GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION
WITH BILL MILLER

Looking for an internationally-oriented talk show with access to the world's leading voices from the public and private sectors who discuss international issues that have local impact? Global Connections Television (GCTV) may fit into your programming very nicely! GCTV is the only program of its type in the world, and is provided to you at no-cost as a public service. You are invited to download any shows that would be of interest to your local audience, such as the general public or students, to mention only a few. You may request that your local PBS/community access television (CATV) media outlets air the Global Connections TV shows on a weekly basis.

Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madry Maestra University in Santiago, the country’s second largest city.

GCTV features in-depth analysis within a wide scope of current issues, topics and events including:

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- FOOD SECURITY • EDUCATION • RENEWABLE ENERGY • GENDER ISSUES • POVERTY REDUCTION •
- PEACE AND SECURITY • ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT • HEALTH •

Global Connections Television (GCTV) is an independently-produced, privately-financed talk show that focuses on international issues and how they impact people worldwide. Global Connections Television features in-depth analysis of important current issues and events including climate change, environmental sustainability, economic development, global partnerships, renewable energy, technology, culture, education, food security, poverty reduction, peace and security, and gender issues.

Episodes are broadcast worldwide through cable, satellite, public-access television, and the World Wide Web. GCTV provides inside perspectives from the United Nations and other important organizations that showcase how these groups impact the daily lives of people around the world.

GCTV FOR BROADCASTERS, MEDIA OUTLETS & EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Within the goal of providing important perspectives and initiatives from the UN and other organizations, Global Connections Television is provided to broadcasters, satellite systems, media outlets and educational institutions at no charge subject to terms and conditions found on our website. GCTV believes that by providing this invaluable content, the public can learn more about the world, its issues, and the men and women making a difference.

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The Dark World of Online Murder Markets

THE WOOSTER GROUP’S ENDLESS REHEARSAL
FICTION BY SUSAN CHOI & ZORA NEALE HURSTON
Unterberg Poetry Center

Christopher Lightfoot Walker Reading Series

Isabel Allende
Thu, Jan 23

New York Review Books–A 20th Anniversary Reading
with Edwin Frank, Marlon James, Colm Tóibín & others
Mon, Jan 27

Sayed Kashua
David Treuer
Tue, Feb 11

Toni Morrison’s The Source of Self-Regard
A Literary Performance
with André Holland & Phyllicia Rashad
Tue, Feb 18

Hanif Abdurraqib
Timothy Donnelly
Mon, Feb 24

Daniel Kehlmann
with Zadie Smith
Thu, Feb 27

Louise Erdrich
Colum McCann
Mon, Mar 2

Maira Kalman’s
The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas
by Gertrude Stein
Thu, Mar 5

Jane Hirshfield
Patricia Smith
Mon, Mar 9

Hilary Mantel
Wed, Mar 18

James Shapiro
Mon, Mar 23

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with Jorie Graham, Robert Hass, Li-Young Lee, David Semanki, Tracy K. Smith & others
Free
Thu, Apr 2

Quan Barry
Sharon Olds
Mon, Apr 13

A Celebration of Robert Stone
with Madison Smartt Bell, Jennifer Egan & Ben Fountain
Mon, Apