the floor is slippery? Take small steps.”

Spicer took it all in. “If you suck, you get kicked off,” he said. “From a military standpoint, I’m an after-action person, like: What went well? How did that go? That’s how I’ve lived most of my life.”

—Antonia Hitchens

**BROTHERHOOD DEPT.**

**SUN AND MOON**

Rick Yorn, the Hollywood manager and producer, was dining recently with his younger brother and client, the singer–songwriter Pete Yorn, at Walker’s, in Tribeca, after a day of promoting Pete’s new album, “Caretakers.” Rick, fifty-one, is six years older than Pete, whose 2001 début, “Musicforthemorningafter,” established his reputation as a songwriter’s songwriter. A third Yorn brother, Kevin, the oldest by three years, is an entertainment attorney. He lives in Los Angeles, where all three Yorns, formerly of New Jersey, now make their home.

Rick wore a baseball cap at a jaunty angle; Pete was in a black Psychedelic Furs T-shirt. They sound like brothers, but they don’t look much alike. Pete is melancholic, with black hair and brown eyes, like their mother, Joan. Rick is fair and blue-eyed, and he smiles a lot—a slightly sideways grin reminiscent of his client Leonardo DiCaprio. He looks more like their father, Lawrence, a retired dentist, who wanted his youngest son to be a tax attorney.

“He’s got more of the sun in him,” Pete said, gesturing across the red-checked tablecloth at his big brother. “I’ve got more of the moon.”

The dreamy synths-and-strings jangle of “Caretakers” (produced by thirty-year-old Jackson Phillips, who co-wrote many of the songs with Pete) echoes a particular musical moment in the early eighties, as it played out in the Yorns’ split-level ranch in Montville, twenty-five miles west of the city. Music was the brothers’ obsession. Rick had a drum kit in the basement, and when the older boys jammed with their friends, who’d bring over Marshall stacks, “Pete,” barely seven, was allowed to hang out and listen.

“Rick would be the drummer, and my oldest brother would be the singer,” Pete recalled. “And they would have these burned-out older high-school kids over, and my parents would let them smoke. And I’m thinking, This is the coolest shit ever.”

“Kevin loved metal,” Rick added, “but he was more of a singles-pop guy. Remember? All over his floor, there were scratched up maxi-singles from Madonna and Bryan Adams—”

“Blue Oyster Cult, Rick Springfield,” Pete cut in.

“Yeah, but he loved Zeppelin, too. And he loved Van Halen. We loved Halen.”

But then, in the early eighties, Rick brought new sounds to the basement. He got into alternative (R.E.M.) and Brit Pop (the Cure, the Smiths), which were not Kevin’s thing. “Kevin never went alternative,” Pete said. “Maybe some New Wave stuff.”

Pete’s music is full of nostalgic references to those bands and styles; he seems
to still be trying to reconcile his brothers’ divergent tastes. “I don’t have that many vivid musical memories,” he said. “But one of them is me in the car, and Rick puts on a cassette of that first R.E.M. EP, ‘Chronic Town,’ and turns it up really loud.” That sonic experience still resonates, thirty-seven years later, on his new record.

Making music wasn’t a viable career option for Kevin or Rick, although both eventually found a way to work with musicians. When Rick started his company, he named it Chronic Town. He was an executive producer of HBO’s “Vinyl” and the movie “Wolf of Wall Street” (Martin Scorsese is also a client). As a manager, he plays a big-brotherly role in the careers of his many younger clients; DiCaprio is the same age as Petey.

“The joke is, our parents were way more strict with Kevin,” Rick said. “So he becomes a lawyer. They weakened a little bit with me, so I became a manager. The third one they gave up on, and he became an artist.”

Pete started writing songs as a young teen and picked up the pace at Syracuse University. “I would call Rick in L.A., which was long distance in those days, and play them for him,” he said. “And he’d always stop what he was doing, and he’d listen, and he’d get stoked. It’s still going on, twenty-five years later.” Rick helped convince their parents that Pete had “something really fucking special,” as Rick put it, and that tax-lawyering was not in his future.

“Rick can make people believe things about themselves that they didn’t even realize yet,” Pete said. Following his brothers to L.A. felt natural to him. “I would have followed them to Dover, Delaware,” he said. “I just wanted to be around them.” Their parents moved out West in 1999, after their father retired; their mother worked as Kevin’s receptionist for years. These days, the Yorns are a Hollywood tribe. Kevin’s ex-wife, Julie Yorn, produced “The Dirt,” the Motley Crüe movie, with Rick.

In spite of the Yorn migration, “Caretakers” seems to have Montville on its mind. The first line of the first song, “Calm Down,” goes, “All is well in my hometown.” The Yorns may be gone, but Petey is still back there in the basement, listening.

—John Seabrook

**SKETCHPAD**

**TIME TRAVELLERS**

For two weekends a year, a flotilla of flappers in ropes of pearls and men in bow ties storm Governors Island for the Jazz Age Lawn Party. As Aperol spritzes flow, they dance the Charleston and party like it’s 1929.—Rachel Syme

“Flappers were punk rockers. They were the ones saying, ‘No, I’m going to do what I want, I’m not going to wear a bra or a corset, I’m just going to enjoy my life and drink until my husband or boyfriend goes to war.’”—Analucia McGorty, costume designer

“This is a Stetson. Everybody thinks Stetson is only cowboy hats, but Stetson made every kind of hat. It’s really rare to find old boaters in good shape. A man would wear one for a summer and then throw it in the garbage.”—Michael Arenella, bandleader

“I’m wearing saddle shoes and Argyle socks. This is something I’ve been doing since I was one or two. My parents really like that jazz music. I like hip-hop.”—Basil Gershkovich, age ten
One afternoon last February, Donald Trump stood at a lectern at Florida International University, in Miami, and before a cheering crowd of a thousand called President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela a “dictator” and a “Cuban puppet.” Trump was flanked by two enormous flags, Venezuelan and American, and the word Democracia flashed on a screen behind him. Chants in Spanish alternated between thanking Trump (“We’re with you!”) and taunting Maduro (“He’s already fallen!”). “It was like a rock concert,” Rafael Fernandez, who left Venezuela nearly two decades ago, told me.

The Trump Administration had recently instituted sanctions against Venezuela’s state oil company, which supplies the overwhelming majority of the government’s budget, and more than fifty countries, including the U.S., now recognize the opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, as the country’s legitimate President. Trump had also floated the possibility of a military intervention. Marco Rubio, the Republican senator from Florida, who is influential on Latin-American issues, claimed that high-ranking officers in the Venezuelan military were poised to defect. Addressing those who weren’t, Trump warned, “You will find no safe harbor, no easy exit, and no way out. You’ll lose everything.”

For those who have fled dictatorships, U.S. policy on Venezuela is all-important.

Fernandez was in the audience with his father, Francisco. The two argued constantly about Trump. Rafael told me that he was “more pro- Trump than anti.” His father, a former Venezuelan politician, is a lifelong conservative, but when he voted for the first time in an American election, in 2016, it was for Hillary Clinton; he despised Trump.

Francisco’s sentiments were rare among his neighbors in Doral, a small city of strip malls and golf courses west of Miami. There are more than two hundred thousand Venezuelans in Florida, more than anywhere else in the country, and the majority live in the Doral area. Many of them are recent arrivals—some four million people have left Venezuela in the past four years, ten per cent of the country’s population. The exodus began after Maduro was elected, in 2013, when, in response to dwindling oil prices and economic mismanagement, the government tried to stave off collapse by printing more money. Earlier this year, with inflation close to two million per cent, a bottle of ketchup cost nine dollars, but a minimum-wage job paid about six dollars a month. Maduro has responded to public protests by jailing and killing dissenters; death squads aligned with the government have assassinated at least seven thousand people in the past year and a half. Condemnation of Maduro has been widespread in the U.S. and other countries, but no one has denounced the regime as aggressively as Trump has. In Doral, Rafael said, “you were a pariah if you didn’t support Trump.”

Rafael, who is twenty-eight, manages a car dealership, and he and his father run a Web site called Bienvenidos Venezolanos. They created it eight years ago as an advice hub for Venezuelans in Florida, with links to immigration lawyers, job postings, and real-estate listings. It’s a low-budget operation, with a single full-time employee, but by the end of last year, when Venezuelans were responsible for the largest share of asylum applications in American immigration courts, the site was getting five thousand hits a day.

Rafael said that, at the rally, anticipating Maduro’s downfall, “we were thinking, We could be free next month.” When Trump promised a “new day” in...
Latin America, asserting that “all options are open,” Rafael looked at his father, who had tears in his eyes. “Oh, my God,” Francisco said. “It’s happening.”

Only a small percentage of the recently arrived Venezuelans are eligible to vote, but many Latin Americans in Florida see the Venezuelan government as the nexus of the region’s worst problems. The repressive socialist leaders in Cuba and Nicaragua depend on Venezuela for oil and for political support. Colombia, which borders Venezuela, has taken in more than a million refugees. “If you solve the Venezuela problem, you get three for the price of one,” a state Republican operative told me. “You’ll make the Colombians, Nicaraguans, and Cubans in Florida very happy.”

In every Presidential election since 1992, the winner of Florida has gone on to the White House. Trump won the state, which has a population of twenty-one million, by a hundred and thirteen thousand votes. He’s since made it the centerpiece of his reelection effort, launching his campaign in Orlando and making frequent visits to South Florida to deliver major addresses on Cuba and Venezuela. Local politicians call Interstate 4, which runs between Tampa and Daytona Beach, “The road to the White House.”

“Florida elections always come down to margins,” Frank Mora, a professor of politics at F.I.U., told me. The 2018 races for governor and the Senate were each decided by less than half of a percentage point. In South Florida, which has diverse and overlapping voting blocs, candidates try to win votes in sympathetic constituencies and limit the damage in others. In and around Miami, seven hundred thousand Cubans are eligible to vote, along with a hundred and sixty thousand Colombians, eighty thousand Nicaraguans, and some fifty thousand Venezuelans. “Foreign policy is intensely local in South Florida,” Mora said. Most of the diaspora communities in the state have fled socialist dictatorships. Republicans, and especially Trump, have seized on this fact to relentlessly attack left-wing populists in Central and South America. “The Trump Administration’s Latin America policy has become all about Florida,” a former State Department official told me.

Less than a week after Trump’s speech, the White House and Guaidó, convinced that Maduro was on the verge of falling, attempted to deliver nearly two hundred metric tons of food and medicine to Venezuela by way of checkpoints along the border with Brazil and Colombia, in a push that they hoped would break the will of Maduro’s supporters. The Venezuelan military blocked the shipments and sealed the border. Few officers defected. In April, Guaidó called for a military uprising—the “final phase,” he said, of the attempt to oust Maduro—but it never materialized. Two months later, when Trump returned to Florida to speak to campaign donors at the country club he owns in Doral, the regime was still in power. He didn’t mention Venezuela.

“The situation was hot at the time of the rally,” Rafael Fernandez told me recently. “Now the streets are cold.” These days, Trump’s promise of action in Venezuela rarely comes up at social gatherings; Rafael’s friends and family prefer to avoid it. “All the options are on the table.” That’s what we heard, even though they aren’t on the fucking table,” he said.

“For the Trump Administration, Plan A was that the military would come in and save the day,” Mora told me. “They don’t have a Plan B or C.”

The Latino electorate is younger, more numerous, and more diverse than ever before, with largely progressive views on health-care and social-justice issues. These trends should work in favor of the Democrats. Still, the Presidential election is more than a year away, and disaffection with Republicans is hardly a guarantee of Democratic votes. Florida Democrats remain bitterly divided over how they lost statewide races in 2018, and many have complained that the national Party leadership is not investing enough resources in voter-outreach and registration efforts. In an Op-Ed in the Times, Andrea Cristina Mercado, the head of the progressive group New Florida Majority, warned that the Democrats “assume demography is destiny and think their policies speak for themselves.”

This spring, the President’s national-security adviser at the time, John Bolton, announced new sanctions against Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, claiming that “the troika of tyranny” was “beginning to crumble.” “If the President wins 2020, the Venezuelan policy will have been successful,” a former Administration official said. “No matter how many Venezuelans are scattered to the winds.”

Meetings of the Venezuelan American Republican Club of Miami-Dade County begin with a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. One night in late June, a group of thirty people dressed in cocktail attire stood with their hands on their hearts in the back room of a Cuban restaurant in Doral which was decorated with photographs of Old Havana. I’d been invited by the club’s vice-president, Kennedy Bolivar. Short and barrel-chested, Bolivar is a former union leader in Caracas. He fled to the U.S. in 2010, and worked in construction in New York before moving to Miami and applying for asylum. He will become a U.S. citizen next year, in time to vote in the 2020 elections. Bolivar helps organize press conferences and town-hall-style meetings for the Venezuelan opposition, when it visits Washington, and for the Trump Administration, when it visits Florida. He pulled out his phone to show me photographs of himself posing with Guaidó and Vice-President Mike Pence. “We have a semantic problem with Venezuelans arriving in the U.S.,” he told me. “People associate Democrats with democracy. We have to tell them, ‘No, there are two parties that work within the U.S. democratic system.’” The club’s president, Gustavo Garagorry, added, “Trump is the king of democracy!”

A few miles away, the Democrats were holding the first debate of the Presidential primaries, and the club had asked two guests to offer a preemptive rebuttal: Luciano Suárez, the Cuban-born, octogenarian vice-mayor of West Miami, and David Rivera, a Cuban-American former U.S. congressman. The words of the pledge were the only ones uttered in English all night. Suárez, bald and bespectacled, in a white guayabera, took the microphone first, playing the role of elder statesman. “This isn’t about Florida,” he said, as waiters distributed baskets of fried plantains. “It’s about preventing the spread of socialism in the region. If you’ve got a friend who’s Colombian, or Nicaraguan, and they say..."
they’re a Democrat, take them aside and say, ‘Listen, this is about democracy.’” The candidates who would be taking the debate stage, he said, were “socialists disguised as Democrats.”

The Republicans’ approach to Venezuelan immigrants builds on a relationship they’ve been cultivating with Cuban-Americans since the nineteen-sixties. Between the Cuban Revolution, in 1959, and the mid-seventies, hundreds of thousands of Cubans came to Florida, fleeing the Castro regime. They thought that they’d go home after Fidel Castro fell, but he remained in power until he died, in 2016, at which point he was replaced by his brother, Raúl. By the early eighties, local Cuban leaders had begun organizing voter-registration drives in South Florida under the slogan “Vote So That They Respect Us.” Republicans courted them as the party of anti-Communism and free enterprise. The Party also capitalized on a history of Democratic betrayals, typified by the Bay of Pigs, in 1961, in which John F. Kennedy sent a battalion of Cuban émigrés to overthrow Castro—then, when the invasion foundered, abandoned them in order to deny American involvement. “Kennedy is still the No. 2 most hated man in Miami,” the Cuban émigré Raúl Masvidal said, in 1985, while running for mayor of the city. “Castro is of course the No. 1.” Within a decade, nearly seventy per cent of Cuban-Americans were registered Republicans.

“Venezuela is the gateway to the Cuban electorate,” Fernand Amandi, a Democratic pollster in Miami, told me. Since 2000, Venezuela has supplied Cuba with some twenty-one billion dollars’ worth of oil; in return, in 2008, the Castros began supplying Venezuela with Cuban intelligence agents, to monitor its military and to quell political opponents. In 2017, Maduro thanked Cuba publicly for this assistance. “The fall of Venezuela represents the fall of the Cuban regime,” the Republican operative told me. “Cubans have waited their whole lives for this. For them, Venezuela is personal.”

At the meeting of the Venezuelan American Republican Club, Rivera gave a selective recounting of everything that the Republican Party had done over the years for South Florida’s Latin-American constituencies: In Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan supported the Contras in their war against the Sandinistas. George W. Bush expanded Plan Colombia, a security-and-anti-drug initiative popular among the country’s conservatives. And yet, Rivera said, without the efforts of groups such as the club he was addressing, it was far from assured that the diaspora communities would remember their debts. “It’s the same with the Venezuelan vote,” he said. “The fact that Trump has sanctioned Diosdado Cabello”—a member of Maduro’s inner circle—“and that he’s elevated Guaidó. That’s not enough.”

The Democratic candidates on the debate stage made a point of proving how progressive they were on immigration. With a show of hands, they supported providing medical coverage to the undocumented and decriminalizing border crossings, proposals that fall well to the left of past Party consensus. Beto O’Rourke, Pete Buttigieg, Cory Booker, and Julián Castro attempted a few phrases in Spanish. (“Cervantes would have laughed. Or cried,” the Miami Herald wrote.) But none of them mentioned Venezuela. Democrats in Florida have pushed for the Trump Administration to extend a form of legal relief, known as Temporary Protected Status, to some two hundred thousand Venezuelan refugees in the U.S., but the President has refused. Not a single Democrat on the debate stage talked about T.P.S. for Venezuelans. In the candidates’ eagerness to satisfy their party’s progressive base on immigration policy, they seemed to be forgetting that one reason they’d come to Florida was to actually address the state’s immigrants.

On a humid afternoon, I met Fabio Andrade, a Colombian-American Republican strategist, at a Panera Bread in a Doral strip mall. Last year, Andrade worked on Ron DeSantis’s successful gubernatorial campaign, and he is now a consultant for the Republican Party on Latino outreach. In 2018, across Miami-Dade County, DeSantis and his predecessor, Rick Scott, who ran for Senate, outperformed Trump, mostly because of their strong showing among Cuban-Americans; turnout among previously registered voters, who are often older and more likely to vote Republican, outpaced new registrations. Andrade told me that older Cuban-Americans had been at the center of DeSantis’s strategy in Miami-Dade, where he won seventy per cent of the Cuban vote. According to polling by a team at F.I.U., Cuban-Americans who came to the U.S. before 1980 supported DeSantis over his Democratic opponent, Andrew Gillum, by a margin of eighty-four per cent to fifteen per cent; those who were born in the U.S. supported him by a margin of only fifty-one per cent to forty-eight per cent. (DeSantis won over all by four-tenths of a percentage point.)

DeSantis played on older Cubans’ resentment of President Obama, who, in 2014, began the process of normalizing relations with Cuba and, two years later, visited the country and appeared alongside Raúl Castro, making him the first sitting American President to set foot on the island since the nineteen-twenties. “For Cubans, our message was that we had to return to the way things were before Obama,” another Republican strategist told me. New generations of Cuban-Americans have grown less interested in Cuba policy, which has dropped below the economy, health care, and gun control in its importance to the Cuban-American electorate as a whole. While the community is still mostly Republican, younger Cuban-Americans identify less strongly with the G.O.P. The Venezuela issue, the strategist added, galvanized older Cuban-American voters, whose turnout had become more important than ever.

Andrade walked me through the messages for other communities. Puerto Ricans, he said, were primarily concerned with the territory’s achieving statehood. The national Republican leadership tends to reject this idea, but during the campaign DeSantis claimed to support it, in addition to immediate measures to insure the territory’s sovereignty. On the campaign trail, Scott, who had travelled to Puerto Rico at least eight times as governor, emphasized the idea of representation, stressing the line “I’m going to be your senator.”

The Colombian-American commu-
nity, Andrade said, had closely followed recent Presidential elections in Colombia, in which a right-wing candidate, Iván Duque, won by demonizing the previous government’s peace accords with Marxist rebels. When Duque assumed office, in August, Scott was on hand for the inauguration, and appeared on Univision, which broadcast the event in Florida. Andrade said, “We saw that as an election that came down to a choice between socialist and non-socialist. The takeaway, in the governor’s race, was that Gillum was the socialist.”

Similar appeals to Nicaraguans were reinforced by events in Nicaragua, where Daniel Ortega, the country’s strongman President, has repressed dissent and brutalized opponents. One pro-DeSantis mailer added Gillum to a lineup of Latin-American socialist authoritarians, from Maduro to Ortega and Raúl Castro.

In 1983, when Ronald Reagan travelled to Little Havana for a rally, Al Cardenas, his state campaign chair, told the Times, “If you were running for President in a Latin-American country, I don’t think you could fit the profile any better.” The same could be said of Trump. Between his daily fulminations against the press and his fondness for campaign pageantry, there’s something of the tropical caudillo about him. And, as the G.O.P. has morphed into the party of Trump, a small group of Florida Republicans have helped him boost his image with the state’s Latino electorate. Representatives Mario Díaz-Balart, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and Carlos Curbelo have deep ties to the Cuban community. Rick Scott has offered advice: in November, 2016, after Fidel Castro died, Trump, as President-elect, called Scott to ask what he should say. Most helpful of all is Rubio, who is known both for his interest in Latin-American policy and for his tendency to view the region through the lens of Cuban-American relations. “He knows a lot,” a former White House official who worked with Rubio told me. “But what’s good for Cuban-Americans isn’t always what’s good for America.”

When Rubio and Trump were running for President, they were contentious opponents: Rubio was “Little Marco”; Trump was a “con artist.” But that changed in early 2017, when Trump was trying to secure support in the Senate to repeal Obamacare, and Rubio was a swing vote. Rubio, for his part, wanted to be the Party’s lead policymaker on Latin America.

If Trump had any real interest in Cuba, it was as a business opportunity and a political staging ground. In 1998, he sent a group of investment advisers to the country on his behalf—in violation of the U.S. embargo. The following year, when he was considering running for President, he gave a speech in Miami vowing never to do business in Cuba while Fidel Castro was in power. One former White House official told me that, by 2017, “the instructions were ‘Make Rubio happy.’ The President didn’t care about Cuba at all, so it wasn’t a big thing for him.”

The White House set a deadline of the summer of 2017 to reverse Obama’s Cuba policy, and Rubio took the lead, working with officials at the National Security Council, as well as other Florida Republicans. At one point, after repeatedly failing to get meetings with the President, representatives from Kentucky, Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas—states that exported goods to Cuba, and didn’t want White House policy to block trade with the country—became upset. “They said to us, ‘This is bullshit,’” a White House official told me. “‘We are Trump country. Why is the President only talking to Rubio and Díaz-Balart? We represent more votes than they do?’” But the Administration—and the Florida Republicans—saw the congressmen’s business-minded pragmatism as insufficiently hard-line.

On June 16, 2017, at a ceremony in Little Havana, with Rubio as the m.c. and the Florida Republican delegation in attendance, Trump claimed to be “canceling the last Administration’s completely one-sided deal with Cuba.” The presentation was a greatest hits of anti-Castro invective, featuring a violin performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” and homages to veterans of the Bay of Pigs. Nonetheless, the plan left most of Obama’s policy intact: embassies remained open; direct commercial flights and cruises continued; Americans could still send unlimited remittances. “This was domestic electoral politics, not foreign policy,” the second White House official told me. Returning to Washington on Air Force One, Trump said, “We’re done. I won. We did what we needed to do. I said I’d undo Obama’s policy, and I did.”

A few months later, as the Cuban-American community in Miami learned the details of Trump’s policy, Rubio, who, according to two White House officials, had been involved in drafting the policy, now lambasted it as the work of the deep state. “Bureaucrats in the State Department who oppose the President’s Cuba policy refused to fully implement it,” he said, in a statement issued just five hours after the final regulations were published. But, by then, Trump had shifted his focus to Venezuela.

In May, while the White House had

“We prefer our idea people to present their ideas during office hours.”
been preparing to unveil its Cuba policy, the situation in Caracas had exploded. “People were marching in the streets by the millions, and on our end there was no strategy,” one White House official told me. Officials at the N.S.C. started meeting with the State Department, and the Administration decided to impose a series of escalating sanctions in response to actions taken by Maduro.

Later that month, Administration officials noticed a pattern. Every time they met with Rubio or his aides to share news about the developing Venezuela policy, the senator found some way to publicly disclose it in advance of a White House announcement. On May 17th, he appeared on the Senate floor with, he said, “an update and a suggestion, a request of the Administration about a step that we can take.” According to a White House official involved in the policy, Rubio had been informed that the Administration planned to sanction eight members of the Venezuelan Supreme Court, including the chief judge, the next day. He delivered the speech to make it look as if he were the one behind it. “He was beginning to be seen as the godfather of Latin-American issues,” another White House official told me. In July, after Maduro held a sham election for the constituent assembly, Rubio preempted another White House announcement of sanctions, this time against Maduro himself. Having been told that sanctions were imminent, Rubio called for them in an official statement, voicing his confidence that “Trump will respond swiftly and decisively.” Trump was enraged, the official told me, but he and Rubio continued to “play from the same sheet of music.” They needed each other.

Announcing the latest sanctions, H. R. McMaster, the national-security adviser, said, “Maduro is not just a bad leader. He is now a dictator.” Many Democrats, especially those in South Florida, concurred, and routinely assailed Maduro themselves. “There was almost no sunlight between the South Florida Democrats and the Trump Administration on the Venezuela question,” a senior Senate aide told me. But Trump and the Florida Republican delegation made sure that Democrats were cut out of conversations about Venezuelan policy. (Through a spokesperson, Rubio, who in the Senate has partnered with Democrats on legislation related to Venezuela, denied this.) When Trump and Pence travelled to Florida, they met only with Republican officeholders, then invited them to high-profile briefings in Washington. The more that the White House discussed Venezuela and Cuba, the more the region came to look like an exclusively Republican priority.

In March, 2018, Trump fired McMaster and replaced him with John Bolton, a fierce advocate of regime change in Latin America. The Senate staffer told me, “When Bolton takes over, the message was ‘You guys are doing the right thing, keep going, but you’re not taking enough political credit. Venezuela policy will affect Florida in 2020.’” Inside the White House, Bolton’s confidence created the illusion of immediate progress. He “misled POTUS,” one White House official said. “Bolton told him, ‘This whole thing is going to be over soon.’” After the Administration announced a battery of policies against Maduro and the Cuban government, Bolton examined news reports in Florida to gauge the reaction. When he found critical op-eds or letters, especially from Republican voters faulting the Administration for not being tough enough, he told staffers, “These are the guys who are supposed to be supporting us. If we’re losing them, we’re doing something wrong.” (A senior Administration official denied that Bolton had a political agenda.)

Bolton’s appointment was a triumph for Rubio and the Florida Republicans, many of whom had long-standing relationships with him. In August, Bolton fired the N.S.C.’s head of Latin America policy and replaced him with an attorney from South Florida named Mauricio Claver-Carone, known among establishment politicians in Washington for his extremist, zero-sum outlook on Cuba. The Republican strategist told me that, in Miami, “the news about Mauricio made everyone very happy.”

Trump named another Rubio ally, Carlos Trujillo, as the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States, a body designed to avoid regional military conflict. According to three Ad-
ministration officials, Rubio also tried, but failed, to get the President to replace the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs. “Rubio can’t control the Holy Trinity on Latin America policy in Washington,” another former State Department official said. “But he gets two out of three. He gets the Father and the Holy Ghost.” The effect was to create an echo chamber, in which the Administration convinced itself that Maduro’s fall was imminent. “This was the product of a small group of people who are being fed information from members of the Venezuelan diaspora,” the official told me.

The headquarters of Actualidad Radio, an AM station started by Cuban and Venezuelan businessmen thirteen years ago, occupies a peach-colored building fringed with palm trees, on a quiet street off the freeway in Doral. One afternoon in late June, I arrived there with Luisana Pérez, who handles Latino outreach for Florida’s Democratic Party. Pérez, who is thirty-two years old, came to the U.S. from Venezuela in 2011, after becoming engaged to a U.S. citizen, the son of a veteran of the Bay of Pigs. She volunteered at the Florida Immigrant Coalition, in Miami, on a campaign to persuade the state legislature to grant driver’s licenses to the undocumented; that led to a job in the office of a Democratic state senator named José Javier Rodríguez, a Cuban-American with a law practice in Coral Gables.

A few months before Pérez and I met, the Florida Democratic Party had held a meeting in Fort Lauderdale to discuss plans for 2020, and she was given an eighty-thousand-dollar budget to begin outreach. “When I started with J.J.R.—” José Javier Rodríguez—“he was very active on the radio, and I started to realize how important it was for a state representative to be on the radio,” she told me. Univision and Telemundo are popular in South Florida, but AM radio is a diaspora staple. There’s Radio Mambí, the Cuban-American heir to La Cubánísimia, the famous anti-Castro station, and the Colombian station Caracol. Amandi, the pollster, told me that Actualidad is “the command center of the Venezuelan community.” It has a distinctly Venezuelan format: improvised and loosely structured, with frequent audience participa-

tion. The main topic of conversation, as on all South Florida Spanish-language stations, is the situation in Venezuela. Pérez bought a slot on Actualidad, for four hundred and twenty-five dollars, and hired a Venezuelan-American host, creating a news show with a progressive bent, called “Democracia al Día,” which airs every Saturday at noon.

The key to targeting voters in South Florida, Pérez told me, was understanding the fault lines within the diaspora communities. “If you tell me when you got to this country, I’ll tell you what your socioeconomic background is,” she said. “If you have money, you can get visas. If you don’t, you need T.P.S. or asylum.” When Pérez arrived, she stayed with extended family who’d been there for more than a decade and had a house in a gated community. People who have arrived in the past five years, by contrast, often live together in subdivided apartments, doing odd jobs to pay the rent. “Take a Lyft or an Uber—all the drivers are Venezuelans,” she said. There’s been a similar evolution among Cubans. The island’s economy has crated in the past few decades, and recent immigrants to the U.S., who are poorer than their predecessors, are fleeing a different place.

Rodríguez told me, “It’s hard for some members of the Old Guard to claim to be leaders of the Cuban community, given how out of touch they are with the people coming now.” This was one reason that Pérez was so frustrated with the Democratic Presidential candidates who came to Miami and talked about immigration without addressing local particularities: they were missing a historic opportunity to break the Republican grip on the leadership of South Florida’s diaspora communities.

“Whether you came here twenty years ago or one year ago,” she said, “one of the things that unites everyone is what’s happening in Venezuela.”

Democrats in South Florida have attacked the Trump Administration for championing Venezuelans in Venezuela but ignoring them once they arrive in the United States. For all the current political parallels between Venezuela and Cuba, immigration policy has been a point of conspicuous divergence. Cubans have historically enjoyed a singular set of immigration benefits. In 1966, the Cuban Adjustment Act allowed Cubans to apply for permanent residency on an expedited basis—afer a year and a day in the U.S. Beginning in 1995, through a policy called “wet foot, dry foot,” Cubans who had reached U.S. soil were guaranteed legal status. Venezuelans’ request for T.P.S. is comparatively modest. Nevertheless, Trump still refuses to grant it, despite appeals from Rubio and Guaidó. “The Republican Party is going from a conservative party to a nationalist party,” Rodríguez said. “It’s not the party of Reagan that’s going full bore anti-immigrant.”

In an e-mail obtained by the Wall Street Journal, Elliott Abrams, the Administration’s special envoy to Venezuela, warned the N.S.C. that the U.S. would become a “laughingstock” if it deported Venezuelans while fighting the Maduro regime. “We have absolutely got to avoid any noncriminal deportations while we sort it out,” he wrote. Claver-Carone tersely replied that any form of relief for Venezuelan refugees would send the message that Maduro might not fall anytime soon, and added that “it opens up inconsistencies” with the Administration’s immigration agenda. Since 2016, there’s been an eighty-four-per-cent increase in the deportation of Venezuelans and a six-hundred-and-twenty-per-cent increase in the deportation of Cubans.

Still, not all Venezuelan immigrants regard Trump’s agenda as an affront. “The Venezuelans here do not see themselves as undocumented,” Pérez told me. “They think of the undocumented as the Guatemalans, the Central Americans. There’s a reluctance in the community to identify as immigrants.” Rafael Fernandez said that Venezuelans in Doral saw the latest waves of refugees as a Venezuelan political issue, rather than as part of the immigration wars in America. “Their stance on illegal immigration is tough,” he said.

A few days before Trump announced that “millions” of people would be arrested in a series of national immigration raids, DeSantis signed a bill to increase
immigration enforcement at the state level. Democrats had introduced an amendment to create special protections for Venezuelans, but Republicans voted it down. Annette Taddeo, a Democratic state senator from Miami, told me, “All the representatives who stand with the Venezuelan flag, who go to the Arepazo”—the most popular Venezuelan restaurant in Doral—“and give all these press conferences, they voted against the amendment to protect Venezuelans against these freaking raids that are coming.”

Taddeo and I were at Actualidad for an 8 A.M. show called “Prohibido Callarse” (“It’s Forbidden to Shut Up”), hosted by Roberto Rodríguez Tejera, who is Cuban, and Juan Camilo Gómez, a Colombian. At Actualidad, liberals go on the air in the morning, conservatives in the afternoon. The later it gets, the farther right the personalities move; by dinnertime, the hosts are extolling Trump and calling for an armed invasion against Maduro.

“In Miami, they call us the Communists,” Gómez joked. He was sitting in the recording booth with Rodríguez Tejera, the pollster Fernand Amandi, and Taddeo, who’s Colombian–American. They were drinking plastic cups of Cuban coffee and discussing the Democrats in South Florida. Mounted on the wall above them were three TVs, tuned to Fox News, CNN, and CNN en Español, showing, respectively, segments on “censoring conservatives,” Robert Mueller, and the latest statements made by Juan Guaidó.

Like many Democrats in South Florida, the four of them wanted Maduro gone, but they had to answer for other Democrats who were less attuned to the situation. Nancy Pelosi hasn’t visited the Venezuelan community in South Florida this year. Bill de Blasio had recently flaunted his Spanish while in Miami by quoting Che Guevara. Last February, when the journalist Jorge Ramos, of Univision, asked Bernie Sanders whether he recognized the Presidency of Guaidó, he said no.

One “Prohibido Callarse” listener, who had posted a question for the group on Twitter, wanted to know why it was “so hard” for Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to condemn Maduro. A local Democrat told me that the head of the D.N.C., Tom Pérez, had done Florida Democrats “no favors” by bringing the primary debate to the state, because it exposed the left wing of the Party.

Democrats need to avoid the trap of framing their stance on Venezuela solely in opposition to Trump. “You have to say, ‘These guys in Venezuela and Cuba and Nicaragua are bad,’ and then pivot to how Trump is making it worse,” Mora, the professor of politics, said. “The mentality that what’s happening in Venezuela is all about Trump will just reinforce the Republican narrative that Democrats are either ignorant or sympathetic with the regime.”

In August, the Trump Administration announced further sanctions against Venezuela, which news outlets, drawing on the old Cuba policy, mistakenly called an “embargo.” Risa Grais-Targow, a Venezuelan expert at the Eurasia Group, a consultancy, told me, “This was more of a signalling mechanism than a game-changer.” The signal may be more mixed than the Administration seems to realize: after sixty years of punitive politics, the regime in Cuba is still intact.

Maria Casado, a Venezuelan journalist who lives in Miami, told me that there’s an expression in Spanish that sums up the situation: Yo me arrimo al mejor postor, or “I’ll pick the contender with the best chance of winning.” Right now, many Venezuelans in South Florida see the Republican Party as their best bet to resolve the worsening crisis. “They’ve got a bully pulpit that’s larger than ours,” the Democratic representative Donna Shalala told me. Her district, which includes Miami, is seventy-two per cent Latino, and more than a third of its residents are Cuban.

Her frequent denunciations of authoritarian socialism can make her sound like a Republican to people outside Florida, though she supports T.P.S. and the Affordable Care Act. “This requires a very clear voice, not one that’s particularly nuanced,” she said. “It’s not just understanding Venezuela. It’s understanding a whole generation of people who are in exile.”

“How can you support a President and a party that are attacking your people?” Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, a Democratic first-term representative from Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties, asked. Born in Ecuador, Mucarsel-Powell beat Carlos Curbelo, the Rubio ally, in 2018, flipping a key seat. In 2020, she faces a Republican challenger, a Cuban-American businesswoman named Irina Vilarino, who has defined her platform as “pro-growth economic policies and a tough stance against dictators like Nicolás Maduro.” Last year, Vilarino appeared twice with the President, in Washington and in South Florida, and, in June, Mike Pence headlined a Latinos for Trump rally in Miami. That month, at the Democratic Party’s annual state fund-raiser, called the Blue Gala, no national Latino officeholders gave speeches. “We need to be connecting with Hispanic voters,” Mucarsel-Powell told me. She attributed her success in 2018 to Curbelo’s support for the Trump tax bill, Republicans’ repeated attacks on Obamacare, and the Republican Party’s increasing hostility to immigrants. “There’s no party loyalty here,” she said. “Candidates tend to leave Florida for the end, which never works. The constituency of Latino voters in Florida is different than Latino voters in California and Texas.”

“It’s always easier for the Republicans, because they have one single message, from the top to the bottom of the Party,” a Florida Democratic official told me ruefully. But, by the end of the summer, there were signs that the national Democratic leadership was beginning to craft a unified message on Venezuela. In late August, at a meeting in San Francisco, the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution expressing support for the “Venezuelan migrant community” and calling on the Trump Administration to grant it T.P.S. The resolution used words like “condemnation,” but in relation only to Trump, not to Maduro. In the past year, Democrats have tried to make up for lost time: of seven bills on Venezuela in the House and the Senate, six were initiated by Democrats. All of them have languished in the Republican-controlled Senate.

The Trump Administration is now offering Maduro some form of amnesty if he steps down, and the Venezuelan opposition is warming to the prospects of peace talks with the government. Through it all, the Florida Republicans are holding the political line. During a visit to Israel, Rick Scott posted a photograph on Twitter of himself in a yarmulke, and wrote, “Today, I visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem to pray for an end to Nicolás Maduro’s evil regime and genocide in #Venezuela.”

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Tonight I am going to the restaurant, where I will eat a killed and burned-up bird and drink liquefied old purple grapes, and also I will swallow clear water that used to have bugs and poop and poison in it but has been cleaned up so that it doesn’t make us ill. I am so excited at the thought of consuming the burned bird and the grape gunk at the restaurant that I put skin-colored all over my face and dab pasty red pigment on my lips. I also swish peachy granules onto my cheeks and use a pencil to draw a line around my eye, so that people know where my blinkers are.

Next, I take a little brush and swirl black paint over each eyelash, and then I heat up a metal stick and wind my head hairs around it, so that my face is surrounded by spirals. I stuff each of my breasts into a cloth bag, and then secure the pair of boob bags against my torso with straps, I guess to prevent the boobs from floating up past the white puffs and into outer space.

These are important tasks to perform if you want to leave your house and go to the restaurant and not have to stay home and be alone forever, which, on Earth, is bad.

I cover my body with a piece of fabric that has been cut and sewn into a certain shape so as to remind others that I have a butt and a vagina, but without showing the actual butt or vagina that I have.

I am a woman here on this ancient ball that rotates along with a collection of other balls around a bigger ball made up of light and gases that are science gases, not farts. Don’t be immature. I wear this paint and these boob bags and this butt-vagina fabric map so that I can be here on the globe and go to places like the restaurant.

At the restaurant, I pay with the money that I earn from pretending to be other women. I get that money so I can afford all the face paint and boob bags that I need, so that I can go to the restaurant and eat the dead burned bird and sip the purple grape gloop that sometimes makes me fall down or throw up all over this globe. I repeat this cycle so that I can go to even more places on this sphere, as it revolves through eternal darkness and endless space. ♦
LETTER FROM SOUTH DAKOTA

AMERICAN SPHINX

What does the Crazy Horse Memorial really stand for?

BY BROOKE JARVIS

The street corners of downtown Rapid City, South Dakota, the gateway to the Black Hills and the self-proclaimed “most patriotic city in America,” are populated by bronze statues of all the former Presidents of the United States, each just eerily shy of life-size. On the corner of Mount Rushmore Road and Main Street, a diminutive Andrew Jackson scowls and crosses his arms; on Ninth and Main, a shoulder-high Teddy Roosevelt strikes an impressive pose, holding a petite sword.

As one drives farther into the Black Hills—a region considered sacred by its original residents, who were displaced by settlers, loggers, and gold miners—the roadside attractions offer a vision of American history that grows only more uncanny. Western expansion and settler colonialism join in a jolly, jumbled fantasy: visitors can tour a mine and pan for gold, visit Cowboy Gulch and a replica of Philadelphia’s Independence Hall (“Shoot a musket! Exit here!”), and stop by the National Presidential Wax Museum, which sells a tank top featuring a buff Abraham Lincoln above the slogan “Abolish Sleevercy.” In a town named for George Armstrong Custer, an Army officer known for using Native women and children as human shields, tourist shops sell a T-shirt that shows Chief Joseph, Sitting Bull, Geronimo, and Red Cloud and labels them “The Original Founding Fathers,” and also one that reads, in star-spangled letters, “Welcome to America Now Speak English.”

The source from which so much strange Americana flows is Mt. Rushmore, which, with the stately columns and the Avenue of Flags leading up to it, seems to leave the historical mess behind. But perhaps we get that feeling only because we’ve grown accustomed to the idea of it: a monument to patriotism, conceived as a colossal symbol of dominion over nature, sculpted by a man who had worked with the Ku Klux Klan, and composed of the heads of Presidents who had policies to exterminate the people into whose land the carving was dynamited.

Past Mt. Rushmore is another mountain, and another memorial. This one is much larger: the Presidents’ heads, if they were stacked one on top of the other, would reach a little more than halfway up it. After seventy-one years of work, it is far from finished. All that has emerged from Thunderhead Mountain is an enormous face—a man of stone, surveying the world before him with a slight frown and a furrowed brow.

Decades from now, if and when the sculpture is completed, the man will be sitting astride a horse with a flowing mane, his left arm extended in front of him, pointing. The scale will be mind-boggling: an over-all height nearly four times that of the Statue of Liberty; the arm long enough to accommodate a line of semi trucks; the horse’s ears the size of school buses, its nostrils carved twenty-five feet around and nine feet deep. It will be the largest sculpture in the history of the world. Yet, to some of the people it is meant to honor, the giant emerging from the rock is not a memorial but an indignity, the biggest and strangest and crassest historical irony in a region, and a nation, that is full of them.

The monument is meant to depict Tasunke Witko—best known as Crazy Horse—the Oglala Lakota warrior famous for his role in the resounding defeat of Custer and the Seventh Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Big Horn and for his refusal to accept, even in the face of violence and tactical starvation, the American government’s efforts to confine his people on reservations. He
is a beloved symbol for the Lakota today because “he never concealed to the white man,” Tatewin Means, who runs a community-development corporation on the Pine Ridge Reservation, about a hundred miles from the monument, explained to me. “He lived a life that was devoted to protecting our people.” (“Sioux” originated from a word that was applied by outsiders—it might have meant “snake”—and many people prefer the names of the more specific nations: Lakota, Dakota, and Dakota, each of which is further divided into bands, such as the Oglala Lakota and the Mnicoujou Lakota.) There are many other famous Lakota leaders from Crazy Horse’s era, including Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Spotted Elk, Touch the Clouds, and Old Chief Smoke. But when, in 1939, a Lakota elder named Henry Standing Bear wrote to Korczak Ziolkowski, a Polish-American sculptor who had worked briefly on Mt. Rushmore, to say that there ought to be a memorial in response to Rushmore—something that would show the white world “that the red man had great heroes, too”—Crazy Horse was the obvious subject.

Ziolkowski, a self-taught artist who was raised by an Irish boxer in Boston after both his parents died in a boating accident, came to Standing Bear’s attention after winning a sculpture prize at the World’s Fair in New York. He moved to South Dakota in 1947, and began acquiring land through purchases and swaps. A year later, he dedicated the memorial with an inaugural explosion. “I want to right a little bit of the wrong that they did to these people,” he said.

In the early days, Ziolkowski had little money, a faulty old compressor, and a rickety, seven-hundred-and-forty-one-step wooden staircase built to access the mountainside. His first marriage dissolved, apparently because his wife didn’t appreciate his single-minded focus on the mountain, and in 1950 he married Ruth Ross, a volunteer at the site who was eighteen years his junior, on Thanksgiving Day—supposedly so that the wedding wouldn’t require a day off work. Ruth told the press that Korczak had informed her that the mountain would come first, she second, and their children third. “You can see why we had ten children,” Ziolkowski once said. “The boys were necessary for working on the mountain, and the girls were needed to help with the visitors.”

Ziolkowski, who liked to call himself “a storyteller in stone,” sometimes seemed to be crafting his own legend, too, posing in a prospector’s hat and giving dramatic statements to the media. He made models for a university campus and an expensive medical-training center that he planned to build, to benefit Native Americans. “Of course I’m egotistical!” he told “60 Minutes,” a few decades into the venture. “All my life I’ve wanted to do something so much greater than I could ever possibly be.” In 1951, he estimated that the project would take thirty years to complete. By the time of his death, in 1982, there was no sign of the university or the medical center, and the sculpture was still just scarred, amorphous rock. Ziolkowski had, however, built his own impressive tomb, at the base of the mountain. On a huge steel plate, he cut the words

KORCZAK
STORYTELLER IN STONE
MAY HIS REMAINS
BE LEFT UNKNOWN.

After Korczak’s death, Ruth Ziolkowski decided to focus on finishing the sculpture’s face, which was completed in 1998; it is still the only finished part of the monument. The unveiling ceremony prompted a wave of media attention, a visit from President Bill Clinton, and a fund-raising drive. Most of the Ziolkowski children, when they became adults, left to pursue other interests, but eventually returned to draw salaries at the mountain. Some have worked on the carving and others have concentrated on the tourism infrastructure that has developed around it—both of which, over the decades, have grown increasingly sophisticated.

Every year, well over a million people visit the Crazy Horse Memorial, a name almost always followed, on brochures and signage, by the symbol ®. They pay an entrance fee (currently thirty dollars per car), plus a little extra for a short bus ride to the base of the mountain, where the photo opportunities are better, and a lot extra (a mandatory donation of a hundred and twenty-five dollars) to visit the top. They buy fry bread and buffalo meat in the restaurant, and T-shirts and rabbit furs and teepee-building kits and commemorative hard hats in the gift shop, and watch a twenty-two-minute orientation film in which members of the Lakota community praise the memorial and the Ziolkowski family. On special occasions—such as a combined commemoration of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and Ruth Ziolkowski’s birthday, in June—they can watch what are referred to as Night Blasts: long series of celebratory explosions on the mountain. They are handed brochures explaining that the money they spend at the memorial benefits Native American causes. “The purpose here—it’s a great purpose, it’s a noble purpose,” Jadwiga Ziolkowski, the fourth Ziolkowski child, now sixty-seven and one of the memorial’s C.E.O.s, told me. “It’s just a humanitarian project all the way around.”

There are many Lakota who praise the memorial. Charles (Bamm) Brewer, who organizes an annual tribute to Crazy Horse on the Pine Ridge Reservation, joked that his only problem with the carving is that “they didn’t make it big enough—he was a bigger man than that to our people!” I spoke with one Oglala who had named her son for Korczak, and others who had scattered family members’ ashes atop the carving. Some are grateful that the face offers an unmissable reminder of the frequently ignored Native history of the hills, and a counterpoint to the four white faces on Mt. Rushmore. “It’s the one large carving that they can’t tear down,” Amber Two Bulls, a twenty-six-year-old Lakota woman, told me.

But others argue that a mountain-size sculpture is a singularly ill-chosen tribute. When Crazy Horse was alive, he was known for his humility, which is considered a key virtue in Lakota culture. He never dressed elaborately or allowed his picture to be taken. (He is said to have responded, “Would you steal my shadow, too?”) Before he died, he asked his family to bury him in an unmarked grave.

There’s also the problem of the location. The Black Hills are known, in the Lakota language, as He Sapa or Paha Sapa—names that are sometimes translated as “the heart of everything that is.” A ninety-nine-year-old elder in the Sicangu Rosebud Sioux Tribe named Marie Brush Breaker-Randall told me that the mountains are “the foundation of the Lakota Nation.” In Lakota stories, people lived beneath them while the world
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sometimes around 1840, a boy known as Curly, or Light Hair, was born to an Oglala shaman and a Minicoujou woman named Rattling Blanket Woman. He learned to ride his horse great distances, hunting herds of buffalo across vast plains. As a young man, Curly had a vision enjoining him to be humble: to dress simply, to keep nothing for himself, and to put the needs of the tribe, especially of its most vulnerable members, before his own. He was known for wearing only a feather, never a full bonnet; for not keeping scalps as tokens of victory in battles; and for being honored by the elders as a shirt-wearer, a designated role model who followed a strict code of conduct. (He later lost the honor, after a dispute involving a woman who left her husband to be with him.) His father passed on his own name: Tasunke Witko, or His Horse Is Wild.

White settlers were already moving through the area, and their government was building forts and sending soldiers, prompting skirmishes over land and sovereignty that would eventually erupt into open war. In 1854, when Curly was around fourteen, he witnessed the killing of a diplomatic leader named Conquering Bear, in a disagreement about a cow. The following year, he may also have witnessed the capture and killing of dozens of women and children by U.S. Army soldiers, in what is euphemistically known as the Battle of Ash Hollow. (Much of what we know about Crazy Horse’s life comes from oral histories and winter counts, pictorial narratives recorded on hides.) In 1866, when Captain William Fetterman, who was said to have boasted, “Give me eighty men and I can ride through the whole Sioux nation,” attempted to do just that, Crazy Horse served as a decoy, allowing a confederation of Lakota, Arapaho, and Cheyenne warriors to kill all eighty-one men under Fetterman’s command. He continued to build a reputation for bravery and leadership; it was sometimes said that bullets did not touch him.

The U.S. government, knowing that it couldn’t vanquish the powerful tribes of the northern plains, instead signed treaties with them. But it was also playing a waiting game. Buffalo, once plentiful, were being overhunted by white settlers, and their numbers were declining. Major General Philip Sheridan, a Civil War veteran tasked with driving Plains tribes onto reservations, cheered their extermination, writing that the best strategy for dealing with the tribes was to “make them poor by the destruction of their stock, and then settle them on the lands allotted to them.” (An Army colonel was more succinct: “Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.”)

In 1868, the United States promised that the Black Hills, as well as other regions of what are now North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado, would be “set apart for the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation” of the Sioux Nation. But, just six years later, the government sent Custer and the Seventh Cavalry into the Black Hills in search of gold, setting off a summer of battles, in 1876, in which Crazy Horse and his warriors helped win dramatic victories at both Rosebud and the Little Bighorn.

But the larger war was already lost. To survive, Red Cloud and Spotted Elk moved their people onto government reservations; Sitting Bull fled to Canada. In 1877, after a hard, hungry winter, Crazy Horse led nine hundred of his followers to a reservation near Fort Robinson, in Nebraska, and surrendered his weapons. Five months later, he was arrested, possibly misunderstood to have said something threatening, and fatally stabbed in the back by a military policeman. He was only about thirty-seven years old, yet he had seen the world of his childhood—a powerful and independent people living amid teeming herds of buffalo—all but disappear.

That same year, the United States reneged on the 1868 treaty for the second time, officially and unilaterally claiming the Black Hills. More and more Native Americans, struggling to survive on the denuded plains, moved to reservations. In 1890, hundreds of Lakota, mostly women and children, were killed by the Army near a creek called Wounded Knee—where Crazy Horse’s parents were said to have buried his body—as they travelled to the town of Pine Ridge. Twenty of the soldiers involved received the Medal of Honor for their actions. Years later, the holy man Black Elk said, “I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there.”

In 1975, the U.S. Court of Federal Claims wrote, of the theft of the Black Hills, “A more ripe and rank case of dishonorable dealings will never, in all probability, be found in our history.” In 1980, the Supreme Court agreed, ruling that the Sioux should receive compensation for their lost land. The tribes replied that what they wanted was the hills themselves; taking money for something sacred was unimaginable. The funds ordered by the Supreme Court went into a trust, whose value today, with accrued interest, exceeds $1.3 billion. It remains untouched.

On a bright June day, the parking lot of the Crazy Horse Memorial was packed with cars and R.V.s, their license plates—California, Missouri, Florida, Vermont—advertising the great American road trip. The front door of the visitors’ center, like the brochures handed out at the gate, was emblazoned with the memorial’s slogan: “Never Forget Your Dreams” —Korczyk Ziolkowski. On an outdoor patio, beside a scale model of Ziolkowski’s planned sculpture, tourists took their own version of a popular photo: the idealized image in front, and the unfinished reality in the distance behind it.

The memorial boasts that it holds,
in the three wings of its Indian Museum of North America®, a collection of eleven thousand Native artifacts. There is art and clothing and jewelry, and a tepee where mannequins gather around a fake fire. A young boy, perhaps nine years old, bounced through the exhibit, shouting to his mother, “Are all the Indians dead? Did we kill all of them? I! Do! Not! Know! Anything! About! Indians!”

Inside a theatre, people watched a film on the history of the carving, which included glowing testimonials from Native people and a biography of Henry Standing Bear. The film quoted his letter to Ziolkowski about wanting to show that the red man had heroes, but it omitted a letter in which he wrote that “this is to be entirely an Indian project under my direction.” (Standing Bear died five years after the memorial’s inauguration.)

The previous version of the film, which was updated last summer, devoted fifteen and a half of its twenty minutes to the Ziolkowski family and to the difficulty of the carving process. It featured only one Lakota speaker and surprisingly little information about Crazy Horse himself. The film also informed visitors that Crazy Horse died and Korczak Ziolkowski was born on the same date, September 6th, and that as a result “many Native Americans believe this is an omen that Korczak was destined to carve Crazy Horse.” In the press, the family often added, as Jadwiga Ziolkowski told me in June and Ruth told the Chicago Tribune in 2004, that “the Indians believe Crazy Horse’s spirit roamed until it found a suitable host—and that was Korczak.”

However, the historical consensus is that Crazy Horse died on September 5th, not the sixth. And I didn’t meet any Lakota who believed that the carving was predestined. Lula Red Cloud, a seventy-three-year-old descendant of Crazy Horse’s contemporary Red Cloud, supports the memorial and has worked there for twenty-three years. When I asked her what she thought of the supposed coincidence of dates, she laughed. “If I was born close to Halloween, am I destined to be a witch?” she said. Tatewin Means told me, “The memorial’s on stolen land. Of course they have to find ways to justify it.” Every year, the memorial celebrates September 6th with what it calls the Crazy Horse and Korczak Night Blast.

An announcement over the P.A. system alerted visitors that a renowned hoop dancer named Starr Chief Eagle would be giving a demonstration. As people gathered, Chief Eagle introduced herself in Lakota, then asked the crowd, “What language was I speaking?” When someone yelled out, “Indian!,” she responded, with a patient smile, that there are hundreds of Native languages: “We have a living, breathing culture. We’re not stuck in time.” Later, Chief Eagle, who has been performing at the memorial for six years, told me that she’s grateful that the place provides a platform to push back against stereotypes. “People can come to see us as human, not as fictional characters or past-tense people,” she said.

In a corner of the room was a pile of rocks—pieces blown from the sacred mountain—that visitors were encouraged to take home with them, for an additional donation, as souvenirs. The ceiling was hung with dozens of flags from tribal nations around the country, creating an impression of support for the memorial. Most of the flags were collected as a personal hobby by Donovin Sprague, a Minicoujou Lakota historian who is a direct descendant of Crazy Horse’s uncle Hump, and who was employed at the memorial as the director of the Native American Educational and Cultural Center®, from 1996 to 2010. “I thought that, culturally and historically, they could use the help,” he told me. But, during his time at the memorial, Sprague sometimes felt like a token presence—the organization had no other high-level Native employees—to give the impression that the memorial was connected to the modern Lakota tribes. “The tourists, they say, ‘This money is going to help your people,’” he said. “Everybody that comes up there thinks they’re on the reservation.”

Visitors to the memorial are assured that their contributions support both the museum and something called the Indian University of North America®. Despite its impressive name, the university is currently a summer program, through which about three dozen students from tribal nations earn up to twelve hours of college credit each year. They also pay a fee for their room and board and spend twenty hours a week doing a “paid internship” at the memorial—working at the gift shop, the restaurants, or the information desk.

Though the federal government twice offered Korczak Ziolkowski millions of dollars to fund the memorial, he decided to rely on private donations, and retained control of the project. Some of the donations have turned out to be in the millions of dollars. In fiscal year 2018, the Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation brought in $12.5 million from admissions and donations, and reported seventy-seven million dollars in net assets. These publicly reported numbers do not count the

“Are you sure you don’t want it? Eleven doughnuts is pretty much all my diet can handle.”
income earned through Korczak’s Heritage, Inc., a for-profit organization that runs the gift shop, the restaurant, the snack bar, and the bus to the sculpture.

To Sprague, who grew up on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, misdirection about whom the memorial benefitted seemed especially purposeful when donors visited. “If there was money coming,” he said, “I was at the table, and Ruth was, like, ‘Donovin, where did you grow up?’ It was just part of my job.” (Ruth Ziolkowski died in 2014.) “Donors were thinking they’re helping in some way,” he said. “They weren’t.”

On Pine Ridge and in Rapid City, I heard a number of Lakota say that the memorial has become a tribute not to Crazy Horse but to Ziolkowski and his family; no verified photographs of Crazy Horse exist, leading to persistent rumors that the sculpture’s face was modelled on Korczak himself. People told me repeatedly that the reason the carving has taken so long is that stretching it out conveniently keeps the dollars flowing; some simply gave a meaningful look and rubbed their fingers together. In 2003, Seth Big Crow, then a spokesperson for Crazy Horse’s living relatives, gave an interview to the Voice of America, and questioned whether the sculpture’s commission had given the Ziolkowskis a “free hand to try to take over the name and make money off it as long as they’re alive.” Jim Bradford, a Native who served in the South Dakota State Senate and worked at the memorial for many years, tearing tickets or taking money at the entry gate, described himself as a friend of the Ziolkowski family and told me that he’d sought advice from other tribal members about what he should say to me. “It kind of felt like it started out as a dedication to the Native American people,” he said. “But I think now it’s a business first. All of a sudden, one non-Indian family has become millionaires off our people.”

In 2008, Sprague, who had long lobbied for the memorial to use the more widely accepted death date for Crazy Horse, again found himself at odds with the memorial. The museum had acquired a metal knife that it believed had belonged to Crazy Horse. Sprague argued that details of the craftsmanship suggested that the knife was made well after Crazy Horse’s death. He aired his concerns to the Rapid City Journal, and was summoned to a meeting at the memorial. “All it was was to pressure me about changing my story about that knife,” he told me. About a year and a half later, he was fired. (Jadwiga Ziolkowski said that she couldn’t comment on personnel matters.)

When I met Don Red Thunder, a descendant of Crazy Horse, at his house, on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, he retrieved a cardboard box from a bedroom. Inside, wrapped in cloth and covered in sage, were knives made from buffalo shoulder bone. Each was labelled: “Sitting Bull,” “Touch the Clouds,” “Little Crow,” “High Back Bone,” and, finally, “Crazy Horse.” They had, he claimed, been repatriated to the family from the Smithsonian. “That’s how we know that knife up at Crazy Horse Memorial isn’t his,” he said. (The Smithsonian was not able to locate any records of this transaction.)

The memorial’s knife remains on display, next to a thirty-eight-page binder of documents asserting its provenance. Ziolkowski told me that she’s confident it is authentic. She also said, “Sometimes there’s nothing wrong with just believing. You don’t have to have every ‘t’ crossed and every ‘i’ dotted.”

To non-Natives, the name Crazy Horse may now be more widely associated with a particular kind of nostalgia for an imagined history of the Wild West than with the real man who bore it. “In the United States,” a judge noted in a 2016 opinion in a case involving a dispute between a strip club and a consulting company, both named Crazy Horse, “individuals and corporations have used the ‘Crazy Horse’ brand for motorcycle gear, whiskey, rifles, and, of course, strip and erotic dance clubs. Since at least the 1970s, Crazy Horse nightclubs have opened everywhere from Anchorage, Alaska to Pompano Beach, Florida.” In 2003, a liquor company resolved an eight-year dispute over its Crazy Horse Malt Liquor (Crazy Horse the person deplored alcohol and its effect on tribes) by offering a public apology, plus blankets, horses, tobacco, and braided sweetgrass.

When I asked Jadwiga Ziolkowski about the concern that outsiders were profiting from Crazy Horse’s image, she replied, “We are very conscious of that,” and then continued, “And we have the image of Crazy Horse copyrighted, so it can’t be sold by anyone but us.” This, she explained, was a matter of protecting his legacy; the memorial would not
permit, for example, a Crazy Horse laundromat. What if the laundromat used the name but not the image of the sculpture? I asked. “It would be a discussion,” she replied. What if the laundromat owner was Lakota? “It would still be a discussion.” When there was interest in putting the Crazy Horse sculpture on the South Dakota state quarter, the memorial said no, because doing so would have put the image in the public domain. Ziolkowski added that she was used to the controversy that the sculpture provokes among some of her Lakota neighbors. “It’s America,” she said. “Everybody has a right to an opinion.”

On the Pine Ridge Reservation, the site of the killings at Wounded Knee is marked by a ramshackle sign; a piece of wood bearing the word “massacre” is nailed over the original description, which was “battle.” Pine Ridge is a beautiful place, rolling prairie under dramatic skies. As one local man, Emerald Elk, described it to me, “The hills look like they keep running on forever, especially the grass on a windy day.” The reservation is also very poor. Larry Swalley, an advocate for abused children, told me that kids in Pine Ridge are experiencing “a state of emergency,” and that it’s not uncommon for three or four or even five families to have to share a trailer. When I visited Darla Black, the vice-president of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, she showed me several foot-high stacks of papers: requests for help paying for electricity and propane to get through the winter. People kept stopping by her office to pick up diapers and what she called “sack lunches,” meals made up of whatever food gets donated; that day, the lunch was Honey Nut Chex Mix, brownies, and gummy bears. “I think they could do more for us,” she said, of the memorial. Though there are exhibits on the reservation, few tourists make the trip; on the day I was there, the visitors’ center was empty.

Even among the Lakota, the question of who can speak for Crazy Horse is fraught. Crazy Horse had no surviving children, but a family tree used in one court case identified about three thousand living relatives, and a judge appointed three administrators of the estate; one of them, Floyd Clown, has argued in an ongoing case that the other claims of lineage are illegitimate, and that his branch of the family should be the sole administrator. Clown is convinced that, once the legal questions are settled, Crazy Horse’s family will be owed the profits that have been made on any products or by any companies using their ancestor’s name—a sum that he estimates to be in the billions of dollars. (“I would probably buy two packs of cigarettes instead of one!” he said, laughing.) He also expects the family to gain title to nearly nine million acres that they believe were promised to Crazy Horse by the U.S. government, including the land where the memorial is being built. “Maybe we’ll let them stay, maybe, to keep working,” Clown said. When I expressed doubt that this would come to pass, Clown laughed. “Hey!” he said, with a confidence that seemed strangely unweighted by history. “It’s their laws.”

One night last June, downtown Pine Ridge hosted its own memorial to Crazy Horse: the culmination of an annual tradition in which more than two hundred riders spend four days travelling on horseback from Fort Robinson, where Crazy Horse died, to the memorial. (“Crazy Horse rode in there, and he never got to ride out,” the event’s founder explained. “We’re going to ride out of there for him.”) Bryan Brewer, a former president of the Oglala Lakota Nation, told me that his brother once went to the memorial to ask for financial support for the ride. “We sent him all the way up there,” he said. “They gave us twenty-five dollars.”

Hours before the riders were expected, the streets and the powwow grounds were already packed with spectators on folding chairs and truck tailgates. As the crowd waited, the sky in the west, over the Black Hills, turned golden. Finally, in the blue light of dusk, the riders arrived. The onlookers rose to their feet, cheering wildly, as a stream of grinning, hollering, or serious-faced young people cantered past. As always, at the front of the procession was a simple, profound tribute to Crazy Horse: a single horse without a rider.

So much of the American story—as it actually happened, but also as it is told, and altered, and forgotten, and, eventually, repeated—feels squeezed into the vast contradiction that is the modern Black Hills. Here, sites of theft and genocide have become monuments to patriotism, a symbol of resistance has become a source of revenue, and old stories of broken promises and appropriation recur. A complicated history becomes a cheery tourist attraction. The face of the past comes to look like the faces of those who memorialize it.

Every night during the summer tourist season, the Crazy Horse Memorial hosts an evening program, called “Legends in Light®.” It lasts twenty-five minutes and features brightly colored animations, projected by lasers onto the side of Thunderbolt Mountain. Here, too, the crowd gathered early and waited as the sky grew dim; finally, with an echoing soundtrack, the show began.

It was difficult to keep up with the flashing images: tepees, a feather, an Oglala flag, Korczak Ziolkowski building a cabin, pictures of famous Native leaders, from Geronimo to Quanah Parker. Sequoyah, the Cherokee scholar, appeared, and a leaping orca, and an air-traffic controller. “All my life, to carve a mountain to a race of people that once lived here?” Ziolkowski’s voice boomed. “What an honor.” The images flew by, free of context or explanation. A white hand shook a red hand, the soldiers at Iwo Jima raised their flag, the Statue of Liberty raised her torch, and the space shuttle transformed into an eagle. The crowd swayed in their seats, and the country singer Lee Greenwood’s voice rang over the half-carved mountain. “Cause the flag still stands for freedom,” he sang, “and they can’t take that away.”

The last word went to Korczak Ziolkowski, who, in a recording, delivered a grand but bewildering quote that visitors to the memorial encounter many times. “When the legends die,” he thundered, “the dreams end. When the dreams end, there is no more greatness.”

As the sound faded, the lasers shifted one final time. For a few minutes, a glowing version of Ziolkowski’s vision was complete, at last, on the mountainside, and Crazy Horse’s hair flew behind him. The stars were bright. Cameras were held aloft. And then it was time to leave through the gift shop.
I
n a clearing in rural Somalia, a jihadi commander sat in a white plastic chair, stroking a dik-dik, an antelope the size of a cat. His men escorted two British journalists into the clearing and sat them under an acacia tree. The commander, who had offered safe passage and a rare interview, released the dik-dik, which scuttled off into the bush.

Dik-diks are hard to catch but easy to shoot, and for this reason one of the journalists, Jonathan Ledgard, who was the East Africa correspondent for The Economist, later described the battle against these jihadis, known as the Shabaab, as “the dik-dik war.” The commander began a lecture on the supremacy and fairness of Islamic law, jabbing his finger at the sky. But Ledgard barely noticed; he was looking at the array of mobile phones that the commander had laid out in front of him. It was 2009; the digital world was becoming enmeshed with the physical world, accessible in a place where the environment could hardly sustain human life. “You could receive money through a wire transfer, but you could not keep your child alive,” Ledgard later wrote. He realized that nothing the man had to say—nothing that anyone had to say about the conflict—was as essential to understanding the transformation under way in the region as the fact that the phones had perfect reception.

For fifteen years, Ledgard had been reporting on war and disaster in Latin America, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Africa, while writing novels to settle his mind. He carried two notebooks—red for his reporting notes, blue for thoughts and observations to use in fiction. With each journalistic assignment he grew more interested in the contents of the blue notebooks, and less sure that reporting on the world’s horrors did anything to change them. “I had been looking at the world as if it were cracks in a pavement,” Ledgard told me. “But it’s not about the individual cracks, it’s about the patterns and the networks,” the scale of which eluded the dispatch format.

The world was undergoing an accelerating convergence of technological and environmental trends—you could feel it in Nairobi, Kenya, where Ledgard lived. A little more than a century earlier, the city hadn’t existed; now it had a population of millions, doubling in size every generation, and was home to perhaps the largest urban slum in Africa. “The biggest risk for Africa is the unmet expectations of its youth,” Ledgard wrote, years later. At least fifty per cent of the continent was less than twenty years old. It was the best-educated generation in African history, digitally connected to the rest of the planet, yet the World Bank estimated that seventy-five per cent of sub-Saharan youths would be unable to find a salaried job in the coming years. “They will be easily knocked flat by mishaps or illnesses,” Ledgard continued, and would be prone to recruitment into insurgencies and terrorist groups. It was no coincidence, he thought, that the jihad was most active in the areas already being ravaged by oil extraction and climate change.

New technologies were lifting a nascent class of entrepreneurs and activists, but also enabling predatory regimes to crush them. “Africa rising” was the phrase often heard at conferences in Geneva and New York; “Africa wakening” was Ledgard’s view. Decades of humanitarian aid had not slowed the proliferation of refugee camps, or the surge of migrations across the desert and the sea. Meanwhile, the pace of human development was destroying the natural world faster than scientists could catalogue its systems, much less understand how they fit together. “You don’t have to be a C.I.A. analyst to realize that it doesn’t add up,” he said.

Ledgard saw a brief window for radical changes in sustainability and
years, in 2012 Ledgard began to refashion himself as both an evangelist of radical thinking and a prophet of specific doom.
governance—a couple of decades, perhaps. After that, it seemed clear that no previous conflict or migration would compare to the hell to come. Feedback loops would be set in motion that would transform the earth into an irradiated planet. Already, humans are expected to force more than a million species into extinction, and, by 2050, to fill the oceans with a greater mass of plastic than there is of fish. In interviews, Ledgard started pressing politicians, consultants, businessmen—anyone with power—to devise strategies for a more equitable, sustainable future. “But I just wasn’t getting any answers,” he told me.

The most exciting thinking about the near future was taking place on the fringes of the tech sector, among people who worked on networks and artificial intelligence. “There is no room for techn-utopianism in our bare-fisted future,” Ledgard wrote. But if there were a way to counter the scale and pace of human depredations, he thought, it would come out of the laboratories and companies whose creations were enabling it.

In 2012, Ledgard quit his job, moved to Switzerland, and began a fellowship at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, one of Europe’s best research institutes. “It was very important to me to be in an almost autistically scientific environment,” he said—not “hanging around with political scientists or economists or anthropologists and having the usual conversations, learning nothing.” He pinned photographs of a Nokia 1100 and a Kalashnikov next to his desk, as reminders of why he was there.

For the first two years, Ledgard sat through hundreds of lectures by theoretical physicists, computer scientists, mathematicians, and engineers, and forced himself to read abstracts of scientific and philosophical papers on subjects that he could barely grasp. “My brain started moving in these completely different and much richer directions,” he said, sparking “a series of progressive realizations that the world that I thought I understood is not at all the world as it is.”

In time, Ledgard refashioned himself as both an evangelist of radical thinking and a prophet of specific doom. He won’t tell you that the world is ending; he’ll just present the charts that show you how. “The only possible thing to do is to go in an imaginative direction,” he told me. “Imagination at scale is our only recourse.” This approach has led him into collaborations with an array of famous partners—the British architect Norman Foster, the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson—on projects that range from practical and humanitarian to fanciful and abstract. The world, according to Ledgard and his collaborators, might stand a chance if cargo drones delivered goods in the roadless areas of East Africa; if sentient robots were curious about the natural world; if people could immerse themselves in the sights and sounds of the deepest parts of the ocean; if plants and animals could pay people for the cost of their preservation. “I’m not sure if this is a real project or I’m trying to write a novel in the natural world,” Ledgard told me, referring to the last of these ideas.

Ledgard knows how fantastical his projects can sound. “You have to acknowledge that the probability of success is vanishingly small,” he said. “But if just one of these ideas came off in the next twenty years, in some form, and in a really significant way—and it improved the lives of poor people, or helped save other life-forms from extinction—then that would be really worth your time.” He added, “My main point is to move the conversation in a more imaginative direction.”

“You get visionaries, you get dreamers, but Jonathan is also a realist, and intensely practical,” Norman Foster told me. “Perhaps that’s why there has been so much common ground between us. In the end, architecture is projecting imagination to realize a tangible project.” Each of Ledgard’s projects appears to be animated by a single question: What if human greed could be harnessed as a kind of natural resource, and redirected to mitigate its own effects?

Ledgard was born in the Shetland Islands, off Scotland, in 1968. His father was a military chaplain, and, when Ledgard was four, the family moved to a base in Germany. But he spent his teenage summers in the Shetlands, and came to know a group of retired whalers there. They would “sail to Antarctica, South Georgia, Montevideo, San Francisco, Cape Town, Valparaiso,” he recalled. “And then they’d come back. They were amazing, in that they had seen the world, but also they were so comfortable with not seeing the world. In a way, they were global citizens before globalization kicked into the jetliner age.” Ever since, he said, “I’ve always been someone who just longs to be everywhere and nowhere.”

Somewhere between boarding school in London and journalism everywhere else, he lost his Scottish accent. He is married to a Czech diplomat named Marta Anna. Avvy, their Britanny spaniel, responds to commands in English, French, and Czech. So does their fourteen-year-old son, Hamish, who has attended schools in Nairobi, Lausanne, and Prague, and recently accompanied his father on
a trip to Papua New Guinea, to look at dugong, vegetarian sea cows. (Ledgard has also helped bring up Marta Anna’s three children from a previous marriage.)

One day in Lausanne, it occurred to Ledgard that “we have no word to describe the volumetric space in the sky. What we see is what is on it, like stage scenery.” In other words, “the sky above Sudan is stacked with virtual Sudans”—vast, empty, unused. Then came an epiphany: just as the arrival of mobile- phone networks had allowed Africa to avoid constructing expensive landlines, there might be a way to use this empty space to bypass the continent’s paltry system of roads.

Most roads in Africa were built by colonial powers, for the extraction of natural resources, and so they connect villages to capitals, and capitals to ports, and hardly take into account the desire of a community to trade over the next hill. Only half of the population live within a mile of a functional road. Deliveries of blood to rural health centers are slow and unreliable; refrigerated medicines go bad before they arrive.

An answer, Ledgard thought, was drones. Commercial drones can’t carry payloads of more than a few pounds, but that will soon change. Ledgard worried more about designing the infrastructure for what he calls droneports, from which cargo drones could one day be charged, loaded, launched, and repaired. A disconnected fax machine is useless; as a node on a larger network of fax machines, however, it achieves something close to magic. “It’s got to work in a way that ordinary people can get some meaningful value from it in their own lives,” he said.

“One thing to kill early on is this Silicon Valley idea of disruption,” Ledgard went on. “I don’t want to disrupt everything. I just want to add new solutions. You need motorbikes. You need lorries. You need boats, you need cars, you need trains, you need planes. But maybe a fleet of flying robots is a good idea as well.”

Ledgard started mapping out fifty-mile routes that would connect populated but remote areas in Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania. (He estimated fifty miles as the distance that a cargo drone could reliably travel on a single charge.) The droneports would begin operating in three stages, in the next decade. The first would provide deliveries of small quantities of blood, vaccines, and other urgent medicines. In stage two, droneports would make up a courier system to transport crucial documents and goods between government offices, mines, oil-and-gas installations, ranches, and conservancies. Then commercial droneports would begin to emerge, connecting industrial zones to city centers. From this, eventually, local economies could spring to life. “Whenever you have impecunious young people ubiquitously connected to the internet, e-commerce is desperate to happen,” Ledgard wrote in a concept manifesto.

To design the droneports, Ledgard reached out to Norman Foster, whom he had profiled for The Economist, and whose work includes the Apple Park, in Cupertino, and the Beijing airport. Foster is an accomplished pilot, and had been flying drones with his adolescent son in Central Park. “You’ve designed the world’s largest airports,” Ledgard said to him, in 2013. “Want to design the smallest?”

The first droneport had to be uncomplicated and inexpensive, constructed with local materials, and able to withstand wild fluctuations between the rainy seasons and the dry. Foster also wanted it to be beautiful. He sketched an arched vault—strong, elegant, easily replicated. The renderings included a health clinic, a fabrication shop, a post office, a trading hub, and a garage for manufacturing and repairing drones, to insure that the droneport would “become part of local community life,” Foster wrote, in a design pitch for African governments, released through his charitable foundation.

Foster began lecturing on the droneport concept at universities all over the world, and constructed a prototype at the Venice Biennale. Meanwhile, Ledgard returned to Central and East Africa, to solicit advice from politicians, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, and local traders. One night, in northern Kenya, he tried to explain the concept to a Samburu elder. At first, the man struggled to conceive of an autonomous flying robot. But, after a few minutes, he leaned back and smiled, and said, “I see! You want to put my donkey in the sky.” Exactly, Ledgard replied. “The qualities of a donkey are similar to what is required for a cargo drone: surefooted, dependable, intelligent, able to deal with dust and heat; cheap, uncomplaining.”

The adoption of Ledgard’s vision would require the backing of many of the same government officials who, in the aftermath of colonialism, had enriched themselves but failed to build functional roads. And so, for reasons that he recalled as “pragmatic, really, and cynical,” he decided to start with Rwanda.

“It’s that I knew the President quite well,” he said—another benefit of his journalistic past. Paul Kagame, whose band of rebel soldiers brought an end to the Rwandan genocide, became the country’s President in 2000. Since then, he has distinguished himself in the region for his future-minded approach, with strong health and education sectors, and more women than men in the legislature. These policies have seduced international organizations and brought investors to Rwanda, even as his regime has detained street children and other “undesirables,” and his political opponents have wound up in prison or dead. In 2014, at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Ledgard suggested to Kagame that Rwanda could transform the perception of drones from that of flying robots that deliver missiles to one of flying robots that deliver lifesaving materials. Kagame embraced the idea, and two years later a Silicon Valley startup called Zipline began flying blood to health facilities in remote areas, as part of a governmental fleet.

For Ledgard, the result was mixed; a leader had acted on his idea, but he found it troubling that Zipline operated under Kagame’s authority. “It needs to be a civilian project, at its core,” Ledgard told me. In nearby countries, young people came up with new applications for drone mapping and photography, but Ledgard struggled to get African leaders to adopt his droneport concept. “I’m not a politician or a regulator, and I’m not an engineer or an entrepreneur,” he said. “It’s up to them to test it in the real world, and scale it—if it makes sense.”

Another obstacle lay in opening up
B E F O R E  W I N T E R

I imagine there is a place of deep rest—not in the resting but after, when the body has forgotten the weight of fatigue or of its many betrayals—how unfair that once I thought it clever to blame my body for the wounds in me: the ankle bulbous and aching, the heaviness in the thigh, and the fat, the encroachment of flesh. It is hard to believe that there are those who do not know that it is possible to let things go, to then see the expansion of flesh—it is so easy, and that knowing is a pathology. What is unknown to me is the clear day of rest—

I carry a brain of crushed paper, everything unfolds as if by magic, every spot of understanding is a miracle, I cannot take any credit for the revelations, they come and go as easily as the wind.

You must know that this is a preamble to an epiphany I will record—

the late-morning light of October, the damp soiled back yard, the verdant green lawn, the bright elegance of leaves strewn over it all, turning nonchalantly in the wind, and the Nebraska sky blue as a kind of watery ease, a comfort, it is all I can say, the kind

haled deeply, and said, “This was always the dream: to connect Lake Victoria.” The largest freshwater body in Africa, Lake Victoria has more than four thousand miles of jagged shoreline, belonging to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Some thirty million people live in settlements on the periphery, in structures ranging from glass skyscrapers, in Kampala, to mud huts, on islands where there is no electricity. The lake is twice the size of Belgium, but it is overfished and filled with deadly parasites.

That night, on the lawn of a lakeside resort, Ledgard met with Edward Anderson, a senior technology and development specialist at the World Bank. In 2014, Anderson recalled, he had noticed “an explosion in the variety and capability of small drones,” at a time when most countries in Africa had no regulations. “It was a bit of a Wild West scenario.”

“Moving blood, moving medicine—it’s a good start,” Ledgard said. “But the scaling is really going to kick into gear when it becomes cheap enough to move around everyday things.” Battery technology hasn’t advanced as quickly as Ledgard had thought it would, when he wrote his manifesto; five years later, cargo drones lack the power-to-weight ratio required to lift heavy loads.

Anderson said that he’d just met a livestock geneticist who wanted to use drones to transport “elite semen” to cattle farms in remote areas in Kenya. “Yes, he’s all about artificial intelligence for artificial insemination,” Ledgard replied.

“In the way that the Internet was lifted by porn, cargo drones will be lifted by khat,” the stimulant leaf that’s ubiquitous in parts of Africa and the Middle East.

Anderson raised a glass of beer and slumped in his chair. He had first sought out Ledgard in 2016, “to get his insight, advice, and, ideally, blessing on how to revive the Flying Donkey Challenge,” he said. Now, after years of coordinating with Tanzanian officials, Anderson and his colleagues had organized the Lake Victoria Challenge, the world’s first drone-infrastructure conference. Part lecture series, part sales pitch, it would bring together entrepreneurs and experts in development, regulation, governance, security, infrastructure, and technology from across Africa, as well as from Silicon Valley. Ledgard, its guiding spirit, would deliver the keynote address. Foreign drone companies would
one knows, even standing there waiting for the dog to squat; one that I will remember for years but will never have the language to speak of—one of those precious insignificances that we collect and hoard. The moment lasts ten breaths, and in that silence I imagine that I can see spirits, I can know myself, and I will not fear the betrayals of body and love and earth, and the machinations of self-made emperors and pontificates. It will be winter soon. I know my body is collecting water in its nether regions, the weight of the hibernating mammal, storing everything in drowsy, slow-moving preservation. I mean I am losing myself to the shelter we build to beat back sorrow and the weight of our fears. I have covered thousands of miles in a few days, and I feel my parts flaking off, a shedding of yellow pieces covering the turning earth, and I am helpless to this soft disappearing that some call sleep. I will stretch out and breathe.

—Kwame Dawes

run their wares through a gate of trials, carrying objects between the mainland and nearby islands, in competition for contracts. “Now that it’s entering the real world, I think there are better people than me to push it to the next level,” Ledgard told me. The full event was planned for the following year; a rehearsal would begin at dawn.

Late breakfast on a patio at the Hotel Tilapia, a few feet from the lake. Suddenly, there was a rush of air, and a hawk swooped down and snatched a crêpe off my plate. A few minutes later, another raptor relieved my fork of some bacon, halfway to my mouth, and flung scrambled eggs onto my pants. The assault brought sympathetic laughter from a group of Rwandan Civil Aviation Authority officials sitting nearby. Maréchal Gasana, an elegantly dressed regulations officer, gestured toward an empty chair. After Ledgard’s meeting with Kagame, Gasana and his colleagues had drafted the first commercial-drone regulations on the continent, a model for other countries looking to “leapfrog into the future,” as he put it.

“It was very complicated, because we have so many mountains,” Gasana told me. “We have to make sure that drones are flying not just at the right altitude but in relation to the shape of the ground.” Today, two drone companies are operational in Rwanda—Zipline, for medical deliveries, and Charis, a domestic company, for surveying land and tracking crop yields. “The biggest challenge that we are facing is scalability,” Gasana continued. “We’ve seen all the benefits, but the question is, how can we manage thirty or fifty times as many operations?”

On the lawn of the Malaika, Mwanza’s grandest hotel, European and American drone manufacturers showed off their concept vehicles. In Rwanda, Zipline drones deliver blood packs, medicine, and vaccines as a one-way service; launched from a motorized slingshot, they travel to remote health facilities, drop a cardboard box tethered to a tiny parachute, and return to the launch area, where they are brought down with a wire trap. Their inability to land means that doctors at remote health centers cannot send back lab samples or biopsies. At the Malaika, the prototypes were largely V.T.O.L. drones—vertical takeoff and landing. Perhaps the most arresting one was the Wingcopter 178, a German contraption with a six-foot wingspan and a tilt-rotor mechanism that can transition between vertical takeoff and fixed-wing flight. Ansgar Kadura, a founder and the chief operating officer of Wingcopter, told me, “We’ve already been here in Mwanza for six months,” conducting test flights to an island called Ukerewe. By ferry and motorcycle, delivery from Mwanza to Ukerewe, around the perimeter of the lake, takes between four and six hours. The Wingcopter costs seventy-five thousand dollars, but it can transport a payload of up to thirteen pounds across the water in about forty minutes, soaring along a preprogrammed flight path, before rotating the propellers and lowering itself to the ground.

Kadura and members of the other drone teams had travelled to Mwanza in part to compete in a race from the Malaika to Juma, a small island without electricity about ten miles west. But the race was cancelled, because the hardware for the traffic-management system had been lost in transit from Amsterdam, and without it the Tanzanian authorities wouldn’t allow drones to fly beyond the line of sight. The drone operators stood next to some of the most advanced nonmilitary aircraft on earth, while, at Mwanza’s international airport, which had no radar system, air-traffic controllers peered out of a second-floor window to track incoming planes.

By now, it had become apparent that the legacy of colonialism affected every step of this process. Representatives of Western companies, N.G.O.s, and U.N. agencies—wary of criticizing African leaders in an environment imbued with historical exploitation and contemporary guilt—spoke of the absence of roads and other systems in East Africa as if the situation were in no way the responsibility of the officials in the room. Broken roads, no roads, sinking ferries, urban flooding, cholera; drones could photograph the problem, map it, deliver small items—as long as the governments didn’t object.

A Swiss construction expert noted, with an exasperated shrug, “The supply chain for these drones is controlled by fancy Western companies, toting around carbon-fibre frames. And the international community will make them rich,” pouring aid and development funds into flying machines that, for all their advantages,
could put motorcycle deliverymen out of business. He added that only Ledgard and Foster’s drone concept was exempt from this critique, because it was conceived as an organic network, for locals to use as they saw fit. “The last thing you want to do is disrupt the local motorcycle-delivery guy, picking up from the fixed droneport location and delivering on the last mile,” Ledgard said. “But the middle mile—when you want to get over a mountain or a lake—that’s where it can get very exciting.”

Maréchal Gasana, the Rwandan regulatory official, also had cost in mind. “In Italy, they have roads that are two thousand years old, built by the Romans, but we are trying to meet the needs of a population that has never had anything,” he said. “So if I am given the option of building one kilometre of road that will last two thousand years, or taking the Chinese contract that will build a thousand kilometres of road that will last five years, plus two hospitals, that’s the offer we are going to take.”

A hawk stole another tourist’s breakfast. Gasana was reminded of a video he had seen, in which a carbon-fibre V.T.O.L. drone falls out of the sky. “It broke my heart,” he said. “I was thinking of it in terms of houses. In my village—seventy-five thousand dollars? That’s two houses.”

The next morning, the World Bank rented both of the speedboats in Mwanza to take a couple of dozen Lake Victoria Challenge participants, who had signed up for the conference’s “Infrastructure Track,” to Juma Island. Guided by Ledgard, the group set out to identify a good location for a droneport, and to evaluate how it might contribute to the economy, which relies mostly on fishing. I sat in the back, in a growing puddle, with the Swiss construction expert and Steve Kemp, the livestock geneticist. “Artificial insemination is ludicrously complex, cumbersome work!” Kemp shouted, above the roar of the engines. “If you want to do an insemination well, you’ve only got a few hours!”

The boats pulled up to Juma’s eastern shore, where L.V.C. representatives had set up fences and chairs and awnings. Islanders stood at the periphery. One of them held up a carp by its gills, and smiled, as visitors snapped photos with their phones. Ledgard, who had visited the island a year earlier, asked participants to be “very gentle and respectful of everyone on the island,” but it seemed an inherent violation for such a large delegation of mostly white strangers to wander around.

We set off through a lush grove of banana trees, past goats and chickens, into a village of mud-and-concrete huts, where Ledgard stepped into a tiny shop selling batteries, toiletries, snacks, and cheap plastic goods from China. With the help of Freddie Mbuya, a Tanzanian entrepreneur who helped organize the L.V.C., Ledgard started interviewing the shopkeeper, who was twenty years old. After several minutes, the man became agitated. “What he is saying is being said repeatedly in places all over Tanzania, and I’m sure all over Africa,” Mbuya explained. “You guys came last time and you said that these drones will bring medicine. He hasn’t seen any medicine. Now you’re coming in and saying these drones are going to be bringing other things.” He added that, because we had spent time inside his shop, his neighbors will ask him about the World Bank’s plans for the island, and will assume that he’s been paid. “I think he’s a hundred per cent right—we should be able to tell him why we’re here,” Mbuya continued. “What can he go and tell the islanders?”

“We’re a group who are looking at building a small structure near the school and the clinic,” Ledgard said. “It will take some years. You have to be understanding that this is a new technology. It’s not going to change anyone’s life straightaway, but it can be a useful service.”

The shopkeeper nodded but looked dissatisfied. “It actually makes me extremely uncomfortable as a Tanzanian, because I think he’s asking the right questions,” Mbuya told me later. He used to be a full-time consultant for the World Bank, where he often found himself promising short-term solutions to intractable issues. “If I were someone else, I would be slamming the person in my role, really hard,” Mbuya said.

Back at the staging area, the L.V.C. delegation ate boxed lunches while islanders watched from the other side of the fence. Then we piled into the boats and returned to Mwanza, to compare notes at the Malaika. No one from Juma was present for the discussion about how to connect the island to its own future.

On Juma, Ledgard had learned that fishermen sell a sardine-like fish called dagaa by the bucket, while the middlemen who transport and sell the fish to Mwanza sell them by the kilogram. The fishermen of Juma don’t know the price per kilo, and couldn’t tell him how many kilos were in a bucket, because they didn’t have a scale. “So, obviously, the droneport will need a weigh station,” Ledgard said. “What is going out is, essentially, fish. And what is coming in is cash, spare parts, postal delivery.”

A young Rwandan entrepreneur objected, saying, “If you mentioned all that in the Rwandan context, the government would not allow you to do it. It is against the vision of the country. We are encouraging zero paperwork, zero cash—it’s all mobile money, mobile banking.” He added, “When you are looking at earliest-use cases, you quickly want to run them through the strategic direction that the country has.”

“You’re too Rwandan,” Ledgard replied. “Tanzania does not have a strategic direction.” For Ledgard, the fact that the L.V.C. trial had taken place was itself a miracle. For all its tonal and logistical challenges, he saw it as a potentially transformational event, whose effects might spread throughout the region as participants from neighboring countries returned home. But, months later, the Tanzanian government still hasn’t set aside any land for the construction of a droneport, and has blocked the full L.V.C. event from taking place until at least 2021. “The conversation with Mwanza is off, indefinitely,” Anderson, of the World Bank, told me. “We’re relocating the next phase to Lake Kivu, in Rwanda.”

At the Malaika, the Infrastructure Track group pondered heady questions. “What is the role of architecture?” an American architecture professor asked. “What is the iconicographic identity that we can achieve through some kind of performative structure? What are the values that we can chase?”

“Design is the problem,” another said.
two days later, Ledgard and I left Mwanza for Nairobi, with a brief fuel stop at Kilimanjaro. From there, he would continue to Marseilles, to consult with the theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli on the shape and meaning of time, and then to Prague, where, for the past two years, Ledgard has served as a visiting professor at the Czech Technical University’s Center on Artificial Intelligence. In transit, I reread “Submergence,” Ledgard’s second novel, which was published in 2011. It depicts a love affair between a deep-ocean biologist and a spy, but it’s really Ledgard’s attack on short-sighted politics and an ode to our sickly, fading earth. A favorable review in the Times called it “obsessed with unexplored depths, whether of self, of world conflict or of the ocean.” Kathryn Schulz, writing in New York, called it “the best novel I’ve read so far this year,” and compared Ledgard’s prose to that of John le Carré, Anne Carson, and W. G. Sebald.

In the book, James More, a British intelligence officer who lives in Kenya, is Ledgard the reporter, a man who has “a flaw in him that urged him to catalogue rather than to enjoy,” Ledgard writes. “He was tasking agents to infiltrate mosques in Somalia and along the Swahili coast,” places where you could work out how many people lived in a settlement by the number of plastic bags on the trees. Danielle Flinders, the biologist, is Ledgard today: “She was trying to understand the pullulating life in the dark parts of the planet at a time when, up above, mankind was itself becoming a swarm and setting off in ever more artfully constructed but smaller and more mindless circles.”

James is captured by jihadists in Somalia, and faces execution—but it is Danielle who puts into perspective the fragility of life itself. “We exist only as a film on the water,” she explains. Life on earth began in the deep, and the search for extraterrestrial life continues in the oceans of distant moons. “We’re nature’s brief experiment with self-awareness,” she says. “Any study of the ocean and what lies beneath it should serve notice of how easily the planet might shrug us off.”

Since “Submergence” came out, Ledgard has been working with Olafur Eliasson to broadcast the sights and sounds of the deep ocean in a gallery, to show that “there is another world in our world,” which is vast and fragile, and largely unknown. As we drove through Nairobi, during a layover, Ledgard gestured in the direction of the Great Rift Valley, the site of many of the oldest known human remains. “Early humans walked out of that place seventy thousand, maybe eighty thousand years ago—an incredibly short period of time, compared to microbial life,” he said. Now we’re choking the planet.

According to a United Nations study, humans have “severely altered” two-thirds of the earth’s marine environment. Each decade, we lose ten per cent of the world’s sea-grass meadows and dump some four billion tons of heavy metals, solvents, toxic sludge, and other industrial wastes into the world’s waters. “If this was happening in a science-fiction world we would see it clearly for what it is, but we don’t because it’s happening here and now. It’s obscured by the money someone is making off it,” Danielle says. “If man had a sense of proportion, he would die of shame.”

In Czech, the phrase jdi do Prčice literally means “go to Prčice,” but it is widely understood as an affectionate way of saying “get lost” or “go fuck yourself.” Ledgard, who has a weekend house near Prčice, says he does much of his best thinking on walks in the Czech countryside, and it was on one of his outings, last year, that he had “a eureka moment.” Many of the planet’s biodiversity-rich areas happen to be in cash-poor places. What if endangered species could, in effect, pay local communities for their own protection? Might it be possible to store value in a pear tree in Tajikistan, or in a chimpanzee in Uganda’s Albertine Rift?

Last November, in Prague, he presented this idea at Avast, an artificial-intelligence and cybersecurity firm, before Ondrej Vlcek, the C.E.O., and a team
of computer scientists. “Many species are at risk of local extinction because they have no independent means to change their financial value,” Ledgard explained. The goal, he said, is to “pick a local species that is threatened with extinction, give it some financial agency in the world, and then work out how the value that it holds can be distributed to the local human community.” He named the project Linnaeus, for the Swedish botanist who devised the taxonomic system.

“Why not kill the animal when you’re hungry?” an engineer asked.

“Essentially, what you want is for these communities to start realizing that they have significant, positive financial value from living next to a biodiverse area,” Ledgard replied. “But to do that you would have to provide more value than they’re presently getting from short-term, day-to-day activities, like cutting down trees for charcoal, or killing gorillas for meat. If Linnaeus were implemented, he explained, “very large numbers of humans would give small amounts of money into a mechanism which then apportions it hyperlocally, to species that need it most,” as an endangered population grew in health and number, so, too, would the amount of money distributed to the local human community.

“It’s crazy, but it might work,” an Avast employee said.

“How committed are you, personally, to this?” Vlcek, the C.E.O., asked. “Oh, a hundred per cent!”

“So this is all you’re doing?”

“Well, eighty per cent,” Ledgard replied. “My modus operandi is to think of crazy ideas, and then try to lift them, in a very early stage.”

“A number of crazy ideas? Because this one is crazy enough to keep you busy for many years,” Vlcek said. “What’s in it for you? Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t want to get to 2040, when Elon Musk and his libertarian chums are eating dog food on Mars, and then for them to look back on Earth and see that we’ve lost fifty per cent of our lifeforms,” Ledgard replied. “There’s a significant minority—or maybe a majority—of human beings who are biophilic. They like living things. And that hasn’t been priced correctly.”

A few months later, Ledgard called me to say that he had refined the concept to focus on the promotion of in-
ing—maybe forever—are really fundamental questions, which machine-intelligence engineers are only just beginning to ask themselves,” he said. “What is it to have a body? What is it to have a sense of touch? How are you orientated in space?” Ledgard and Díaz concede the impossibility of the task at hand. “We know something about boars through videos and books, hunters and zoologists,” Díaz said. “But I am like a child—I know nothing about the language of the boars. And then, if we are talking about A.I., we are in prenatal times.”

“We are two humans trying to imagine what is a boar, and what is machine intelligence, and how would they think about each other,” Ledgard said. The theme echoes Ledgard’s first novel, “Giraffe,” from 2006, which is partly written from the perspective of a Kenyan giraffe, which ends up being killed in Czechoslovak captivity during the Soviet era. “We know that what we are doing is stupid and forlorn. But we also know that it’s important and beautiful.”

Díaz objected: “I wouldn’t say stupid, I would say naïve.”

“Naïve—better word,” Ledgard agreed. “It’s this idea that maybe—and weirdly—in 2060 the machine intelligence will look back and say, ‘Oh, this was one of the first very, very clumsy, naïve attempts to think of what I might think about!’”

That night, Ledgard and I drove a half-hour southwest, to a village called Mezou. It was nine o’clock, and Díaz had arranged for a local hunter, a large, middle-aged Czech named Martin, to lead us into the woods.

Martin parked at the edge of a small field, thick with weeds. It was surrounded by forest but close enough to the highway that you could hear the sounds of passing cars. “When we started this project, we were trying to escape the human element,” Ledgard said. “But we’ve come to really appreciate that humans have meshed the entire world. Here is an animal that lives around us. It’s not domestic, but it’s not truly wild, either.” Against the night sky—which showed the lights in Prague—you could make out the black silhouette of a wooden hunting tower.

“There is a group of thirty to forty boar that lives in this patch of forest,” Martin explained. He gestured toward the tower, adding, “I killed one this morning, at seven o’clock.” Then he climbed into his truck and drove off.

Dead leaves and acorns tumbled through the crisp autumn air. Ledgard and Díaz climbed the hunting tower, but after a few minutes Díaz insisted that they leave. “I think we will not see anything, because we are in the spot of the shooter,” he said, and the boar would be mourning Martin’s kill.

Ledgard got down, and began traipsing through the forest, leaving Díaz behind. He came across muddy pits where the boar had foraged for mice and acorns, and parts of trees whose bark had been rubbed off by boar. “Boy, that’s a strong smell,” he said. “Sweat, berries, mice, rotting acorns, shit.”

There was the yellow glint of an eye, roughly forty feet away. A large female boar stared at Ledgard for a few seconds, then turned, snuffling, and darted off. After a few minutes of silence, at least a dozen boar rustled past, very close, hidden amid the darkness and the trees. “If you see them, it’s about you,” Ledgard whispered. “But if you can just smell and hear them it’s about them.”

This was quintessential Ledgard: inquisitive, strange, striving for stillness and invisibility—the better to spend time among aggressive and skittish creatures, and make sense of them to a mostly incurious world. I had come to think of him as a man who probably won’t save the planet but at least has the audacity to try.

Ledgard and I returned to the car close to midnight. We were covered to the ankles with boar droppings. We drove with the windows down, and stopped at a gas station, on the outskirts of Prague, where we took turns blasting our feet with a power washer. “The closer you get, the harder you try to see the boar as a creature, the more you realize that you don’t have the empathy to do so,” Ledgard said, laughing.

In his darkest moments, Ledgard has the “somewhat creepy” fantasy that advances in artificial intelligence may actually serve as a kind of evolutionary correction to the depredations of humanity. The best hope for the natural world might look something like Nick Bostrom’s paper-clip problem, but morally intact: that before we render the earth completely uninhabitable we will create a superintelligent entity that recognizes the value of life itself, and so begins to ruthlessly prioritize the preservation of life in its most essential forms—the microbes, the fungi, the flora, the jellies and salps pulsing in the oceans’ blackest deep. A digital intervention to mitigate the Anthropocene. Another chance for earth, without us.
The mid-July sun at Waialua, on the north shore of Oahu, was already so unforgiving at 9 A.M. that the ice in a cooler of LaCroix near the foot of Constance Wu’s chair had all but melted; an assistant heaped up the few remaining cubes around the cans. It was the first day of principal photography on the movie “I Was a Simple Man,” an intergenerational family drama set partly in nineteen-fifties Hawaii, and Wu was being readied for continuity photos of her character, Grace, an ethnically Chinese woman whose family has lived in Hawaii for generations. Wu wore a floral dress with swirls of turquoise, and a waxy white orchid was about to be pinned behind her ear. When the stylist, a genial man whose beard and burly physique gave him the air of a tropical Santa, imparted a gentle wave to her hair, she yelped and winced repeatedly, convinced that she’d been burned. He assured her that what she felt was just freshly curled strips of hair brushing her skin. Wu kept close watch in the mirror as the makeup artist, a woman with wrist tattoos named Jordann, worked on her face. Eventually, Wu cocked her head, grimaced, and said, “I feel like you are making me look too pretty.”

Wu cast around for an example of what she was hoping for. “Like, you know how Brie Larson looked in ‘Short Term 12’?“ Jordann hadn’t seen the movie. “Elsie Fisher in ‘ Eighth Grade’?“ A sorry shake of the head. Appraising her face once more, Wu said, “I mean, I feel like I’m at a magazine shoot, but I’m not sure I feel like the character.”

Jordann explained that the film’s writer and director, Chris Yogi, had shown her a video of an actress wearing the look he envisaged for Wu’s character. “He’s a guy,“ Wu said, conspiratorially. “He probably liked it because he thought the girl was hot.”

After a while, Yogi wandered over, clutching a cup of coffee. Wu gestured at her face, smooth as the inside of a seashell, and he nodded approvingly just as she said, “Too much, right?“ She pointed to her touched-up brows. “I think it needs to be more natural, don’t you? More like yours, maybe?“ “Mine...“ Yogi said, raising his bushy thickets. Wu giggled. Yogi relented, deadpanning, “O.K., fine, make it like mine.”

Her objective achieved, Wu dragged a moist cloth over her face, revealing her fine pores.

“I Was a Simple Man,” an indie project with a tiny budget, had taken a while to come together. Wu had workshopped the film at the Sundance Directors Lab back in 2015, and not long before that she had been a full-time waitress, forty thousand dollars in debt, with only a few acting credits to her name. But 2015 was her breakout year, thanks to her role in ABC’s “Fresh Off the Boat,” the first Asian-American-led network sitcom in twenty years. Five seasons of the show have now aired, and Wu has been nominated for a Critics’ Choice Television Award for Best Actress in a Comedy Series four years running, becoming one of the most famous Asian-Americans to have emerged from television in decades.

Last summer, she transitioned to movie stardom, playing the lead in “Crazy Rich Asians,” an ecstatic fantasy of romance and opulence set in Singapore. The first all-Asian Hollywood film in twenty-five years, it outgrossed every romantic comedy released in the past decade, and Wu was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Actress, making her the first Asian woman to be recognized in the category in forty-five years.

When Wu was named one of Times’s 100 Most Influential People, she became the face of a historic moment; the citation, by Lena Dunham, praised her for being “outspoken on the lack of Asian representation in Hollywood” and pointed out that, because of her ethnicity, “she is tasked with being more than just an actor.”

In Hollywood terms, Wu, who is thirty-seven, came to stardom late, and at first she was refreshingly un-circum- spect for a celebrity. When Casey Affleck was nominated for an Oscar in 2017, despite allegations of sexual harassment, she tweeted, “Men who sexually harass women 4 OSCAR! Be good acting performance matters more than humanity, human integrity!“ She added, “I’ve been counseled not to talk about this for career’s sake. F my career then, I’m a woman & human first.”

But stardom is inevitably accompanied by scrutiny, and Twitter is nothing if not fickle. In May, in response to the news that “Fresh Off the Boat” had been picked up for a sixth season, Wu fired off a string of expletive-laden tweets grousing about what many actors would consider unequivocally good news: “So upset right now that I’m literally crying. Ugh, Fuck.” She was immediately pilloried on social media, and Jimmy Kimmel, on his late-night show on ABC, quipped, “Only on ABC is getting your show picked up the worst thing that can happen to you.” Wu took to Twitter again, explaining that the show’s rep, while wonderful (“I know that it’s a huge privilege that I even HAVE options—options that FOTB has afforded me”), would prevent her from pursuing “another project that I was really passionate about,” one that “would have challenged me as an artist.”

Then, in her effort to convince fans of her sincerity, Wu echoed the #MeToo slogan “believe women.” Another wave of indignation ensued, and the gossip rags quickly piled on. The Post quoted anonymous sources who claimed that Wu, on the set of “Hustlers”—a movie about strippers who fleece their skeevy Wall Street clients, which was released on September 13th—was a “bigger diva” than her co-stars Jennifer Lopez and Cardi B, and that she was widely loathed on the set of “Fresh Off the Boat.”

In a
Since her breakthrough role, in “Fresh Off the Boat,” Wu has become one of the most famous Asian-Americans in Hollywood.
spirit and indefensibly blunt woman whose fierce devotion to her children is matched only by her uncompromising expectations for them. Wu’s presence on-screen—impetuous, possessive, pugilistic, winsome—quickly made her character the axe around which the other family members rotate. Jessica Huang may not always be pleasant, but she is never boring. Shipwrecked on the shoals of assimilation—adjusting to the cultural peculiarities of America less easily than the rest of her clan—she fights harder than anyone else to keep the family afloat.

When critics hailed Jessica Huang as the most compelling character on the show, it felt momentous: here was an Asian woman charming Americans by playing something other than a victim or a temptress, the two types generally assigned to Asian women since the time of Anna May Wong. (Wong, Hollywood’s first Asian-American star, is perhaps most famous for the role she didn’t land, as the lead in the 1937 adaptation of Pearl S. Buck’s “The Good Earth,” whose Chinese characters ended up being played by white actors.)

As I watched the show, I realized that the woman onscreen was very much like my mother, who arrived in the U.S. from China in the early nineties. Like her, Jessica wears visors and high-waisted khaki shorts, refuses to turn on the air-conditioning even at the height of summer, and packs her children pungent stir-fry lunches that earn them the scorn of their classmates. Like her, Jessica speaks with an accent—flattened “R’s, tightened “O’s, elided consonants—and has a predilection for dropping articles. But in Jessica the alienated edge of immigrant identity, which my mother and I both strove to hide, is played up and endowed with a kind of sideways charisma. Wu can render a petulant scowl hilarious by allowing it to linger on her face past the point of excess. Humor often comes from the dissonance between the expression in her eyes—panic, grievance, barely concealed resentment—and her belief that she projects an air of supreme control. When she says, “All white people look the same” or “It’s true, I am good at everything,” there is vulnerability to her vainglory because it is so transparently insecure.

On the Internet, the character’s idiosyncrasies are a matter of gleeful cel-
Eddie Huang’s mother. “She’s very, very extravagant,” Wu once said, describing the real Jessica’s white minidress, giant platform sandals, and body “dripping in diamonds.” Eddie Huang told me about the encounter from his mother’s side. “The first thing she said was ‘O.K., she’s not hot enough to play me,’” he recalled. “Constance really captures a lot of my mom, because my mom is very much a diva. They both are.” He laughed. “They’re both just super-alpha, super-diva, super-unstopable forces. Constance shows up anywhere, and it’s a hurricane.”

A popular episode in the show’s first season centered on Jessica’s belief in traditional Chinese superstitions. The beliefs had been unfamiliar to Wu, who discussed them with other Asian-Americans in preparation for shooting. “Everyone knew about it,” she said. “But, because I grew up in America, I didn’t grow up around Chinese people or relatives. And I didn’t get these superstitions from my parents. So I had to integrate them into Jessica’s origin story.” Jessica’s origin stories—flashbacks to her formative years, in college, say, or meeting her husband—are Wu’s favorite part of the show, and it is easy to see how they have helped her inhabit a Chinese-American experience that is not her own.

Wu was born in Richmond, Virginia, the third of four daughters, to Taiwanese immigrants who had moved to the U.S. in the nineteen-seventies. Her father pursued a doctorate in biology and genetics and later became a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University; her mother was initially a homemaker, then went to the local community college to study computer programming. By the time Wu was born, the family was solidly middle class—“not upper-middle, not lower-middle, but fucking middle-middle.” On the weekends, she went with neighbors to the local Third Presbyterian Church. She took piano lessons and did gymnastics at the Y.M.C.A. English was spoken in the household. “I speak Chinese like a toddler with an American accent,” Wu told me. The family went on vacation to the Blue Ridge Mountains or Disney World, not to their ancestral home.

Like the Huangs in “Fresh Off the Boat,” Wu’s family were virtually the only Asians in their town. But, whereas Eddie Huang has written about being called a “chink” on his first day of middle school, Wu can’t recall being treated differently, much less bullied, because of how she looked. When the Wus moved into a new house, she told me, neighbors came to greet them: “They were literally baking us pies to welcome us to the neighborhood.”

Genteel Southern culture figured more prominently in Wu’s upbringing than ancient Chinese traditions did. “Richmond is the city that built me,” Wu said. “There was a lot of J. Crew and Ann Taylor.” At her high school, whose mascot was a Confederate Rebel, she was a cheerleader for the wrestling team. But school, in general, wasn’t of much interest to Wu; community theatre was where she thrived. “Theatre was the place where adults listened to you, with respect, and valued your feelings, instead of trying to make you suppress them,” she said. Wu made her lead acting debut, at the age of twelve, as Molé, in a stage adaptation of “The Wind in the Willows.” A couple of years later, she saw college productions of “All My Sons” and “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”—shows that, she said, “knocked my socks off to the other side of the fucking theatre.”

Christianity and political conservatism were integral to the identity of the adults she knew. Although Wu is coy about whether she believes in God, she uses religion as a framing device for understanding certain parts of her life. When she was twelve, she wrote to the local paper to advocate a fervently pro-life position. (Wu, who campaigned for Hillary Clinton in 2016, is now pro-choice.) “I was proud of being a virgin when I got to college,” she told me. “Because, where I come from, it was cool to wait until marriage.”

College was SUNY Purchase, where Wu earned a B.F.A. in acting. She described her academic schedule as rigorous, and said that it made her reckon with her work in a serious way. “It took me a long time to marry that seriousness with the playfulness and the freedom.
that I had to give,” she said. One of her professors, Jennie Israel, recalling Wu’s drive, described “fire coming off her in determination.”

While Wu was in college, her parents divorced. It was a painful and confusing time that Wu doesn’t like to talk about, and I noticed that she slipped into an abstracted third person when discussing it. “Eighteen to twenty-one is a hard time for the showbiz-starving kid whose parents just got divorced, so she doesn’t exactly, like, know what home she’s coming back to,” she said.

Wu is generally reluctant to talk about her family, particularly her mother, whom she has gnomically described as “whimsical.” Eddie Huang was too loyal to Wu to divulge details, but he inadvertently let a hint slip. “Constance and I struggle with our parents in a very similar way,” he said. “My mom always thought she knew best for me. And it was always really a struggle to be able to be myself at home with my mother around. She was my first hater. And, you know, Constance and I really relate.”

Wu graduated from Purchase, in 2005, with a good agent. She moved to New York, where she spent the next five years waitressing and going to countless auditions, which led to only a handful of TV and Off Off Broadway roles. Still, she remembers those years as a time of self-discovery—she took a class in Victorian literature, attended Quaker meetings for a year, and contemplated a career as a speech therapist—and she still speaks passionately about the idealism of the New York theatre world. She moved to Los Angeles in 2010, after a bad breakup with a boyfriend, but for several years her life continued much the same in the new location: waitressing, auditions, sporadic roles. “At one point, I asked myself if I would be O.K. waitressing at forty-five as long as I got to do acting,” Wu told me. “My answer was a firm yes.”

One afternoon, a week or so before the movie shoot in Hawaii, I accompanied Wu to visit her acting coach, Craig Archibald, in the Hancock Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. Archibald, an affable Canadian in his mid-fifties, greeted us at the door of his Spanish-style duplex home, where he lives and teaches. After serving us generous mugs of tea, he turned to his client. “So, tell me how you are doing,” he said. Wu drew a long breath and curled herself into a deep red sofa.

“I’m having a day,” she said, pulling a notebook and a pen out of a black leather backpack.

“O.K., so, a day,” Archibald said slowly. “Business day or personal day?”

“Both,” Wu replied. She had spent the morning writing in her journal, which, she said, always gets “rather emotional,” and had done a number of interviews for the imminent release of “Hustlers.” Archibald asked if she planned to see the movie, and she laughed. “I don’t like to watch myself,” she said. “All the exposure just makes me yucky.”

Archibald, who has the soothing voice of a mindfulness-app guide, had a therapeutic habit of repeating Wu’s words, as if to make sure that she had heard herself and given adequate weight to her own ideas. I got the impression that a significant part of the work was buttressing Wu’s confidence, letting her work out thoughts and emotions in a protected environment. Wu has been attending coaching sessions with Archibald since shortly after she arrived in L.A.—long before she could afford it. During her waitress years, she’d bring audition pieces to rehearse, but now she looks to Archibald for help inhabiting a character she’s playing by inventing a backstory or developing an interior world.

Wu told Archibald that she had yet to meet the woman who would be playing a younger version of her character, Grace, in “I Was a Simple Man.” “I’m concerned, because I don’t know how she sounds,” Wu said, haltingly. “She’s not an actress, she has never acted before.” (“Oof,” Archibald said, with raised brows.) “We’ve done so much on Grace’s spirit and her inner life,” Wu went on. “But that’s all work that we’ve done that isn’t in the other actress.”

“You can talk to her, you know?” Archibald said. “She’s gonna be very respectful of you.”

“Will she, though?” Wu asked.

“Of course she will,” Archibald said. “No, she won’t,” Wu protested, without conviction.

Wu’s intensity brought with it a certain distractibility. When a lawnmower began rumbling outside, Archibald apologized and explained that yard work was normally done in the morning, but the crew had arrived late. Wu almost vibrated with agitation. “Oh, my God, it’s just so loud!” she exclaimed at one point, as if the mower had been dispatched expressly to thwart her concentration.

Soon she turned to me, her face darkening. “I’m honestly distracted because of you,” she said. I had been taping out notes on my phone on a couch off to the side. “Are you actually taking notes, or are you texting people or doing something else?” she asked. Unsure whether “yes” or “no” would antagonize her more, I said, weakly, “A bit of both.” Wrong answer.

“Because, here, what we say has a lot of reverence,” she continued, frowning. “Pay attention.” In our subsequent encounters, Wu spoke directly into my phone, as if recording an audiobook.

Archibald moved us to a quieter room to resume the exploration of Wu’s role. He told me about one of the techniques they use. “Very often, it’s helpful for actors to see themselves as either a plant or an animal,” he said.

“Animal work is a big thing,” Wu said.

Archibald explained that choosing an animal that a role resembles “helps you feel the essence of it.”

The pair had decided that, in this film, Wu’s character was fundamentally a plant. “In my mind, Grace, when she dies, literally enters the soil and is put at the base of this monkey-pod tree,” Wu said. She added, grinning, “This is the first time I’m being a plant!”

“This the first time you’re being a plant,” Archibald affirmed serenely.

“But it works!” she cried, with an almost childlike glee.

Acting is the art of animating fiction. Slipping into a character is a form of forgetting the self. But, whereas Tom Hanks and Brad Pitt are given free rein to channel the Everyman in American cinema, being a minority actress often means auditioning for roles that dwell on the specificity of the Asian-American experience—roles that, for the actor, can feel like a constant reminder of what sets her apart.

Wu’s character in “Crazy Rich Asians” is an accomplished professor from a
TOWED

I understand how you might feel that where she parked the car reveals a kind of disregard bordering on disrespect.

You didn’t say or have to say as much—it was the way your eyelids fluttered near each other in caress, as if to arm your consciousness against expressing exasperation at the continual arrival of unpredictable events

that come along with I.

Much like the world destabilized by rising temperatures and seas,

I can approach catastrophe, a carnival whack-a-mole run amok. I am sorry.

—Eliza Griswold

humble Chinese-American background, whose sense of her heritage is transformed when she accompanies her boyfriend to Singapore and discovers that he is the scion of the city’s most prominent family. But, to Wu, the character is a child. “She never feels quite at home in America, where she grew up, yet she has never been to Asia,” she said. “When she finally goes, she is bullied.”

I asked what animal was behind her performance in “Fresh Off the Boat,” but Wu worried that the real Jessica Huang would be offended by her answer. She told me eventually, but insisted that it be off the record. “You have to understand that Jessica sees herself as a peacock,” Wu said.

In “Hustlers,” Wu plays a squirrel—which is to say, she plays a woman from Queens named Destiny who strips in order to support a young daughter and the grandmother who raised her. “Destiny was always on the lookout, always afraid of predators,” Wu said. “She’s always trying to store up all the nuts because she has a scarcity complex.” Wu seemed to retreat into herself, and then come to a realization. “I know that well, because I think I am very much a squirrel,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to play somebody who’s really lonely.”

In the movie, Destiny is mentored by Jennifer Lopez’s magnetic character, Ramona—a lioness to Destiny’s squirrel—who teaches her how to extract money from clients and later hatches a scheme to drug and defraud them. When I saw the film, I noticed how watchfully Destiny enters every room. Whether navigating a club or celebrating Christmas with her sisters in crime at a lavish apartment, she always seems to be observing the scene, and to be slightly apart from it.

“Destiny needs money, but Destiny really gets caught up in it because she loves feeling like she’s a part of something,” Wu explained when I brought this up, a tenderness entering her voice. “She’s so excited that she’s part of a family.”

But Wu’s flitting eyes betray that Destiny doesn’t quite dare to believe that she really belongs, and, the more I thought about the characters that Wu has inhabited, the more connected they felt to me, a band of outsiders.

The story of Asian-Americans is the story of being marooned between vertiginous aspiration and compensatory diligence, between being probationary Americans at best and perennial aliens at worst. America is the strange place where Asians are stranded, yoked together by difference. As Wu put it to me, “‘Fresh Off the Boat’ is not about being Asian. It’s not about being Chinese. It’s about Asian America—the fact that, even though we are from different cultures, what we share is the way our dominant culture, which is white America, treated us growing up and lumped us together.”

White America tends to ignore the fact that Asian America encompasses a vast variety of experiences—not just different countries and cultures of origin but a whole spectrum of assimilation, class, and other markers of identity. “For most Asians, either you’re superpoor or you’re gonna go to school and be a professional,” Eddie Huang told me. Wu’s Asian America, he said, was “a little bit whiter” than his own. “The first week we hung out, Constance wanted no part of the Asian-representation stuff,” he recalled. “She was, like, ‘I’m an actor. I’m focused on acting as a craft.’ Constance definitely ran from the Chinese home in a lot of ways, and then came back around to find it through consciously exploring her identity on the show.”

When Huang and I spoke, we used English threaded with Chinese words and expressions. Huang, who has a book and a movie coming out, both featuring Asian-American protagonists—“I can only ever write what I know”—told me that he recently found himself asking a Barnes & Noble clerk for a copy of Sally Rooney’s novel “Conversations with Friends” in his “white voice.” “I didn’t even realize I had a white voice until the person I was with pointed it out to me,” Huang said, with a dry laugh.

Huang’s words reminded me of all the times that I’d been charged with “sounding white” or being a “banana”—yellow on the outside and white on the inside—and of how baffled I’d been by the accusations. If the prototypical American was white and middle class, and my parents’ Chinese accents and
indigence marked them as irredeemably fresh off the boat, what chance was there for someone like me to achieve Americanness? And, if striving to assimilate is an unforgivable form of selling out, is there any way to be authentically American without being perceived as an impostor?

Wu is still surprised when people comment on her staunch embrace of an American identity. Once, on “The Ellen DeGeneres Show,” when asked where she was from, she reflexively answered, “Richmond.” “There was a whole thing online where Asian-Americans were saying how rad it was that I said it so naturally,” Wu said, with a shrug. “But I really wasn’t trying to make a statement.”

One afternoon in Hawaii, I met up with Chris Yogi and Sarah Kim, the producer of “I Was a Simple Man,” at the house they’d rented for the movie’s crew. Yogi grew up on Oahu; his great-great-grandfather came from Japan more than a century ago, to work on the sugar plantations. “I Was a Simple Man” came out of his experience, in his twenties, of watching both his father and his grandfather die. Yogi’s grandfather, in his last days, had started calling out to people who weren’t there, in Japanese phrases that Yogi couldn’t understand. “It’s a story about family and death and trauma, but the island is the main character, and I want to honor that,” he said, of the film.

In Hawaii, people of Asian or Pacific heritage are the majority, and Yogi said that this gave him a very particular sense of Asian-Americanness when he was young. After he left home, to study film at the University of Southern California, he was puzzled by the sense of exclusion felt by Asian-Americans around him. “It’s pretty interesting to grow up in a place where you’re not the minority and then to go to a place where you are,” he said. “It was almost like when I moved to L.A. I had to sort of assimilate all over again.”

When Yogi got out of film school, he was confronted with the received wisdom of the industry: no matter how interesting the story, white America does not want to watch a film with only Asian-American stars. “You sort of know that intellectually, but it’s a real wake-up call when you actually go out,” he said. “A few execs would say stuff like ‘Even Asian-Americans don’t want to watch Asian-American work!’ And some of these people were Asian-American execs.” He shook his head.

Kim, who was working on a laptop nearby, chimed in. “There are a lot of white people who are in places of power so, naturally, they hire other white people,” she said. “It may not be conscious sometimes, but it arises out of the same sense of familiarity we Asians feel with one another—the kind of comfort and safety that’s difficult to put into words.” Even the Asian movies that got made in the U.S., she felt, like “Mulan,” succeed in part by telling stories filtered through a Westernized, white perspective.

“It’s the age-old question,” Yogi said. “Do you try to change the system, or do you just try to create your own?” The pair talked with rueful admiration about recent advances in black cinema. “We need ten flops to make one ‘Moonlight,’” Kim said. But there wouldn’t be ten films if the first one was a flop. She went on, “And we don’t have the Asian Ava DuVernay, who is leading this charge and making her own way to do things.”

They’d recently been given a sobering piece of advice by an executive who was a woman of color, and who had witnessed the fluctuating fortunes of black cinema since the nineties. “She was really excited that our film was gaining momentum,” Yogi recalled. “But she said, ‘You Asian-Americans’—this was right after ‘Crazy Rich Asians’—and she was, like, ‘It’s really great that you guys have momentum, but this isn’t going to last. Because next year Hollywood may change again.’”

These days, all the big studios have diversity executives, and I talked to one, who said that she would be able to speak more frankly if she wasn’t named. The executive, who is African-American, had seen her share of unconscious-bias absurdities, and recalled one in particular, a meeting about casting the role of a police chief. “I said, ‘What about an Asian-American female?’ And people, like, burst out laughing,” she told me. “Then they realized that I was serious, and they looked skeptical. I said, ‘Well, you know what? The chief of police in San Francisco is an Asian-American female.’”

All the same, she was encouraged by recent developments in representation both in front of and behind the camera, and by changes in supply and demand. On the supply side, she pointed out the ease of access to online video platforms and the power of social media as a publicity tool. “Think about just how many Asian-Americans have been on YouTube for many years,” she said, citing the Japanese-Hawaiian comedian Ryan Higa. “No one knew about Ryan, but he got this outsized, coveted YouTuber fan base.”
As for demand, she told me that she had a statistic that she was fond of citing. “U.S. minorities represent $3.7 trillion in buying power, so it’s not marketing to a multicultural audience that isn’t sustainable,” she said. “The numbers don’t lie. We’re talking about the census and how in, like, 2040—in twenty years—we’ll be the majority.”

On my last afternoon in Hawaii, I met up with Wu at her hotel. She’d spent the morning on a hike with a native Hawaiian family, “to absorb the sound of the island and its trees.” She was wearing a cropped T-shirt, dark denim shorts, and Havaianas flip-flops, and could have passed for one of the tourists who drifted around us, sporting seaside necklaces, hair half wet, looking dazed from the sun. She took a sip from her drink—a perfect Manhattan with a twist, her favorite cocktail—and gazed out at the receding tide and the swaying palms.

I asked how much she thought systemic bias had affected her career. She cautioned that her particular background predisposed her to notice it less than someone else in her position might. But, after a pause, she said that it had of course come up. “When I first got ‘Fresh Off the Boat,’ I noticed that all the parts I was being offered afterward were what I call ‘suits,’” she said. “They were lawyers or professionals—you know, businesspeople. And I was, like, ‘That’s really weird, because if you look at my résumé, there is no evidence that this is something that’s in my repertoire.’” She went on, “People are, like, ‘We want to include an Asian in our project because we care about diversity. How can we imagine an Asian being in our project? Oh, she could totally play the lawyer, she could totally play the agent.’”

I wondered if the sense of being pigeonholed had increased with her fame—if she felt pigeonholed at this very moment, as I peppered her with questions about her Asian-Americanness, when it wasn’t the defining facet of her identity. Wu sank back into her seat and pulled one leg up. “Look, when Tom Cruise is in an interview, people aren’t, like, ‘What’s it like to be a white actor?’ My answers coincide with Asian-American activism, but that’s because those are the questions I’m being asked. It doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in it and that I’m not a proponent of it. But is it my reason for being alive? No.”

Finally, I asked Wu about her trial by Twitter. She sat up and rubbed her temples. She had been taking a long break from Twitter since the incident. “Being messy in public is something”—She stopped, adjusting her posture somberly, like a politician who realizes that this is the question on which people will base their vote. “I’m not proud of what I said,” she continued. “But I also think that it was how I was feeling in the moment, and we all have days where we feel differently, and I don’t think it represents my entire character.”

Wu wondered if role models—and I don’t want to be a fucking role model, I’m an artist—should be allowed to be a little less pure. “Wouldn’t that make people feel a lot less lonely when they were having the feelings and emotions that weren’t the prescribed ones?” she asked.

She paused. “I’m glad people are talking shit about me, because it makes me think about other people’s feelings and the effects of things,” she said. “It’s like negotiating authenticity with obligation, and I don’t have an answer either way, because I think you have to actually clarify what your obligations are first and what your authenticity is first.”

On my way back from Hawaii, I thought about Wu’s authenticity, and I kept coming back to the day we’d spent with her acting coach. After her private session, she had stayed around for a group class that night.

“It’s funny,” Archibald said. “It was only after she landed ‘Fresh’ that she said, ‘Now I’m gonna come to group class.’” Wu considered this for a second, nodding. Later, she told me, “Sure, my career is doing well. But in class we’re talking about art, not career. Everything else—success, career, money, accolades—that all gets left at the door.”

There were only five students that evening—two of the regulars were off playing a zombie and a mobster. A redhead who bore a passing resemblance to Christina Hendricks arrived, followed by a young, square-jawed man in tight black jeans. Wu sat quietly on the couch, her eyes trained on a script, as the others made small talk about the recent earthquake and snacked on chips. The actors did brief scenes from various sitcoms they were auditioning for. Resting her chin on the back of her hand, Wu watched with coiled stillness, her only movements the lines of pleasure and surprise that occasionally registered on her forehead.

When her turn came, Wu chose an emotionally lacerating eight-minute scene from “Middletown,” a play by Will Eno. She was reading the role of a young man who has just attempted suicide and is now trying to make sense of the experience with a doctor. Wu had told me earlier that she’d always loved the play, but has come to understand the character only by speaking his lines. “It’s so babbly,” she said. “On the page, it looks so poetic. But then, when I was saying it out loud, I realized, No, this is somebody who is covering up, who is nervous. Because if he doesn’t babble he’s gonna break.”

As she began to speak, the defensiveness she’d shown earlier that day dissolved. And although she now sat jittery with vulnerability, inhabiting a character whose fragility reverberated across the room, it occurred to me later that this was the most at ease I ever saw her. She folded her arms across her chest, her elbows shifting impatiently, a haunted expression softening her features as she struggled to speak, sometimes through tears. Her voice, when it came out, was gauzy with depth and delicacy: “I wanted to be an emergency somehow. I always felt like I was one deep down.”

Wu finished and said, “Ugh, I was watching myself too much, so waving in and out.” She wiped her nose and eyes, which were still damp.

“But just got right back into it,” Archibald said gently.

“The reason I love this scene is that I love when he says, ‘I want to be an emergency somehow. My life’”—she said, transitioning to the voice of the character—“has become a little bit static. Like, I don’t know if I’m important to somebody.” She blinked up at the ceiling and repeated, “I wanted to be an emergency.” The room was so quiet that you could hear the rustle of the pages as Wu dropped the script into her lap.

“Ask this question,” Archibald prodded. “What is your relationship with yourself?”

“Gosh, that’s a good question,” Wu said slowly. “I don’t know.”
WIDE SPOT

THOMAS McGUIANE
The small-bore politics that I've been caught up in for the past thirty years has provided, beyond the usual attractions of graft and corruption, a vivid lesson in regional geography, as I've had to make sure my constituents would keep showing up to vote. Still, it had been a very long time since I'd last visited Prairiedale. Back then, the town was known as Wide Spot; it wouldn't have had a name at all if it weren't for the filling station there, and, had anyone thought about it, would have been called something more dignified, like Fort Lauderdale. In the old days, the Indians led their cattle to the freight yards many miles away on horseback; their wives awaited them in Model T Fords, pulled their saddles off the horses, and drove them back to the reservation. The horses turned up on the res within a week, grazing their way north on unfenced grass. But, when the Northern Pacific laid a spur from the east-west line to pick up cattle and grain, Wide Spot boomed, became the county seat. It got a courthouse, a sprawl of frame houses, a fire station in a quonset hut, a baseball diamond, and its unimaginative name.

Lately, the combination of agriculture and local mining had made Prairiedale a politically divided town. I decided to visit my half of the divide as part of my sweep—and just to feel the sweet ache of old days (mine) gone by. I'd been there in my youth, when I played keyboards for the Daft, during our short heyday as a regional band. Once the band decided to pack it in, we felt that Wide Spot would be the perfect place to celebrate the end of our inconsequential run. We were delighted to see the Rainbow Horizon Bar fill up with cowboys and country girls, but then, Wide Spot was the only place to go within a very large radius.

Now, when I drove into town, nothing had changed, except that—I was quick to notice—the old Rainbow Horizon Bar had become an appliance store and secondhand–clothing drop. There was a dog sleeping in the doorway that did not appear anxious to move.

The first side street in town seemed abandoned. There were small houses—possibly the homes of former laborers at the defunct talc mine nearby—but no sign of life, except for the crows pecking along the street and around the trunk of a sagging linden. I thought this street might have been where we'd bought that pot that gave us all a headache and a slight sense of dislocation. Its only value was that it entitled us to say that we were smoking pot. It stank up our van so badly that we threw away the tie-dyed curtains. Halfway down the street was a narrow three-story brick building, with a sewing-machine store on the first floor, probably an apartment on the second, with Tibetan prayer flags in the window; the third floor was filled to the ceiling with mattresses that pressed against its window. In front was a chopper bike with Sturgis stickers and expired New Mexico plates. Of the next seven houses, four appeared empty and one had broken windows. I was looking for the county chair of my party, who, the notes on my phone said, was one Cornel Bowen, an official with the savings and loan, which I could see at the end of the street.

In the great river of American politics, I am no more than an endangered snail darter, but like other politicians, big and small, I'm to some extent mortified to even have the job. Getting along by going along is what got us all here, but as my dad, an alcoholic dentist, used to say about staring into dirty mouths, "It's a living." The first political speech I ever gave, on the virtues of Westerners, up at Fort Peck, went over quite well with the crowd, though my cousin Earl came up to me afterward and said, "You sounded like ten pounds of shit in a six-pound sack." I should have quit while I was ahead, but public respect trumps self-respect in my book.

A vulture standing amid the flowers in front of the savings and loan was undeterred by an irate employee shouting and waving a clipboard. Whoa, something new! I stepped in to flush the bird and found that it was dead and stuffed. Clipboard pressed to her hip, the woman cried, "Why would anyone do such a thing?" I said, "It's a vulture. Do you know what vultures stand for?" I'm always saying the wrong things to women, or maybe it's how I say them. She shot me an annoyed glance, and, as she started toward the front door of the building, I called out, "I'm looking for Cornel Bowen." She gave me the same wintry smile my ex-wife used to save for quiet evenings by the fire.

"No longer with us. Goodbye. Take the bird with you."

She shut the door before I could explain that I hadn't put the daggy vulture in the flowers. Then she popped back out. "I suppose you're with the papers. This S. & L. doesn't need your explanation of what vultures stand for. Bowen is at the courthouse treasurer's office. Nobody here understands how he got from here to there. You can drop the bird off at his office with our compliments."

Nothing besides times gone by—good times that won't come back—like courthouses in towns like this, all the slate, sandstone, granite, marble, copper, and nostalgic European architecture towering over a residual population without the wherewithal to fix the pipes. In the corridors, desks whose occupants never look up, a smell of mildew and old wood, ghosts at their rollops—the pleasant melancholy that Civil War buffs must feel on the blood-soaked killing grounds.

Bowen didn't acknowledge me. He looked like an aging surfer dude, or what I imagined an aging surfer dude might look like. He was tanned, handsome, and his gray hair had a hint of blond. He stared at his paperwork with parted lips and an air of despair befitting someone torn from better days.

"Cornel," I said, after introducing myself, "I'm making my way around the state visiting all the good folks"—when you campaign in Montana, it's "folks," not "people" or "persons," folks, folks, and more folks—"all the good folks who supported me the last time, hoping that what I've accomplished will have them on board for the next cycle."

"I didn't support you."

"Do what?"

"Nor would I."

I examined my phone as though it might explain the mistaken entry in my notes. "I thought you were running for state auditor."

"Not running for state auditor," Cornel recited.

"Is that a real Rolex?"

"Oh, hell, no," he said, as though I were an idiot.

"And you're no longer at the savings and loan?"

"No!"

"Did you leave the stuffed vulture in the flowers?"
“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I smiled amiably at this disclaimer. “I have another reason for visiting Prairie­dale. I once had a band, the Daft—”

“The what? A band? Here?”

What gave me the urge to paint a romantic picture of the old days in Wide Spot? I suppose I hoped he’d change his tune once he understood that I had local memories and a politician’s knack for filling the air with pleasant nattering. I told him how we’d toured around the state, knocking off Grand Funk Railroad, the Doobie Brothers, and forgotten hair bands, and how this had been our last stop. “We disbanded right here, Cornel. It wasn’t a great band, but we had a great singer, Micah Clardy, a great voice.” Cornell leaned forward at this. “And we knew that he deserved to be famous. Micah, he’s, like, I’m going to L.A.,’ and he was perfect for that kind of crossover-country thing. Anyway, handsome guy, unbelievable pipes.”

“He’s still here.”

“Who’s still here?”

“Micah Clardy. I thought he was always here. Old Mr. Fixit.”

I wanted another town and accurate information. Bowen told me dismis­sively where to find Micah—in the house with the Tibetan prayer flags and the old chopper—and returned his dead stare to his papers. I didn’t need him anymore and left without a word. I looked forward to telling my old bandmate how our days on the road had helped launch my career. I was never important to the band—I could hardly play my fucking keyboards—and the ironic contrast could be fun, because now I was really going places.

Still, as I walked toward Micah’s apartment I felt fearful of seeing him again. He’d been a strict bandleader and had often hurt my feelings by singling out my incompetence. I considered skipping it and leaving town, heading to a more reliable stop on my campaign trail, but it would only be another prairie town, where the future of the post office was under review and the landowners lived elsewhere.

The rear tire of the chopper was flat. The Gazette was stuck between the screen and the door. I knocked and the door opened partially. I saw lips poking out of a goatee and heard a shout: “We don’t sell sewing machines anymore!” I said that I was there to see Micah Clardy.

“Side entrance!” Slam. I made my way around the building into the alley and found the stairs to the second floor and the bright-blue paint of Micah’s door.

He was standing there, probably no more aged than me but exceptionally weathered. I told him who I was, but in question form, as though I weren’t sure. He squinted and said in the most measured way, “Holy shit,” then stepped away from the door and swung his arm back for me to enter.

I said, “Was I supposed to call?”

“Now or then?”

“That’s a great question! Ha-ha-ha!”

Micah laughed, too, and joined me inside. He hadn’t lost his lean, broad­shouldered look, though he now had a laborer’s hands. As before, he gave the impression of being well dressed, despite the stains on his painter’s pants and a worn snap-button shirt with the tails out.

He got us ice water and motioned me to a seat before making a practiced fall into an armchair. It was a cheerful room, bright clouds in the windows. After a long stretch to clink glasses, I looked up at a large black-and-white photograph of a beautiful woman, high cheekbones, dreamy smile, like Gene Tierney.

“Girlfriend?”

“Daughter.”

With effort, I took my eyes off the picture.

This was an all-purpose room: refrigerator, television, four­place dining table, a bookcase, yellow walls, a dog sleeping under the table, curtains tied back with bungee cord, and a hummingbird feeder. A peculiar row of stuffed animals lined the wall below the window: a duck, a badger, a raccoon, a heron. Micah noticed me looking at them. “Friend of mine closed up his taxidermy shop and went to work as a twelve-hour derick hand on an oil rig. He gave those critters to me. There was also a vulture. I put it in front of the savings and loan.”

“They think Cornel Bowen put it there.”

“Oh, good. He’s a crook, but so is everyone else there.”

It struck me that a refrigerator and a television were rarely in a room together.

“So you’re still here,” I said.

“What did you do with the van?”

“It was up on blocks for years, then I gave it to my kid and it got, uh, forfeited.” I skipped all the hell I’d had with
my kid and leaped forward to something more to my credit. “I suppose you know I’m in the legislature.”

“Really! What’re you going to do there?”

“As we meet the challenges ahead, I’d like to show our fellow-Montanans a better way to a sustainable future.” I held my hand before me as though showing the way to the future.

I already felt exposed when Micah burst into laughter. “Oh, cut it out! You’re breaking my balls!” I was shocked. I began again. “That’s the positive stuff. My home life never worked out. First wife was a paralegal named Sue who left me for an R.V. dealer. The second wife was a big-busted Broken Arrow buckle bunny. Bomb-grade sex drive, pour-in Wranglers. Her boyfriend lost everything at the bucking-horse sale and stranded her in the Range Riders Bar, where I was with a client. I was suing a Miles City L.L.C. over a grass-lease default on some rangeland between Hathaway and Rosebud. That marriage was longer than the first one by seven hundred and nineteen days and all I got was debt.” I thought this was a stylish summary, and it seemed to break the ice with Micah.

He went to the window and talked while he looked down into the street. “I was under that old music spell when my daughter was born—called her, uh, Maybellene. My dad, my uncles, all tradesmen, ladder racks on their trucks, chain-smokers, nights at the Legion. I didn’t want to go down that road. That last show we played was so great, hot girls and pissed-off cowboys. Rhonda and I locked ourselves in the van while you guys stood around. She was the daughter of the State Farm agent, drove a big white Ford Crown Vic with a police-car engine. I went to L.A. hoping to be somebody. Then Rhonda called to tell me she was pregnant. I’ve been here ever since.”

“Doing what?”

“Plumbing, roofing, a little electrical, exactly like my uncles. Rhonda died of cancer. Single dad for two years, then M.B. went to nursing school, got married, and moved to Lewistown, taught me to Skype. I’m sort of the mayor here. I get called that.”

“How about this—” I turned over a wastebasket and started thumping out a beat and doing my best to hum the opening chords of a G.F.R. song we’d played that last night. We tried to harmonize a few lines: “Take me down to the water, let me feel it run over me. Let me feel the pain and the coldness, the loneliness—”

Micah said, “Let’s not do this.”

I don’t know what I was thinking. I’d embarrassed us. I stood up, averted my face.

“So, I need to roll.” Micah followed me to the door. “Signs to hang.” I shrugged.

Micah said, “Maybe this time I’ll register.” It felt like he’d reached out to me, and I was touched.

A thunderstorm darkened the road toward Jordan and storm clouds soared to the east, the tires hissed. I was thinking of that Chuck Berry song, “Rain water blowin’ all under my hood, I knew that was doin’ my motor good.” At the wheel and with a back seat full of signs—I rarely saw myself so clearly and I can’t say I liked it.

I thought of Micah. He’d had the same detachment I remembered from our band days. But girls had always focused on Micah, thanks to his good-looking rockabilly style, which went with his pompadour and his moves. I thought of Maybellene, whose entrancing picture was hanging so close behind Micah that I was able to shift my eyes to it easily, undetected and often. I remembered Rhonda, too. She’d hung around the stage that night and didn’t look like she knew what she was getting into. Country girl.

Lewistown was not on my tour, but that was where Maybellene lived. So what was wrong? There was no law against turning up.

I pressed on into the twilight, cell phone on my thigh as I scrolled through Lewistown telephone numbers. Since her listing included an address, the temptation to park across the street for a sustained look-see was compelling. The Missoula paper had described me as a “gentleman-politician,” which indicated that I was either a gentleman or had a private income. Since only the first could be true, I took it on myself to call instead. Maybellene answered suspiciously. I made my case: running for office, single, semi-acquaintance of her dad (wanted to avoid age bracket as long as possible), and in town for a meet and greet. I told her that if she felt like taking a leap of faith she might find I had plenty to offer.

“That’s exciting,” she said. “Can I think about it and call you back? I see your number.”

“Sure you can. I’m crossing my fingers!”

I pulled off into a strip mall. All the stores were closed, but I parked in front of the J. C. Penney, where there was good light. I read weather reports on my phone while I waited, just to keep my mind from bouncing around. At last, the phone rang and I left it in my lap for a bit to avoid seeming in a hurry. Then I answered in a low, modulated voice. No better way to spook women than by talking too fast.

“I just got a call from Maybellene. Says you called, says you’re in town.”

It was Micah.

“Well, sure, yes. More of a courtesy call than anything.”

“Tell you what. If you can stay there for a couple of hours I’ll come over and kill you.”

“No, no, I’m on my way, actually. Good one! And I know what this is really about.”

“Do you? And what is that?”

“You never wanted me in the band.” I felt a sense of exhausted relief at finally being able to say this.

“You delusional cocksucker. You’re a perfect politician.”

Something I could take as a compliment. Still, leading indicators were negative, and it was time to hit the road. I put up a few signs and was soon on my way to another town, always one more town. You never know what’s next, and that is why I can say with all honesty that I am not a depressed person. Unlike Mr. Fixit, I have a future and I don’t intend to fade.

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Thomas McGuane on small-town America.
THE CRITICS

BOOKS

THE UNHOLY PRACTICE

A biography as unillusioned about Susan Sontag as she was about herself.

BY JANET MALCOLM

Two volumes of Susan Sontag's diaries, edited by her son, David Rieff, have been published, and a third is forthcoming. In the prefatory to the first volume, published in 2008, under the title "Reborn," Rieff confesses his uncertainty about the project. He reports that at the time of her death, in 2004, Sontag had given no instructions about the dozens of notebooks that she had been filling with her private thoughts since adolescence and which she kept in a closet in her bedroom. "Left to my own devices," he writes, "I would have waited a long time before publishing them, or perhaps never published them at all." But because Sontag had sold her papers to the University of California at Los Angeles, and access to them was largely unrestricted, "either I would organize them and present them or someone else would," so "it seemed better to go forward." However, he writes, "my misgivings remain. To say that these diaries are self-revelatory is a drastic understatement." In them, Sontag beats up on herself for just about everything it is possible to beat up on oneself for short of murder. She lies, she cheats, she betrays confidences, she pathetically seeks the approval of others, she fears others, she talks too much, she smiles too much, she is unlovable, she doesn't bathe often enough. In February, 1960, she lists "all the things that I despise in myself...being a moral coward, being a liar, being indiscreet about myself + others, being a phony, being passive." In August, 1966, she writes of "a chronic nausea—after I'm with people. The awareness (after-awareness) of how programmed I am, how insincere, how frightened." In February, 1960, she writes, "How many times have I told people that Pearl Kazin was a major girlfriend of Dylan Thomas? That Norman Mailer has orgies? That Matthiessen was queer. All public knowledge, to be sure, but who the hell am I to go advertising other people's sexual habits? How many times have I reviled myself for that, which is only a little less offensive than my habit of name-dropping (how many times did I talk about Allen Ginsberg last year, while I was on Commentary?)."

The world received the diaries calmly enough; there is not a big readership for published diaries. It will be interesting to see whether Benjamin Moser's authorized biography, "Sontag: Her Life and Work" (Ecco), which draws heavily on the diaries, makes more of a stir. Moser takes Sontag at her word and is as unillusioned about her as she is about herself. The solid literary achievement and spectacular worldly success that we associate with Sontag was, in Moser's telling, always shadowed by aspect fear and insecurity, increasingly accompanied by the unattractive behavior that fear and insecurity engender. The dauntingly erudite, strikingly handsome woman who became a star of the New York intelligentsia when barely thirty, after publishing the essay "Notes on Camp," and who went on to produce book after book of advanced criticism and fiction, is brought low in this biography. She emerges from it as a person more to be pitied than envied.

If the journals authenticate Moser's dire portrait, his interviews with friends, lovers, family members, and employees deepen its vivid hue. Why do people speak to biographers about their late famous friends? In most cases, the motive is benign: the informant wants to be helpful, wants to share what he knows of the subject, believing that the particulars he and only he is privy to will contribute to the fullness of the portrait. A bit of self-importance may be involved: the interviewee is flattered to have been asked to the party. Of course, he intends to be discreet, to keep some things to himself. The best intentions, however, can be broken on the wheel of skillful (or even inept) interviewing. Discretion so quickly turns into indiscretion under the exciting spell of undivided attention. Thus the film scholar Don Eric Levine, a close friend of Sontag's, is Moser's source for writing that "when Jasper [Johns] dumped her, he did so in a way that would have devastated almost anyone. He invited her to a New Year's Eve party and then left, without a word, with another woman." Moser adds, "The incident goes unmentioned in her journals." In another unmentioned incident (until Moser mentions it), Levine is surprised when Sontag tells him that she is going to pick up her son from a schoolmate's house: "This is not Susan. Why is she going to pick up her son? I didn't say anything. When she came back she put David to bed and then she said, 'Guess what? I knocked on the door. It was the Dakota.'...She knocked on the door, and who opened the door?...Of course she knew who was opening the door. Lauren Bacall."

"I loved Susan," Leon Wieseltier said. "But I didn't like her." He was, Moser writes, speaking for many others. Roger Deutsch, another friend, reported, "If
Susan Sontag, New York, August 29, 1977. Sontag’s life was, in Moser’s telling, always shadowed by abject fear and insecurity.
somebody like Jackie Onassis put in $2,000”—for a fund to help Sontag when she was ill and had no insurance—”Susan would say, ‘That woman is so rich, Jackie Onassis. Who does she think she is?’”

If friends cannot control their ambivalence, what about the enemies who cannot wait to take their revenge? “Susan was very interested in being morally pure, but at the same time she was one of the most immoral people I ever knew. Pathologically so,” Treacherous, Eva Kollisch, a pissed-off girlfriend from the sixties, tells Moser, as if she had been expecting his call for half a century. Moser accepts her grievances at face value and weaves them into his unsparing narrative.

Biographers often get fed up with their subjects, with whom they have become grotesquely overfamiliar. We know no one in life the way biographers know their subjects. It is an unholy practice, the telling of a life story that isn’t one’s own on the basis of oppressively massive quantities of random, not necessarily reliable information. The demands this makes on the practitioner’s powers of discrimination, as well as on his capacity for sympathy, may be impossible to fulfill. However, Moser’s exasperation with Sontag is fuelled by something that lies outside the problematic of biographical writing. Midway through the biography, he drops the mask of neutral observer and reveals himself to be—you could almost say comes out as—an intellectual adversary of his subject.

Coming out is at issue, in fact. The occasion is Sontag’s thrillingly good essay “Fascinating Fascism,” published in The New York Review of Books in 1975 and reprinted in the book “Under the Sign of Saturn,” in which she justly destroyed Leni Riefenstahl’s newly restored reputation, showing her to be a Nazi sympathizer in every bone. After giving the essay its due, Moser suddenly swerves to the side of the poet Adrienne Rich, who wrote a letter to the Review protesting Sontag’s en-passant attribution of Riefenstahl’s rehabilitation to feminists who “would feel a pang at having to sacrifice the one woman who made films that everybody acknowledges to be first-rate.” Moser holds up Rich as “an intellectual of the first rank” who had “written essays in no way inferior to Sontag’s” and as an exemplar of what Sontag might have been if she had had the guts. At a time when homosexuality was still being criminalized, Rich had acknowledged her lesbianism, while Sontag was silent about hers. Rich had been punished for her bravery (“by coming out publicly, [she] bought herself a ticket to Siberia—or at least away from the patriarchal world of New York culture”), while Sontag had been rewarded for her cowardice. Later in the book, Moser can barely contain his rage at Sontag for not coming out during the AIDS crisis. “There was much she could have done, and gay activists implored her to do the most basic, most courageous, most principled thing of all,” he writes. “They asked her to say ‘I,’ to say ‘my body’: to come out of the closet.” Moser cannot forgive her for her refusal to do so.

Sontag’s love life was unusual. At fifteen, she wrote in her journal of the “lesbian tendencies” she was finding in herself. The following year, she began sleeping with women and delighting in it. Simultaneously, she wrote of her disgust at the thought of sex with men: “Nothing but humiliation and degradation at the thought of physical relations with a man—The first time I kissed him—a very long kiss—I thought quite distinctly: ‘This all—is so silly.’” Less than two years later, as a student at the University of Chicago, she married—a man! He was Philip Rieff, a twenty-nine-year-old professor of sociology, for whom she worked as a research assistant, and to whom she stayed married for eight years. The early years of Sontag’s marriage to Rieff are the least documented of her life, and they’re a little mysterious, leaving much to the imagination. They are what you could call her years in the wilderness, the years before her emergence as the celebrated figure she remained for the rest of her life. She followed Rieff to the places of his academic appointments (among them Boston, where Sontag did graduate work in the Harvard philosophy department), became pregnant and had a then-perforce illegal abortion, became pregnant again, and gave birth to her son, David.

There was tremendous intellectual affinity between Sontag and Rieff. “At seventeen I met a thin, heavy-thighed, balding man who talked and talked, snobbishly, bookishly, and called me ‘Sweet.’ After a few days passed, I married him,” she recalled in a journal entry from 1973. By the time of the marriage, in 1951, she had discovered that sex with men wasn’t so bad. Moser cites a document that he found among Sontag’s unpublished papers in which she lists thirty-six people she had slept with between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, and which included men as well as women. Moser also quotes from a manuscript he found in the archive which he believes to be a memoir of the marriage: “They stayed in bed most of the first months of their marriage, making love four or five times a day and in between talking, talking endlessly about art and politics and religion and morals.” The couple did not have many friends, because they “tended to criticize them out of acceptability.”

In addition to her graduate work and caring for David, Sontag helped Rieff with the book he was writing, which was to become the classic “Freud: The Mind of the Moralist.” She grew increasingly dissatisfied with the marriage. “Philip is an emotional totalitarian,” she wrote in her journal, in March, 1957. One day, she had had enough. She applied for and received a fellowship at Oxford, and left husband and child for a year. After a few months at Oxford, she went to Paris and sought out Harriet Schoeh, who had been her first lover, ten years earlier. For the next four decades, Sontag’s life was punctuated by a series of intense, doomed love affairs with beautiful, remarkable women, among them the dancer Lucinda Childs and the actress and filmmaker Nicole Stéphane. The journals document, sometimes in excruciatingly naked detail, the torment and heartbreak of these liaisons.

If Moser’s feelings about Sontag are mixed—he always seems a little awed as well as irked by her—his dislike for Philip Rieff is undiluted. He writes of him with utter contempt. He mocks his fake upper-class accent and fancy bespoke-looking clothes. He calls him a
scam artist. And he drops this bombshell: he claims that Rieff did not write his great book—Sontag did. Moser in no way substantiates his claim. He merely believes that a pretentious creep like Rieff could not have written it. “The book is so excellent in so many ways, so complete a working-out of the themes that marked Susan Sontag’s life, that it is hard to imagine it could be the product of a mind that later produced such meager fruits,” Moser writes.

The hardest piece of evidence that Moser offers for his thesis is a letter that Sontag wrote to her younger sister, Judith, in 1950, about her exciting new job as Rieff’s research assistant. One of her duties, she tells Judith, was to read and then write reviews of both scholarly and popular books that Rieff had been assigned to review and was too busy or too lazy to read and write about herself. Certainly, this doesn’t reflect well on Rieff, but it hardly proves that Sontag wrote “The Mind of the Moralist.” Moser’s interviews with contemporaries who knew that Sontag was working on the book don’t prove her authorship, either. Nevertheless, he has so thoroughly convinced himself of it that when he quotes from “The Mind of the Moralist” he performs the sleight of hand of saying “she writes” or “Sontag notes.” By Moser’s lights, every writer who has been heavily edited can no longer claim to be the author of his work. “Get me rewrite!” the city-room editor barks into the phone in nineteen-thirties comedies about the newspaper world. In Moser’s world, rewrite becomes write. Sigrid Nunez, in her memoir “Sempre Susan,” contributes what may be the last word on the subject of the authorship of “The Mind of the Moralist”: “Although her name did not appear on the cover, she was a full coauthor, she always said. In fact, she sometimes went further, claiming to have written the entire book herself, ‘every single word of it.’” I took this to be another one of her exaggerations.”

“Terrifying plotting.”

Geniuses are often born to parents afflicted with no such abnormality, and Sontag belongs to this group. Her father, Jack Rosenblatt, the son of uneducated immigrants from Galicia, had left school at the age of ten to work as a delivery boy in a New York fur-trading firm. By sixteen, he had worked his way up in the company to a position of responsibility sufficient to send him to China to buy hides. By the time of Susan’s birth, in 1933, he had his own fur business and was regularly travelling to Asia. Mildred, Susan’s mother, who accompanied Jack on these trips, was a vain, beautiful woman who came from a less raw Jewish immigrant family. In 1938, while in China, Jack died, of tuberculosis, leaving Mildred with five-year-old Susan and two-year-old Judith to raise alone. By all reports, she was a terrible mother, a narcissist and a drinker.

Moser’s account is largely derived from Susan’s writings: from entries in her journal and from an autobiographical story called “Project for a Trip to China.” Moser also uses a book called “Adult Children of Alcoholics,” by Janet Geringer Woititz, published in 1983, to explain the darkness of Sontag’s later life. “The child of the alcoholic is plagued by low self-esteem, always feeling, no matter how loudly she is acclaimed, that she is falling short,” he writes. By pushing the child Susan away and at the same time leaning on her for emotional support, Mildred sealed off the possibility of any future lightheartedness. “Indeed, many of the apparently rebarbative aspects of Sontag’s personality are clarified in light of the alcoholic family system, as it was later understood,” Moser writes, and he goes on:

Her enemies, for example, accused her of taking herself too seriously, of being rigid and humorless, of possessing a baffling inability to relinquish control of even the most trivial matters. . . . Parents to their parents, forbidden the carelessness of normal children, they [children of alcoholics] assume an air of premature seriousness. But often, in adulthood, the “exceptionally well-behaved” mask slips and reveals an out-of-season child.

In his account of Sontag’s worldly success, Moser shifts to a less baleful register. He rightly identifies Mildred’s remarriage to a man named Nathan Sontag, in 1945, as a seminal event in Susan’s rise to stardom. In an essay from 2005, Wayne Koestenbaum wrote, “At no other writer’s name can I stare entranced for hours on end—only Susan Sontag’s. She lived up to that fabulous appellation.” Would Koestenbaum have stared entranced at the name Susan Rosenblatt? Are any bluntly Jewish appellations fabulous? Although Nathan did not adopt Susan and her sister, Susan eagerly made the change that, as Moser writes, “transformed the gawky syllables of Sue Rosenblatt into the sleek trochees of Susan Sontag.” It was, Moser goes on, one of “the first recorded instances, in a life that would be
full of them, of a canny reinvention.”

Moser’s story of the good-looking young ex-faculty wife/Ph.D. candidate who comes to New York to seek her fortune among the Partisan Review intellectuals has something of the atmosphere of nineteenth-century narratives about the rise of famous Parisian court-
es. Sontag did not want to be an academic; she wanted only to write. But there isn’t much of a living in the kind of things that she wrote. Her first novel, “The Benefactor” (1963), is a very advanced kind of experiment in unreadability. “Against Interpretation and Other Essays,” the book of criticism that followed (“Notes on Camp” appeared in it), three years later, brought her acclaim but hardly made her rich. Sontag was accused of humorlessness, but in fact she was guilty only of high-mindedness. Her early essays are addressed to the ten or twenty people in the English-speaking world who would not blanch at sentences like these, from her essay on the philosopher E. M. Cioran:

One recognizes, in this Romanian-born writer who studied philosophy at the University of Bucharest and who has lived in Paris since 1937 and writes in French, the convulsive manner characteristic of German neo-philosophical thinking, whose motto is: aphorism or eternity. (Examples: the philosophical aphorisms of Lichtenberg and Novalis; Nietzschean of course; passages in Rilke’s Duino Elegies; and Kafka’s Reflections on Love, Sin, Hope, Death, the Way.)

The “of course” says it all. Sontag would later write in a more accessible, though never plain-speaking, manner. “Illness as Metaphor” (1978), her polemic against the pernicious mythologies that blame people for their illnesses, with tuberculosis and cancer as prime exemplars, was a popular success as well as a significant influence on how we think about the world. Her novel “The Volcano Lover” (1992), a less universally appreciated work, became a momentary best-seller. But in the sixties Sontag struggled to survive as a writer who didn’t teach. A protector was needed, and he appeared on cue. He was Roger Straus, the head of Farrar, Straus, who published both “The Benefactor” and “Against Interpretation” and, Moser writes,

... made Susan’s career possible. He published every one of her books. He kept her alive, profes-
sionally, financially, and sometimes physically. She was fully aware that she would not have had the life she had if he had not taken her under his protection when he did. In the literary world, their relationship was a source of fascination: of envy for writers who longed for a protector as powerful and loyal; of gos-
sip for everyone who speculated about what the relationship entailed.

“They had sex on several occasions, in hotels. She had no problems telling me that,” Greg Chandler, an assistant of Sontag’s, had no problems telling Moser.

A final protector was the photogra-

pher Annie Leibovitz, who became Sontag’s lover in 1989 and, during the fifteen years of their on-again, off-again relationship, gave her “at least” eight million dollars, according to Moser, who cites Leibovitz’s accountant, Rick Kantor. Katie Roiphe, in a remarkable essay on Sontag’s agonizing final year, in her book “The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End,” pauses to think about the “strange, inconsequential lies” that Sontag told all her life. Among them was the lie she told “about the price of her apartment on Riverside Drive, be-
cause she wanted to seem like she was an intellectual who drifted into a lovely apartment and did not spend a lot of money on real estate, like a more bour-
geois, ordinary person.” But by the time of Annie Leibovitz’s protectorship her self-image had changed. She was happy to trade in her jeans for silk trousers and her loft apartment for a penthouse.

The courtesan analogy may be less ludicrous when applied to the Annie Leibovitz period than to the Roger Straus one. Nunez, in her memoir, set in the Straus period, wrote of the Rivers-
drive apartment:

Its main feature was the growing number of books, but they were mostly paperbacks, and the shelves were cheap pine board. To go with the lack of furniture, there was a lack of decorative objects, there were no curtains or rugs, and the kitchen had only the basics. About six square feet of kitchen space were taken up by an old freezer that hadn’t worked in years. A pair of pliers sat on top of the TV set—for changing channels since the knob for that purpose had broken off. People vis-
iting for the first time were clearly surprised to find the celebrated middle-aged writer living like a grad student.

Nunez, who was twenty-three-year-old David Rieff’s twenty-five-year-old girl-
friend and lived in the apartment with him and Sontag for more than a year, stresses that “the time I’m talking about was before—before the grand Chelsea penthouse, the enormous library, the rare editions, the art collection, the de-
signer clothes, the country house, the personal assistant, the housekeeper, the personal chef.”

Nunez’s short book (it’s a hundred and forty pages) raises the ethical ques-
tion that Nunez herself must have wrestled with: Is it ever O.K. to violate the privacy that friends, dead or alive, as-
sumed to be inviolate when they allowed you to know them? Whatever the answer is in the higher reaches of philosophy, the particular instance of Nunez’s violation provides a valuable corrective to Moser’s bleak portrait. Rieff, in his introduction to the second volume of the diaries (“As Consciousness Is Har-nessed to Flesh”), writes that Sontag “tended to write more in her journals when she was unhappy, most when she was bitterly unhappy, and least when she was all right.”

Nunez—who comes across as modest and likable—gives us wonderful glimpses of Sontag when she was all right. She writes of the double dates that she and David went on with Susan and the poet Joseph Brodsky. “David had a car then, and I remember the four of us driving around Manhattan, four cigarettes going, the car filled with smoke and Joseph’s deep, rumbling voice and funny, high-pitched laugh.” She remembers Sontag’s “big, beautiful smile.” She writes of trips that Sontag took her and David on whose sole purpose was enjoyment. She does not suppress her glimpses of Sontag when she was not all right—when she was at her most painfully fearful and miserable and impossible. And yet, Nunez writes, “I considered meeting her one of the luckiest strokes of my life.”

In “Swimming in a Sea of Death,” David Rieff’s brilliant, anguished memoir of Sontag’s last year, he writes of the avidity for life that underlay her specially strong horror of extinction—a horror that impelled her to undergo the extreme sufferings of an almost sure-to-fail bone-marrow transplant rather than accept the death sentence of an untreated (and otherwise un-treatable) form of blood cancer called myelodysplastic syndrome. “The simple truth is that my mother could not get enough of being alive. She reveled in being; it was as straightforward as that. No one I have ever known loved life so unambivalently.” And: “It may sound stupid to put it this way, but my mother simply could never get her fill of the world.”

Moser’s biography, for all its pity and antipathy, conveys the extra-largeness of Sontag’s life. She knew more people, did more things, read more, went to more places (all this apart from the enormous amount of writing she produced) than most of the rest of us do. Moser’s anecdotes of the unpleasantness that she allowed herself as she grew older ring true, but recede in signifi-cance when viewed against the vast canvas of her lived experience. They are specks on it. The erudition for which she is known was part of a passion for culture that emerged, like a seedling in a crevice in a rock, during her emotionally and intellectually deprived childhood. How the seedling became the majestic flowering plant of Sontag’s matura-ty is an inspiring story—though perhaps also a chastening one. How many of us, who did not start out with Sontag’s disadvantages, have taken the opportunity that she pounced on to en-gage with the world’s best art and thought? While we watch reruns of “Law & Order,” Sontag seemingly read every great book ever written. She seemed to know that the opportunity comes only once. She had prenaternal energy (sometimes enhanced by speed). She didn’t like to sleep.

The writer Judith Grossman, who knew Sontag slightly at Oxford, remembered her as “the dark prince,” who strode through the colleges dressed entirely in black. And Katie Roiphe also thought of royalty when she wrote of “tall and elegant” David Rieff’s “slight air of being crown prince to a country that has suddenly and inexplicably gone democratic.” The mother and son bear a strong, not entirely physical, resem-bance to each other. An atmosphere surrounds them that wafts in from the same faraway kingdom. The dedication to “The Volcano Lover” reads “For David, beloved son, com-rade.” Not many parents think of their offspring as comrades. Sontag gave birth to David when she was only nineteen, and it gave her pleasure when, as a young adult, he was taken for her brother. Moser wheels on witness after witness who testifies to Sontag’s neglect of the baby and child David, and to her sometimes unwinning behavior toward him when he was an editor at Farrar, Straus. He is not above quoting interviewees who saw fit to question David’s devotion to Sontag during her horrible last year.

In “Swimming in a Sea of Death,” Rieff confesses that “my relations with my mother in the last decade of her life . . . were often strained and at times very difficult.” None of this diminishes the force that the memoir conveys of the deep currents of love that flowed between mother and son and of the intensity of Rieff’s feeling of (survivor’s) guilt. The book gives the illusion of life that good novels do—an illusion that no novel of Sontag’s was ever able to achieve. Sontag’s pencilled notes in a banal brochure of the Leukemia & Lym-phoma Society inspire Rieff’s reflection on “that astonishing mix of gallantry and pedantry that was one of her hall-marks.” He notes “my own grave fail-ings as a person (above all, I think, my clumsiness and coldness).” The voices of the two characters fuse in a terrifyingly assonant duet. The mother pleads with the son to tell her that the excru-ciating treatment is worth enduring because it will save her life. He, knowing that the treatment has almost no chance of succeeding, tells her what she wants to hear. But he says, “I am anything but certain that I did the right thing, and, in my bleaker moments, wonder if in fact I might not have made things worse for her by endlessly refilling the poisoned chalice of hope.”

In the end, Rieff realizes that the story he is telling is about ends, “the brute fact of mortality.” Sontag was not alone in her bafflement about extinction. She was the smartest girl in the class, but she couldn’t figure out why she—we—had to die. If she had survived the bone-marrow transplant (as she had survived the dire treatments for two earlier bouts of advanced cancer), “would she have been reconciled to dying of something else later on?” Rieff asks. “Are any of us, when it’s our turn?”

In 1973, Sontag wrote in her journal:

In “life,” I don’t want to be reduced to my work. In “work,” I don’t want to be reduced to my life.

My work is too austere
My life is a brutal anecdote
One of Edward J. Snowden’s earliest memories is of sneaking around the house and turning back the time on all the clocks in the hope of tricking his parents into letting him stay up late to watch more TV. Another is of the day his father brought home a Commodore 64 and how exciting it was, that very first time, to hold a joystick. Snowden’s new autobiography, “Permanent Record” (Metropolitan), is the autobiography of a gamer, pale and bleary-eyed and glued to his screen, longing for invincibility. Some people write memoirs; other people craft legends. Snowden, who once aspired to be a model and is in some quarters regarded as a modern messiah, is the second kind. As a kid, he read about King Arthur, and his family name comes from Snowdon, a mountain in Wales on top of which the legendary ruler is said to have slain a terrible giant by sticking a sword in his eye. Snowden makes a lot of this Tolkien-y sort of thing—avatars, portents of destiny, signs of greatness.

“Permanent Record” offers less than what most readers will want of the John le Carré-meets-Jason Bourne stuff: why, at the age of twenty-eight, while working for a defense contractor, Snowden decided to smuggle top-secret computer files from the U.S. government and give them to reporters at the Guardian and the Washington Post; how he did it; and what his life has been like since then. In dozens of interviews, Snowden, who lives in exile in Russia, has fielded and dodged a lot of questions about those parts of his life. Critics charge him with evasion and distortion; supporters see a becoming honesty and the nobility of an unimpeachable integrity. Readers will split over his book, too, without actually learning much, except about the mind of a gamer. Most of the book chronicles not Snowden’s disclosures and their consequences but his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, game by game, from the Nintendo Entertainment System to the National Security Agency.

“I used to work for the government,” Snowden begins, “but now I work for the public.” In 2013, Snowden’s disclosures proved that the N.S.A. had been conducting surveillance on the entire U.S. population, by way of a series of top-secret programs staggering in their scale and intrusiveness, including the bulk collection of telephone records in the form of metadata that was acquired from telecommunications companies. The scale of Snowden’s heist was also staggering. The N.S.A. claims that he stole 1.7 million classified documents. Snowden disputes this number, but, even if the actual number is quite a lot smaller, it’s likely that he stole more documents than he was able to read.

Snowden is a controversial figure, and whistle-blowing, which is how Snowden describes what he did, is a contentious subject, especially when it concerns intelligence operations. Much of the controversy, in Snowden’s case, divides along what can appear to be merely a matter of opinion: Is he a patriot or a traitor? Obama’s Justice Department charged him with treasonous federal crimes under the 1917 Espionage Act. Snowden’s defenders view these charges as wrongheaded; his critics suggest that he ought to face trial, even though, since the material he stole was classified, any proceeding would be closed to the public, a condition that, as a rule, makes a fair trial awfully unlikely. People who consider Snowden a patriot argue that exposing the N.S.A.’s mass-surveillance program was both a public service and an act of heroism. People who consider Snowden a traitor...
argue that his disclosures set U.S. counterterrorism efforts back by years, and endangered American intelligence agents and their sources all over the world. Some also point to the circumstances of his flight and exile: because Snowden first sought refuge in Hong Kong and has been granted temporary asylum in Russia (due to expire in 2020), it has been variously alleged, without proof, that he did not act alone, that he shared American military secrets with China, and that he’s a dupe of Putin. Snowden denies these accusations.

The patriot–traitor divide should be less a matter of opinion than a matter of law, but the law here is murky. On the one hand, you might think, if Snowden is a patriot who did what he did for the good of the country, then he deserves not only the protection of First Amendment freedom of speech but also the legal shelter afforded whistle-blowers, under legislation that includes the 1989 Whistleblower Protection Act—except that Snowden signed an oath not to disclose government secrets, and neither the Whistleblower Protection Act nor its many revisions and amendments extend its protections to people who disclose classified intelligence. On the other hand, you might think, if Snowden is a traitor whose actions put his country at risk, the Justice Department was right to charge him under the Espionage Act—except that it doesn’t sound as though he were a spy. (Unlike Julian Assange, Snowden has criticized Putin, and the F.B.I. believes that Snowden acted alone.) “Permanent Record” doesn’t settle any of these questions, or even evince much concern about them. Instead, Snowden appears to have other worries. “Forgive me if I come off like a dick,” he writes, knowingly.

“S
nowden could one day be seen as America’s first traitor–patriot,” the political scientist Allison Stanger writes, less King Arthur than King Solomon, in “Whistleblowers: Honesty in America from Washington to Trump” (Yale). Stanger interviewed Snowden for her book, a brisk and interesting history of people who, while working for the government, find out about terrible things the government is doing, including waste, fraud, mismanagement, and abuse of authority, and expose that misconduct to the public. She argues that Americans support whistle-blowing in theory, but, in practice, they treat whistle-blowers badly. They also tend not to like them. “Whistleblowers are by definition troublemakers,” Stanger writes. “For that reason, they can be difficult people.”

Laws protecting government whistle-blowers from retaliation have been on the books in the United States since 1778, when, in the wake of a scandal in the Navy, Congress resolved that “it is the duty of all persons in the service of the United States, as well as all other inhabitants thereof, to give the earliest information to Congress or any other proper authority of any misconduct, frauds or misdemeanor committed by any officers or persons in the service of these states, which may come to their knowledge.” In “Crisis of Conscience: Whistleblowing in an Age of Fraud” (Riverhead), Tom Mueller dates legislation having to do with corporate whistle-blowers to the Civil War, when Congress passed the False Claims Act of 1863, to encourage private citizens, referred to as “relators,” to help counter corruption among military contractors by initiating suits for fraud on behalf of the government. (The Department of Justice did not then exist.) Relators who could prove fraud were to be rewarded with a portion of any recovered money. They still are.

Whistle-blowing, at least by that breezy name, is on the rise. In the years since Congress passed a sweeping revision of the False Claims Act, in 1986, relators have recovered sixty billion dollars in mispent taxpayer money. “This is the age of the whistleblower,” Mueller observes. Mueller, who interviewed more than two hundred whistle-blowers and profiles half a dozen, focuses on the corporate kind, especially in the health–care and finance industries. Stanger sets corporate whistle-blowing aside, declaring it a separate case. But the age of the whistle-blower is also an age of corruption, deregulation, and privatization in which the border between the public and the private sectors is as thin as a dollar bill. Snowden, notwithstanding his “I used to work for the government” line, never did; he worked for a series of private companies, because the kinds of services he provided, mainly security and systems administration, had been privatized.

Snowden currently heads the board of the nonprofit Freedom of the Press Foundation, which was established in 2012 by, among others, Daniel Ellsberg. In 1971, Ellsberg leaked to the New York Times and the Washington Post forty-seven volumes of classified documents about the Vietnam War which came to be called the Pentagon Papers. (Unlike Snowden, Ellsberg, a former marine with a Ph.D. in economics, had held positions of considerable influence: he’d served as an adviser in Vietnam and helped draft some of the reports that made up the Pentagon Papers, and he’d read all of them.) In New York Times Co. v. United States (1971), the Supreme Court ruled the publication of the papers to be constitutional, but the Nixon Justice Department pursued charges against Ellsberg under the 1917 Espionage Act all the same. So desperate was Nixon for a conviction that his “plumbers” broke into the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist in the hope of finding evidence to discredit him. The arrest of the plumbers led both to the dropping of the charges against Ellsberg and to the great unravelling known as Watergate. But the exposure of classified intelligence still falls into a different bin from all other kinds of whistle-blowing. Since 1978, whistle-blowing that risks national security has been a contradiction in terms. If you steal classified documents, you can’t be a whistle-blower.

Then, there’s the question of legality. In the summer of 2013, when Snowden gave an apparently countless number of stolen files to the press, the question of whether the N.S.A.’s mass-surveillance program was unconstitutional was, at least in a narrowly legal sense, unresolved. Behind closed doors, both Congress and the White House had approved the program under the authority of the 2001 Patriot Act. In public, the N.S.A. denied that the program even existed. “Does the N.S.A. collect any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?” a Senate committee had asked the director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, early in 2013, “No, sir,” he answered. “Not knowingly.” Lying to Congress is against the law. After Snowden’s revelations, Presidential advisers recommended
that the Obama Administration make changes to the program, which, as they also pointed out, had been almost entirely ineffective, but they did not find it to be unconstitutional. In 2014, after the Times described Snowden as a whistle-blower, some government officials insisted that he wasn’t: because what he exposed wasn’t illegal, he was merely a leaker. This nicety is hard to take. Glenn Greenwald, the reporter who broke the Snowden story, asked, “If disclosing proof that top-level national security officials lied outright to Congress about domestic spying programs doesn’t make one indisputably a whistle-blower, then what does?”

In May, 2015, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, upholding the earlier opinion of a lower court, ruled that the N.S.A.’s bulk collection of Americans’ telephone metadata violated the terms of the Patriot Act. The next month, Congress passed the USA Freedom Act, which prohibited the N.S.A. from collecting that metadata. Stranger argues that before 2015 Snowden was a leaker, but that after 2015 he was a whistle-blower. It’s a Catch-22: if Snowden hadn’t broken the law to point out that the government had broken the law, what the government had done wouldn’t have broken the law.

Edward Joseph Snowden was born in North Carolina in 1983. When he was six, he got a Nintendo for Christmas and fell in love with the Legend of Zelda, which, let me be clear, remains the greatest of all Nintendo games. But for Snowden, a lonely and seemingly miserable kid, the Legend of Zelda was much more than a game. Super Mario Bros., he says, taught him about mortality. Mario runs into bad guys; he falls into pits; he gets crushed by spikes. There are so many ways to die. Nintendo “was my real education,” Snowden writes. “I am being perfectly sincere,” he insists, in a book loaded with I’m-not-a-dick asides in which the author begs the reader to believe him, and to like him.

Snowden came from a military family—one of his grandfathers was a rear admiral in the Coast Guard with an office at the Pentagon—and his father and mother worked for the government. “Both my parents had top secret clearances,” he writes, which is about the most loving thing he says about either of them. Soon he could beat his father at Mario Kart, Double Dragon, and Street Fighter. “I was significantly better than him at all those games,” Snowden writes. “Almost immediately, I grasped the limitations of gaming systems,” he says of himself, at age seven, jumping up a level, leaving mere game consoles behind.

When Snowden was eight, his family moved to Maryland, near Fort Meade, where the N.S.A. is headquartered, and his father brought home a Compaq Presario 425. “From the moment it appeared, the computer and I were inseparable,” Snowden writes. A disconsolate little boy began to shut out the real world. Hitting Enter on his first computer is the only encounter he describes as having been worth his time. “No teacher had ever been so patient, yet so responsive,” he writes. “Nowhere else—certainly not at school, and not even at home—had I ever felt so in control.”

With the Compaq, he started going online. “Internet access, and the emergence of the Web, was my generation’s big bang,” he writes. “From the age of twelve or so, I tried to spend my every waking moment online.” The offline world was horrible. His parents’ marriage was falling apart. He stopped going to school. He stopped sleeping. Nintendo had been his education; the Internet became his everything. “The Internet was my sanctuary; the Web became my jungle gym, my treehouse, my fortress, my classroom without walls.” This sounds less like a childhood than like an experiment in human deprivation.

He spent endless hours on gaming sites looking for cheat codes for his favorite games, Doom and Quake. There’s a thing in gaming known as “god-mode,” where, temporarily, you can play inviscibly and even invincibly. But god-mode conjures something more, a way of being outside the game, above the game. Around puberty, Snowden appears to have gone into god-mode and got stuck.

At least, the way he tells it, he has believed his whole life that he knows more than everyone around him. His teachers were idiots. His co-workers were idiots. His bosses were idiots. Idiots, idiots, idiots. Delete, delete, delete. Game over. Reset. New game.

The great passion of Snowden’s autobiography is his anguished love for the very early Internet. Online in the nineteen-nineties, he could be anonymous, on bulletin boards, and on massively multiplayer online role-playing games like Ultima Online, which he played so constantly that his parents installed a second phone line so that he could have unlimited access. On Ultima Online, players choose an alternate identity, an “alt”; you can be a wizard or a warrior or a tinkerer or a thief. “I could toggle between these alts with a freedom that was unavailable to me in off-line life, whose institutions tend to regard all mutability as suspicious,” Snowden writes. Online, he could be whoever he wanted to be. And he could make the world be the way he wanted it to be.

Disillusionment, in this life story, is watching the wrecking of the Internet. “To grow up is to realize the extent to which your existence has been governed by a system of rules, vague guidelines, and increasingly unsupportable norms that have been imposed on you without your consent,” Snowden writes, offering a definition of adulthood that better describes arrested development. He left high school after a year. He went to community college for a while. He posted a lot of stuff on bulletin boards, including a Japanese anime site where, in April, 2002, when he was eighteen, he uploaded a short autobiography called “The Book of Ed,” illustrated with a cartoon of himself, a bitmoji before they were called bitmojis, wearing a T-shirt that reads “I ♥ Me”:

I like Japanese, I like food, I like martial arts, I like ponies, I like guns, I like food, I like girls, I like my girlish figure that attracts girls, and I like my lamer friends.

That’s the best biography you’ll get out of me, coppers! . . . I really am a nice guy, though.

In the spring of 2004, Snowden joined the Army reserves but, five months later, washed out of basic training. Not long afterward, on an early dating site called HotOrNot, he met a twenty-year-old photographer and pole dancer named
Lindsay Mills. (They married in 2017.) In 2005, he became a contractor for American intelligence services, working as a security guard.

Whistle-blowing is very often an upstanding act of courage, undertaken at great personal cost, and resulting in great public good. But the presence of a lot of whistle-blowing—an age of whistle-blowing—isn’t a sign of a thriving democracy or a healthy business world; it’s a sign of a weak democracy and a sick business world. When institutions are working well, either they don’t engage in misconduct or their internal mechanisms discover, thwart, and punish it. Democracies have checks and balances, including investigations, ethics committees, and elections. Businesses have regulations, compliance departments, and inspections. Whistle-blowing is necessary when these safeguards fail. But to celebrate whistle-blowing as anything other than a last resort is to give up on institutions.

An act of whistle-blowing is more than an accusation of specific misconduct; it’s an indictment of an entire system of accountability. Whistle-blowers don’t say, “My company sells drugs that make you sicker.” They say, “My company sells drugs that make you sicker and my company knows it’s doing this and I alerted my bosses and asked them to stop it and they won’t, because they are making piles of money off this scam.” Whistle-blowers have a lot in common with one another. Most discover abuses while holding positions of power within their organizations, often in oversight roles. They typically report those abuses to their superiors, repeatedly, for months and even years, before seeking help outside their organizations, usually from lawyers or other advocates. Less frequently, they go straight to the press.

Snowden doesn’t fit any part of this pattern. Early in his training, he was upbraided for failing to follow the chain of command. He never held a position of influence or oversight within the intelligence community. He didn’t come across evidence of wrongdoing. He went looking for it. Stanger says that Snowden began “siphoning off classified information” from the servers on which he worked beginning in 2009, when he was sent to Geneva as a contractor for the C.I.A. Snowden says he began searching for evidence of a mass-surveillance program before being posted to Japan, later that year, where he worked for Perot Systems (which was acquired by Dell soon afterward), at the N.S.A.’s Pacific Technical Center, at Yokota Air Base. His job there, he says, was “helping to connect the NSA’s systems architecture with the CIA’s.” To do this work, he had extraordinary access to classified documents, far above his standing in the intelligence community.

He began prowling around. “To find out about even a fraction of the malfeasance, you had to go searching,” Snowden explains. “And to go searching, you had to know that it existed.” N.S.A. mass-surveillance programs had been the subject of the 1998 film “Enemy of the State,” starring Will Smith; of the 2000 Nintendo 64 video game Perfect Dark; and of Patrick Radden Keefe’s 2005 book, “Chatter: Dispatches from the Secret World of Global Eavesdropping.” But Snowden says he began to suspect that the United States was engaged in mass surveillance only after being assigned to assess China’s surveillance capabilities. “I had the sneaking sense while I was looking through all this China material that I was looking at a mirror and seeing a reflection of America,” he writes. “And although you should hate me for it, I have to say that at the time I tamped down my unease.” Still, he was upset. So he kept digging. Eventually, he came across a classified report that provided the evidence he’d been looking for.

Snowden has claimed that he alerted more than ten officials at the N.S.A. about his discovery and expressed his alarm. He has provided no support for this claim. The N.S.A. says he reported his concerns to no one. “There were other avenues available for somebody whose conscience was stirred and thought that they needed to question government actions,” Obama said at a press conference in 2013. The classified documents Snowden released to the press contained a good deal more than evidence of the surveillance of American citizens; they included, for instance, a 2006 memo detailing the N.S.A.’s monitoring of the telephone conversations of thirty-five unnamed world leaders, which led the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, to charge the Obama Administration with tapping her phone, causing a diplomatic uproar. “I think it is fair to say that the senior leadership of the NSA probably hate me a little bit,” Snowden told Stanger, as if this were personal.

Snowden writes that, when he reached the end of his quest, he “felt more adult than ever, but also cursed with the knowledge that all of us had been reduced to something like children, who’d be forced to live the rest of our lives..."
under omniscient parental supervision.” He’d been finding the offline world annoying for a long time, and now the N.S.A. had wrecked the online world, too. He unsheathed Excalibur.

The U.S. government has collected information about Americans since the first federal census, in 1790. At every point in American history when the government has stepped up those efforts, clandestine or not, citizens have protested and resisted, some number of Americans greeting each new regime as marking the end of American freedom. As the gifted historian Sarah Igo argues in “The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America” (Harvard), within this long fight lie the origins of most modern ideas about both privacy and citizenship, including the idea of the “private citizen.” Americans complained in the eighteen-seventies, when the federal government was found to be opening people’s mail. They complained in the nineteen-teens, after the founding of the F.B.I., which spied on socialists and African-American “subversives.” They complained about draft-registration cards, drivers’ licenses, and every other government-issued identification, as forms of tracking and surveillance, including, after 1935, Social Security cards, a punch card for every American. By 1966, as the Senate Judiciary Committee reported, the federal government held, in separate agencies, computer files containing “more than 2 billion records on individuals, including 27.2 billion names, 2.3 billion addresses, 264 million criminal histories, 280 million mental health records, 916 million profiles on alcoholism and drug addiction, and 1.2 billion financial records.” That year, Americans debated a proposal for establishing a National Data Center, a peer to the Library of Congress (which holds books) and the National Archives (which holds manuscripts), to store all the data on a central computer. Congress convened hearings on “computers and the invasion of privacy.” Critics warned of “data surveillance.” “The citizen concerned about the erosion of his privacy has until now had some consolation in knowing that all these records about his life have been widely dispersed and often difficult to get at,” Vance Packard wrote in the Times. “But today, with the advent of giant sophisticated computers capable of storing and recalling vast amounts of information, this consolation is vanishing.” The proposed National Data Center died. But data surveillance endured.

In 1971, Senate hearings on federal data banks revealed the existence of a vast program of domestic surveillance conducted by the U.S. military. By 1974, there had been so much documentation of government-run and computer-stored and processed surveillance of civilians that Congress passed the Privacy Act, which opened with this indictment: “Increasing use of computers and sophisticated information technology, while essential to the efficient operations of the Government, has greatly magnified the harm to individual privacy that can occur.” Passed when Americans’ distrust of government was at a high point, given the betrayals of Vietnam and Watergate, the Privacy Act failed to protect individuals’ private data from corporations. Concern about the capture of personal data seemed to be directed only at the government. (Bell Telephone Company, for instance, had been collecting bulk data about its customers to the best of its ability since its founding, in 1877.) At Senate committee hearings in 1975, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense was asked whether ARPANET, the Pentagon-run precursor to the Internet, was secretly collecting information about American citizens. “It is a marvel in many ways,” he answered, but it “simply does not fit the Orwellian mold attributed to it.”

But Snowden’s interest in the N.S.A.’s surveillance program appears to have had as much to do with the vanishing Internet of his childhood as with the overreach of the national-security state. In 2011, after four years of living abroad, Snowden returned to the United States. “Contradictory thoughts rained down like Tetris blocks, and I struggled to sort them out—to make them disappear,” he writes. Working at Dell, under a contract for the C.I.A., he felt that Americans had become pitiful victims of their own government. “The Internet I’d grown up with, the Internet that had raised me, was disappearing,” he writes. “And with it, so was my youth.” He was twenty-seven.

Snowden subscribes to the theory of a Once Great Internet, a techno-utopia in which boys and men could be free and anonymous and undiscoverable and ungovernable. “Back then, being online was another life, considered by most to be separate and distinct from Real Life,” he writes. “The virtual and the actual had not yet merged. And it was up to each individual user to determine for them-
selves where one ended and the other began. It was precisely this that was so inspiring: the freedom to imagine something entirely new, the freedom to start over.” This is the anarchists’ Internet, promoted by countercultural figures, including Stewart Brand, of the Whole Earth Catalog, and John Perry Barlow, the former Grateful Dead lyricist, and advanced by libertarians and anti–anti-trust conservatives led by Neil Ginling and George Gilder. Their Internet isn’t the Internet we lost; it’s the Internet we got, under the terms of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, a Gingrich-and-Gilder travesty, signed by Bill Clinton, that shielded the Internet from government regulation and made it a commercial free-for-all. Google, Facebook, and Amazon know far, far more about most Americans than the N.S.A. does. But Snowden came to believe that the forces that ruined the Internet of his boyhood were less the forces of libertarianism that left corporations unchecked, giving rise to endless forms of capture, tracking, mining, and manipulation, than the forces of government that, under the expansive authority of the 2001 Patriot Act, made the Internet a place where it was impossible to be unknown and ungoverned. He wanted to end that game. Reset. New game.

In 2012, after taking a disability leave, Snowden moved to Hawaii to work as a contractor at an N.S.A. facility in Oahu. He was determined to know everything about how the agency was trying to know everything. He wrote a program to flag any unusual documents that were moving through the traffic of the Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communication System. In 2013, he took a lower-paying job working for Booz Allen Hamilton, in order to gain access to more classified information. He writes, “I was resolved to bring to light a single, all-encompassing fact: that my government had developed and deployed a global system of mass surveillance without the knowledge or consent of its citizenry.” He neared the eye of the giant.

On his desk, Snowden kept a pocket U.S. Constitution, propped up against a Rubik’s Cube. He stored the files he stole on micro SD cards, smaller than postage stamps. He’d pry off a square of his Rubik’s Cube, tuck an SD card inside, jam the square back on, and walk out the door. This move did not end the game.

BRIEFLY NOTED

Last Witnesses, by Svetlana Alexievich, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Random House). In this sweeping oral history of life during the Second World War, interviews with men and women who were children at the time coalesce into a haunting picture of how life is mutilated by war. First published in 1985, in the Soviet Union, and appearing now in English for the first time, the book documents the terrible swiftness with which modest pleasures—going to the cinema, relishing a lilac’s bloom—were swept aside by brutality. Children often witnessed horror without comprehending it: a seven-year-old boy hears human bones cracking “like ripe pumpkins,” and a girl in a German camp, remembering a friend who died while they were there together, thinks, “I wanted to tell her about my angel.”

Fashionopolis, by Dana Thomas (Penguin Press). The collapse, in 2013, of the Rana Plaza, in Bangladesh, was the deadliest garment-factory disaster in history. Beginning with that event, this investigation into the fashion industry’s manufacturing practices proceeds to indict its exploitation of workers and its cavalier attitude toward environmental damage. “Fast fashion” behemoths, with their landfill-choking wastes and dependence on sweatshops, feature in the most alarming sections, but Thomas, a longtime fashion journalist, also inspects the unsustainable offshoring and cost-cutting habits of smaller companies. Detours into the efforts of firms attempting to produce their goods through gentler methods offer a glimpse into how consumerism, slowed to a less ferocious pace, might be reconciled with sustainability.

Night Boat to Tangier, by Kevin Barry ( Doubleday). Two aging Irish drug smugglers sit in a Spanish ferry terminal trading absurd jokes and quasi-philosophical banter in this tautly written novel. As they desultorily touch on the calamities of our time, including the refugee crisis, the men prepare for another kind of drama—the estranged daughter of one of them may be making her way through the port that night. Dreamlike snippets of their louche and violent youths give depth to a portrait of the pair, who must reckon with the remains of dissolute years spent passing between Ireland and Spain. “There comes a time,” one of them says, “when you just have to live among your ghosts.”

Dominicana, by Angie Cruz (Flatiron). At the age of fifteen, the narrator of this poignant novel embarks on a marriage to a much older man, who promises to move her (and, one day, the rest of her family) from the Dominican Republic to America. When the young woman arrives in New York, she confronts a loveless relationship and a frighteningly foreign city, but currents of desire eventually take shape, and compel her to fight for her autonomy. In nimble prose, Cruz animates the simultaneous reluctance and vivacity that define her main character as she attempts to balance filial duty with personal fulfillment, and contends with leaving one home to build another that is both for herself and for her family.
In the summer of 1954, Roy DeCarava, a thirty-four-year-old photographer from Harlem, paid a visit to the fifty-two-year-old Langston Hughes. The two men didn’t know each other well, but it was not unusual for younger artists to seek out the famous author. In the more than two decades since Hughes—who was originally from Joplin, Missouri—had decided to make his home in Harlem, he had opened his doors to fledgling writers, painters, performers, and the like, who came looking for his genial counsel about their work and their lives. Enormously productive, Hughes was, at the time, one of very few artists of color who supported themselves with their art alone. So far, DeCarava hadn’t managed to do that himself. The only child of a hardworking single Jamaican mother, he had learned young that a strong work ethic was the key to advancement. By the time he met Hughes, he had toiled for several years as an illustrator for an advertising firm. A skilled draftsman, painter, and printmaker, he had developed his various talents first at the now defunct Textile High School, on West Eighteenth Street, and then at the Cooper Union School of Art, the Harlem Community Art Center, and, in the mid-forties, the George Washington Carver Art School. During the years of his apprenticeship as an artist, DeCarava’s practice underwent a great transformation: the photographs he had begun taking as the foundation for his prints became his dominant mode of expression.

Hughes’s enthusiasm for DeCarava’s dark, emotive images was immediate. After helping him secure a publishing contract with Simon & Schuster, Hughes wrote a text to hang the pictures on: “The Sweet Flypaper of Life,” a monologue spoken by Sister Mary Bradley, an elderly black woman who lives in and loves Harlem. Sister Mary has been ill, but she isn’t yet ready to meet her cherished Maker; she wants to stick around, on the sweet flypaper of life, to see what progress blacks will make in this hostile world—to see, for instance, “what this integration the Supreme Court has done decreed is going to be like.” The resulting book, also titled “The Sweet Flypaper of Life,” which contains a hundred and forty of DeCarava’s photographs, is a fascinating historical artifact but not the best place to start if you’re interested in what made DeCarava, who died in 2009, at age eighty-nine, essential and inspiring to numerous image-makers who came after him, including the painter Kerry James Marshall and the filmmaker Kahlil Joseph. When I first saw the book, in the late eighties, I didn’t understand why DeCarava occupied a near-mythic status among some of my photographer friends. The book’s five-by-seven-inch format meant that the pictures were small, and I found the folksy tone of Hughes’s text distracting: it spilled over the photographs and sentimentalized them. I felt as though Hughes was trying to explain blackness—and DeCarava’s photographs of it—to white people.

Still, the book was a critical and commercial success, and it no doubt was part of what allowed DeCarava to quit his job and devote the rest of his life to photography. By the time he died, his body of work had come together to form, among other things, a monumental poetics of blackness, one that explored the ways in which race can define a person’s style and essence, and made it clear how poorly or negligently the
color black had been used in much of American photography before DeCarava came along.

The two tremendous shows of DeCarava's black-and-white work currently on view at the David Zwirner Gallery—“Light Break,” at the space on West Nineteenth Street, and “the sound i saw,” on East Sixty-ninth—are the first large-scale exhibitions of his photographs to be mounted in New York since a 1996 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, and the timing couldn’t be more ideal. It’s wonderful, during this age of agitprop and questions about who gets to speak for whom, to be reminded of the delicacy that one can find in art, a fineness of sensibility that eludes a bluntly political reading. Not that DeCarava will escape those readings entirely; the majority of his subjects are black, which means that much of the response to his images will be, de facto, sociological, addressing the so-called marginalization of the people depicted. But there is no such thing as the marginal in DeCarava’s photographs. Women, musicians, vegetation, Harlem: all of it is alive with the experience of being.

I’m not sure if the immediacy of photography—the ability to record one’s impressions of the world relatively quickly—contributed to DeCarava’s love of the medium, but as a young black man he knew something about how ephemeral life could be, and about the forces around him that didn’t want him to exist at all. Drafted into the Army in 1942, he was first sent to Virginia, and then stationed in Fort Claiborne, Louisiana, in the Jim Crow South. There, DeCarava experienced a racism so intense that he broke down. In Peter Galassi’s biographical essay for the MOMA show, the artist recalled:

The only place that wasn’t segregated in the army was the psychiatric ward of the hospital. I was there for about a month. I was in the army for about six or seven months altogether, but I had nightmares about it for twenty years.

The brilliant Lester Young played his saxophone on a slant in order to achieve the sound he wanted, and one gets the sense, while walking through “Light Break,” which includes a hundred and nineteen silver-gelatin prints and spans more than half a century of picture-making (though the images are not hung in chronological order), that DeCarava photographed on a kind of emotional slant. His phenomenal 1952 portrait of a girlish, hip, centered Billie Holiday is unusual in that she is facing the camera, relating to DeCarava with what looks like a mixture of curiosity, flirtatiousness, and defiance: “This is me,” she seems to say. “Here I am, and who are you?” That kind of exchange is rare. A number of the well-known black people whose images appear in “Light Break” and “the sound i saw” grew up or had family in the South at a time when being black and being looked at was, to put it mildly, a complicated proposition. It was no doubt frightening for some of DeCarava’s subjects to feel seen in this way, and the shy, big, and delicate John Coltrane, who doesn’t look toward the camera at all, is a prime example of the difficulty of trying to distinguish between being viewed and being perceived as a target.

In another photograph from 1952, the legendary pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams sits off center in DeCarava’s carefully considered framing. (Like many of his contemporaries, DeCarava had great respect for Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ability to frame the “decisive moment” with dexterity and formal intelligence.) Williams, her head turned, seems to be listening to something that’s being said or is about to be said beyond the frame; she’s waiting to respond, and DeCarava is waiting with her. While the picture is a photograph of Williams, it is also a study of the weight of blackness: the blackness of the hair that tops her slightly less dark face and the black liquid intelligence of her eyes, offset by the whiteness of her blouse.

DeCarava was always exploring ways to do photographically what he could do as a draftsman: make precise shapes on a white page. As he grew older, he looked for purer and purer shapes, unencumbered by the drama of the individual. (In “Couples, Lake,” from 2001, for instance, mountains stand solidly on the far side of a lake. Closer to the viewer, on this side of the water, sits a row of couples whose forms echo those of the mountains.) Sometimes the precision can make the pictures feel too much like “fine art” and less troubling and free than they could be, but it’s never uninteresting to see what DeCarava saw.

The shows were curated by the artist’s widow, the art historian Sherry Turner DeCarava, and she has done a great job of distilling the work without memorializing her husband, so that what emerges is as much the narrative of a thinker as that of an artist. Whereas some photographers, such as Weegee and Garry Winogrand, seem to react quickly, with great verve and energy, and only after the fact question what they’ve done, DeCarava—especially in the thirty silver-gelatin photographs about musicians and black music that make up “the sound i saw”—thought about thinking, and then improvised around those thoughts. The pictures that grab your heart in “the sound i saw” are the ones that study the subjects’ relationship to their art. No one has ever captured Lena Horne’s pride in her work and her race better than DeCarava did in his 1957 portrait “Count Basie and Lena Horne.” Horne is visibly in love with all that Basie makes her feel as a musician and as a black woman. As in the Williams portrait, whiteness—here the whiteness of Horne’s turban, which sits like a beacon at the top of the image—is used to underline the blackness in the photograph, black skin and black as a color that leads to black feeling and thought.

In 1950, DeCarava befriended a young photographer named Homer Page, who was a protégé of Edward Steichen. (Steichen included several of DeCarava’s photographs in his landmark 1955 exhibition, “The Family of Man.”) It was Page who helped DeCarava develop his unique printing style. Until then, Galassi writes, DeCarava had been “printing the negative to yield a conventionally full range of contrast, from brilliant white to dense black, thus rendering the picture brittle and harsh. After talking with Page, he taught himself how to make the image cohere by printing it more softly, in a narrower range of deep tones, thus breathing space and life into a luxury of dark grays.” Gray is, of course, a color between black and white, and it’s everywhere in DeCarava’s pictures, like a veil between you and the situation being presented, more evidence of DeCarava’s gentility and watchfulness, his commitment to finding the light in what others might consider darkness.
THE ART WORLD

BEHELD

Amy Sherald’s portraits.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The subjects of Amy Sherald’s eight strong oil portraits at Hauser & Wirth impress with their looks, in both senses: striking elegance, riveting gazes. In six of the pictures, the subjects stand singly against bright monochrome grounds. (The other two works are more complicated.) They are young or youngish, attractive, stylishly dressed, and likely well-to-do—presentable people, presented. All are African-American. Should this matter? It does in light of the artist’s drive to, in her words, seek “versions of myself in art history and in the world.” Sherald, who is forty-six and lives in New Jersey, revitalizes a long-fading genre in painting by giving portraits worldly work to do and distinctive pleasures to impart. Her style is a simplified realism, worked from photographs that she stages and takes of individuals who interest her, an approach much like that of the late, belatedly celebrated painter Barkley Hendricks. Peculiar to Sherald is a consistent nuance, in her subjects’ expressions, which can take time to fully register—it’s so subtle. There is no palpable challenge. But there’s drama, starting with that of the show’s existence.

Three years ago, Sherald was plucked from low-profile but substantial status as an artist when Michelle Obama chose her to paint her official portrait. The result was unveiled, last year, along with the official portrait of Barack Obama, by Kehinde Wiley: the ex-President seated and leaning forward, as if in intimate conversation. Barack’s characteristic pose (I beg indulgence to use the couple’s first names, for convenience) rather undercut Wiley’s signature manner of investing contemporary subjects with neo–early-nineteenth-century, Napoleonic grandeur. (Wiley compensated by surrounding Barack with glorious flowers.) In Sherald’s painting, Michelle sits sideways and turns outward, with her arms bare and her chin resting lightly on the back of one hand. She wears an immense cotton gown—by the designer Michelle Smith—patterned with fragments of eccentric abstract shapes adrift on white, which fills most of the canvas that isn’t taken up by a light-blue ground. Like some other commenters, I was bemused, when I saw the work in reproduction, by what seemed an overwhelming of the wearer by the worn. Then I visited the painting at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, in Washington, D.C.

You must—and I mean absolutely have to—see Sherald’s work in person, if at all possible. Taking in the painting’s scale (it is six feet high by five feet wide) and the sensitive suavity of its brushwork (a tissue of touches, each a particular decision), I decided that artist and sitter had achieved a mind meld, buoyant effect. The dress amounts to a symbol of Michelle’s public role—a tall order for anyone—and the éclat with which she performs it. But the gown becomes subsidiary when you meet Michelle’s gaze, which we’ve glimpsed often since 2008, one of disarming but seriously knowing irony, true to her roots even as she rises to her station. Sherald riffs on the extravagance of the spectacle while deferring—as just another beholder, another citizen—to the integrity of the mien. The work is a tour de force within the constraint imposed by a political commission. Even so, it didn’t prepare me for the more intense eloquence of Sherald’s present show: portraits commissioned by herself, all but one painted this year. She activates the double function of portraiture as the recognition of a worldly identity and, in the best instances, the surprise of an evident

Sherald’s “A single man in possession of a good fortune,” from 2019.
inner life. Race applies as a condition and a cause for resetting the mainstream of Western art.

The subjects make eye contact with us. They can seem mildly interested in how they are beheld—they wouldn’t have bothered dressing well if they weren’t—but with disparate self-possession, attitude-free. Their affects vary from the radiant assurance of “Sometimes the king is a woman,” a young woman in a dress of slashing black-and-white patterns against a pink ground, to the slightly gawky presence of “A single man in possession of a good fortune.” (The whiff of Jane Austen borders some consequential comedy.) This young man sports a spectacular sweater that displays gridded architectural motifs in blazing colors; the ground is a modulated gold. He impresses as somebody’s son, somebody’s brother, who is embarking on adulthood with resilient confidence but a good deal yet to learn. He made me smile, with wonder. The tacit narratives of both pictures are compelling in a way that recalls the long-lapsed convention of painted portraiture as courtly ceremony, exalting kings and courtiers—this was the forte of Velázquez, whose duties to Philip IV happened to occasion some of the greatest paintings ever made. (The Spaniard’s royal toasts, for instance, had everything to learn, but their existence was important to everyone.)

Race anchors Sherald’s project in history. She represents it strategically, by modifying a policy of today’s leading painter of subjects from black society and culture, Kerry James Marshall. Marshall renders the skin of all of his people coal black. Sherald opts for grisaille. Both thereby apostrophize America’s original sin and permanent crisis: the otherizing of the not white, regardless of gradations. The standardized hues put race both to the fore and to the side of what’s really going on—an address to Western pictorial precedence, freeing a debate in the present to thaw a conversation with the past and future. To explain the startling authority of Sherald’s art, you must think back to periods when portraiture was a vital function of painting and then, returning forward, incorporate as mainstream the asperous contributions of honored but too often patronized black American artists such as Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Charles White. When art changes in the present, it changes in the past, too. I had a dizzy sensation at the Sherald show—which was so much better than I had expected—of ground shifting under my feet.

As is natural in a time of transition, Sherald, too, is still learning. Marking a hugely ambitious departure for her, “Precious jewels by the sea”—a beach scene, ten feet high by nine feet wide, in which two young men carry two young women on their shoulders, all in chic swimwear, next to a tipped reddish-orange-and-white beach umbrella—should be a masterpiece, and it almost is. The frankly observing, untroubled intelligence of the four subjects stuns with what I want to call the Sherald Effect: an experience of looking that entails looking out, to ambiguous but inescapably gripping ends. However, there’s a lurch in her switch from flat to spatial backgrounds. Aqua waters flipping to dark blue at the horizon fail to convince, and I could very well do without a tiny sailboat in the supposed distance. The perfunctory depth doesn’t detract from the terrific aplomb of the figures, but it sabotages the unitary power to which the picture aspires.

I love “The girl next door,” a less insistent derivation for Sherald. The young woman portrayed is personable and anything but svelte. She fills out a baggy dress that is patterned with red, yellow, blue, green, and purple polka dots, cinched by a thin belt. Her look is rather guileless—far from the cool savoir of the beach people—but equal, you somehow know, to whatever daily life she is leading. She is prised by Sherald’s brush for the insouciance of her garb: the bouncy dots a tonic exception to the refinement of the abstract designs that the other subjects’ clothes provide for this painter’s aesthetic use. What’s the neighbor’s name? I’d like to know. I almost feel that I do—on the tip of my tongue, about to come to me. Now let’s define great portraiture. It makes companionable for a person who is identified or unknown, perhaps remote from you in geography or time (even dead, no matter), different from you in ways big or small, a lot or only the littlest bit like you in other ways, and, all in all, another exceedingly specific inhabitant of a certain planet, amid everything that cannot help but be.
A few episodes into “Our Boys,” Simon, an agent for the Shabak, Israel’s internal security service, talks with two policemen about a case that they are struggling to solve: the death by burning of a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy. He was abducted in the aftermath of another horrific crime, Hamas’s kidnapping and murder of three Jewish teen-agers—students whose disappearance united Israelis, first in the hope that they would be rescued, and then, once their bodies were discovered, in grief and rage.

Revenge seems to be the likely and logical motive, but the cops reject it. “Jews would never do this,” one of them says, making a dismissive gesture. “You sure?” Simon asks. “Yes,” the cop says. “So is my mother,” Simon says, showing him a text message: “Thank God Jews didn’t do this, take care.” “Just like my mother,” the second cop replies—and holds up a similar text. “Let’s recruit them,” Simon says.

It’s the world’s bleakest Jewish-mother joke, a rare moment of humor in “Our Boys,” a galvanic new series on HBO, co-produced with the Israeli network Keshet. Ten episodes long, the show is a partly fictional deconstruction of a hate crime that took place in 2014 and led directly to war in Gaza. It’s a story of family grief and family dysfunction, and also a beautifully paced thriller about a police investigation. But it’s something more ambitious, too: a challenging work of art about the intractable problem of identity—the struggle of any individual to maintain core values, when the world demands nothing but solidarity based on shared victimhood. The show is unusually fearless about letting moral discomfort linger, and manages to be stirring without ever offering false hope, a rarity for even the best-made dramas.

“Our Boys” (which was created by three Israelis, two Jewish and one Arab: Hagai Levi, who made “In Treatment”; Joseph Cedar, of “Footnote”; and the director Tawfik Abu Wael) was bound to attract controversy. During the run-up to this month’s elections in Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attacked it as anti-Semitic propaganda and urged Israelis to boycott it. He also, in his Trumpian style, took aim at Keshet—which has, not coincidentally, helped publicize corruption allegations against him.

Netanyahu’s description is nonsense. “Our Boys” is thoughtful and layered in its portrayal of both Jews and Palestinians. Like many diaspora Jews, I know only a little about Israeli culture, but even I recognize that the show has a deep sense of specificity, from the cramped Jerusalem kitchens to the gated back yards in the settlements and the streets lit by Ramadan lights as Muslim families walk beneath. The series explores tensions between big-city secular Ashkenazi Jews and ultra-Orthodox Sephardic settlers, laying out divisions within the families of the victims and the perpetrators. It also dramatizes both the broken and the functional aspects of the Israeli justice system—which, through skilled police work, nailed the killers of the Palestinian boy, Mohammad Abu Khdeir, in only a few days.

What the show doesn’t do is focus on the first crime, the murders of Naf-tali Frenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah. Instead, it views that crisis from a mediated distance, often showing protests and rallies through screens—on phones and on TV—scanning crowds gathered at the Western Wall, praying for the boys’ return, as their mothers plead for their sons’ lives. This narrative choice has divided viewers, but it feels purposeful: despite the title, this
is a story about one boy, Mohammed, and it is being told precisely because his death struck so many Israelis as beyond belief. At the funeral of the Jewish teen-agers, Netanyahu said, “A deep and wide moral abyss separates us from our enemies. They sanctify death, while we sanctify life. They sanctify cruelty, while we sanctify compassion.” Yet, in the first episode, we watch a young ultra-Orthodox man drift through a crowd of protesters, clutching his guitar, absorbing the furious chants of “Death to the Arabs!”

The series’ central emphasis is on how easily such dehumanizing rhetoric can sway vulnerable minds, a theme that should feel uncomfortably relevant to American viewers. Still, the show’s greatest strength may be the way that it contains its own critiques, letting contradictory impulses smack against one another without resolution. Even the most villainous character gets to make his case, discounting what he perceives as the weakling, watery mind-set of Ashkenazi liturgy: “On the one hand, on the second hand, the third hand, the fourth hand—sometimes you need to pick up a sword and slaughter.” By the finale, every concern that a critical viewer might raise has been addressed. Characters argue that Mohammed’s death is a “man bites dog” exception; they debate the line between mental illness and fanaticism, the immense power gulf between Israeli citizens and Palestinians suffering under the occupation, the fraught notion of collective punishment. At its heart, this is a show about the brutal economics of empathy in a time of war: who gets it, who deserves it, who is denied it.

Jony Arbid and Ruba Blal Asfour are immensely poignant as Mohammed’s parents, whose sorrow and panic pervade the first few episodes, in which Mohammed disappears and then, once his body is found, is proclaimed the Dawn Martyr by fellow-Palestinians, who pressure his parents not to lend support to the Israeli trial. Shlomi Elkbatz is coolly fascinating as the soft-spoken Simon, a Moroccan-born agent in the Shabak’s Jewish Unit, which investigates crimes perpetrated by Jews, and who comes from the same Sephardic ultra-Orthodox background as the murder suspects. In later episodes, Noa Koler is a standout as the prickly, complex Dvora, a psychiatrist to the ultra-Orthodox community, who is faced with a set of ethical quandaries: What is her obligation to a mentally fragile patient under investigation? To her country? To the community she serves?

Simon and Dvora are both riveting figures, different kinds of detectives who use emotional intuition to arrive at different notions of justice. They are also composite characters, based on the writers’ interviews with multiple agents and psychiatrists. That’s a complicated ethical choice of its own. But it ends up being effective, freeing the series to feel authentic without being literally true, enabling it to enter into intimate, manipulative relationships—between agents and suspects, shrinks and patients, and, crucially, among participants in the locked universe of ultra-Orthodox settlers.

The show covers a huge amount of ground, tracing the crime, the police and political response, and, finally, the trial. Ironically, given Netanyahu’s attacks on the media, “Our Boys” is especially damning toward television news, which let rumors—that Mohammed was gay, among others—air unchecked. “This murder will be remembered as an honor killing forever. Arabs killed a fog, that’s how it is,” the man who planted the story says, smirking. “That’s how you form public opinion.”

In the fifth episode, Simon goes undercover among the prime suspects, the narcissistic owner of a Jerusalem eyeglass shop and his nephews, all of them related to a prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbi. The cops bug their houses, tap phones, and monitor alleyways from the sky. Simon—using his family knowledge of Mizrahi manners—embeds with them, disguised as a reserve-duty soldier. He gets invited to Shabbat dinner; he bonds with a local rabbi. He’s particularly drawn to Avishai, the sixteen-year-old boy we glimpsed in earlier episodes, weeping about the lost teen-agers, floating through the protests with his guitar.

A failed Yeshiva student who is paralyzed by O.C.D. and depression, Avishai is stooped and silent. “I know his type,” Simon assures the other agents, pegging the boy, initially, as “a leaf in the wind,” with “zero capacity for violence.” Even once the truth emerges about his role in Mohammed’s kidnapping, and his family becomes anathema in Israel, his community privately defends him and his cousin. Simon’s own brother argues, “They’re good kids who got dragged into this by their crazy uncle.”

Avishai, who is played with a disciplined alienation by Adam Gabay, becomes the most daring narrative gambit in “Our Boys.” It’s not hard to relate to the difficult decision-making of a brilliant detective, grieving parents, or a caring psychiatrist. It’s much harder to consider the inner life of a sixteen-year-old who kidnaps a boy because he is Muslim. In the seventh episode, we are forced to inhabit Avishai’s unhappy head, as he confesses, stuttering, to the acts that led to the crime. Theatrical editing blurs past and present: Simon stands at a gas pump, as we see the boys pour gasoline into soda bottles, in flashback. For a moment, I nearly jumped ship, unwilling to experience the queasy blend of sympathy and revulsion that the moment demands. But Avishai’s story is challenging in a meaningful way, requiring something richer than empathy—something more like comprehension. The definition of modern terrorism that Simon winds up articulating is the one that the show wants us to face: not “cells” or blueprints but “someone with mental issues, on the margins, somewhat racist, who reads ‘Death to Arabs’ or ‘Death to Jews’ on Facebook and goes out and kills someone.” The show’s title has a hidden meaning: teenagers like Avishai are “our boys,” too.

In the end, “Our Boys” is simply not interested in liberal hand-wringing, or in what remains of the left in Israel; its interest is in confronting head on the taboo subject of what people say in private, when questions of security override all else. During Shabbat dinner, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi and his guest, a Russian mathematician, argue that there is, in fact, a Biblical justification for this kind of revenge—and that, strategically speaking, to defeat an irrational enemy you must be just as crazy. “That is why, mathematically, one burned Arab boy is very good,” the guest argues. “For Jews.”

A Shabak agent describes those words as “incitement.” “What incitement?” Simon says, in a weary tone. “My brother could have said the same thing. So could his kids and everyone I know.”

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**THE CURRENT CINEMA**

**NO MAN’S LAND**

"Ad Astra" and "Monos."

BY ANTHONY LANE

A car chase on the moon. Now, that’s something I haven’t seen before. Warmest congratulations to “Ad Astra,” therefore, for presenting a fresh spectacle to tired eyes. The cars in question are skeletal buggies, upgraded from the lunar rovers that the folks on the last three Apollo missions drove around, just for the hell of it. (And for the sci-

ence of it, too. Honestly.) But the chase is a chase. We join a small convoy of rovers, one of them bearing an important passenger, Major Roy McBride (Brad Pitt). Merrily they roll along, across a bone-white prairie of nothing much. Suddenly, other buggies veer into view, intent on pillage and theft. Space pirates! Bring ‘em on! There is a crash, an exchange of fire, and the alarming sight of McBride’s rover slewing over the lip of a crater. And the best thing about the scene? It’s practically noiseless. We might as well be watching a silent movie. One spaceman shooting another, it turns out, makes the same sound that your vacuum cleaner makes when it tries to swallow the rug.

“Ad Astra” is directed by James Gray. So tight was his staging of a car chase, through torrents of blinding rain, in “We Own the Night” (2007) that the only way to top it, I suspect, was to go off-planet. From “Little Odessa” (1994) to “The Lost City of Z” (2016), Gray has been brewing his particular blend of action and introspection. His characters tend to lose themselves in physical conflict or tests of endurance, only to draw back and lose themselves in themselves. McBride, in the latest film, is a case in point. In a breathless early sequence, he is seen toiling on the outside of the International Space Antenna, which resembles a giant stick insect suspended in the upper atmosphere; without warning, he is knocked off by a power surge and tumbles in free fall toward terra firma. Elsewhere, though, he shows an aptitude for sitting still, staring shyly downward, and murmuring, “I will not rely on anyone or anything.” Brad Pitt fans, high on the bonhomie that he radiates in “Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood,” may well be flummoxed by this dual approach, and tempted to ask, What are you, dude, a rocket jock or a recluse?

“Ad Astra” is set in the near future. Technology has leaped ahead, closely followed by salesmanship. You can, for instance, fly Virgin to the moon. The attendants charge you a hundred and twenty-five dollars for a pillow-and-blanket pack and offer a hot towel before you land. Nice. There’s an outpost of DHL in the arrivals lounge, plus, one presumes, a bunch of angry passengers, demanding to know why their baggage has been sent to Pluto. McBride goes along for the ride, though he’s using the moon purely as an interplanetary trampoline, from which he can bounce onward to Mars, and from Mars to the suburbs of Neptune.

His mission is not merely secret but personal. The surge that blew him off the antenna was caused by an energy pulse—one of many being squirted through the void, to the detriment of mankind, from somewhere in Neptune’s rings. To be precise: from the last known location of the Lima Project, an enterprise so steeped in mystery that nobody can say whether it was named for the city or the bean. The commander of the project was none other than Clifford McBride (Tommy Lee Jones), Roy’s father, who hasn’t been heard from in almost thirty years. “Your father may be hiding from us,” Roy is told. If there’s anything more cosmically grumpy than Tommy Lee Jones lost in space, scientists have yet to discover it, and Clifford must be handled with care. The plan is for Roy to nip to Mars and, once there, to read out a typewritten message to his dad from the bigwigs back on Earth. Really? Is that it? Of the many remarkable things about “Ad Astra,” the most remarkable of all is that the task of the noble hero could basically have been completed by fax.

This fusion of the domestic and the galactic keeps nagging away at creators of science fiction. In “Contact” (1997), Jodie Foster’s character gets whooshed to a far-flung solar system, where she finds her late father standing on a beach and assuring her that all is well. Then, we have the gangly monsters in “Arrival” (2016), which somehow enable the linguist, played by Amy Adams, to reach out to her daughter, who is yet to be born. And let’s not even mention Darth Vader. It is only natural, I suppose, that visions of the extraterrestrial should

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**In James Gray’s new movie, Brad Pitt plays an astronaut on a secret mission.**
nudge us into reflecting on those whom we love or lose; on the other hand, one great advantage of infinity is that it provides a welcome break from mortal grips. No doubt the McDermots have unresolved issues, but Neptune does seem an awfully long way to go for family therapy. It is also, he warned, strictly man-to-man. In the past, Gray has granted solid roles to actresses such as Faye Dunaway, in “The Yards” (2000), and Gwyneth Paltrow, in “Two Lovers” (2008), but the women of “Ad Astra” are given astromically short sight. Ruth Negga appears briefly as the boss of a Martian base, and Liv Tyler, as Roy’s estranged wife, barely utters a word. Not that the guys are alive with glittering backchat; McBride’s most faithful interlocutor is the nameless voice that talks him through his psychological evaluations. What Gray yields to here, as Damien Chazelle did in “First Man” (2018), is the alluring (and dramatically useful) idea that astronauts are instinctive ruminators, whereas, as any student of the space program can tell you, the opposite is true. If you don’t believe me, read “Carrying the Fire,” the autobiography of Michael Collins, who swung around the dark side of the moon, in 1969, while Armstrong and Aldrin paced the surface. No one has ever been more alone than Collins, and no one has been saner or more good-humored. Anyone prone to anxiety wouldn’t have been allowed within a quarter of a million miles of such a quest; anyone, that is, like McBride, who gazes at his fellow crew members and muses, in voice-over, “They seem at ease with themselves. What must that be like?”

“Ad Astra” is Gray’s most formidable paradox to date, liable to leave you awed, confused, and sad. It is a work of calculated grandeur, and, if you get the chance to catch it in IMAX, and thus to revel in the breadth of its beauty, do so. But there’s something small at the movie’s core—the smallness of cramped and dissatisfied souls, who don’t like where they came from and aren’t sure how far they should go. Never is the story more startling than when a spaceship, with Roy on board, changes course, in mid-journey, to answer a distress call from another craft. That’s pretty much what the spaceships do in “Alien” (1979), too, except that what happens there plants the squirming seed of everything else that unfurls in the rest of the film. In “Ad Astra,” by contrast, the diversion leads nowhere. It’s creepy and well staged, but its only function is to make poor, brave, and beleaguered McBride freak out just a little bit more. I hate to say so, but I reckon Roy has the Wrong Stuff.

Wolf, Dog, Lady, Smurf, Bigfoot, Rambo, Swede, and Boom-Boom. These are not the heroes of a haywire cartoon on TV, or the whimpering occupants of a rescue shelter, but the principal characters—rural guerrillas, male and female—in “Monos.” Though too old and too brutalized to be children, they lack the constraints of adulthood. They carry lethal weapons, which they treat like toys. They are trained by a grownup teacher, who is half their size. They lark around in mud, like truants from school, yet they also surrender to animal lust, and two of them even undergo a form of mock-marriage. It doesn’t last.

“Monos” is the third film from the Brazilian director Alejandro Landes. The setting remains unidentified, though the language is Spanish, and your thoughts may turn toward the Colombian rebels of FARC, a number of whom have recently resumed operations. The use of juveniles as soldiers is more commonly associated with Africa and the Middle East, so where on earth are we in this movie? In no man’s land, I would say, much of it mountainous, and so lofty that we look down on seas of cloud. There are images in “Monos” to rival anything in “Ad Astra,” and moments when we have to remind ourselves that Wolf and the gang belong not to another world but to ours. The extraordinary score, by Mica Levi, refuses to leave our nerves in peace.

The second half of the fable takes us to lower altitudes, and there, it must be said, some of the magic evaporates. We are now at jungle level, and the focus shifts to a woman referred to as Doctor (Julianne Nicholson), who, having been kept as a hostage by the young warriors, is bent upon escape. Her plight is desperate but, for moviegoers, not wholly unfamiliar, whereas the dynamic among her captors—to whom any political cause feels ever more remote—is discomfitingly new.

What Landes has done is to revise, and to render yet starker, the premise of “Lord of the Flies.” The inhabitants of “Monos” do not gradually shed the skin of civilized behavior; rather, they are all but skinless to start with. Why else would the film begin in failing light, with the kids playing soccer in blindfolds? Darkness is their home.

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 Victoria Roberts, must be received by Sunday, September 22nd. The finalists in the September 9th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week’s contest, in the October 7th 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

“\[Cartoon Image\]"

THE FINALISTS

“I just invented leftovers.”
Terry Good, St. Louis, Mo.

“I don’t tell you how to gather.”
Joel S. Saferstein, Washington, D.C.

“Rare? It’s nearly extinct.”
Leo Nicholson, Sydney, Australia

THE WINNING CAPTION

“Let’s let him keep your ball.”
Beth Lawler, Montclair, N.J.
Your business ownership and personal wealth inevitably become intertwined. Our advisors understand the challenges and have the insight to help you make decisions with confidence, now and in the future. Let's create one integrated plan and build something that lasts.

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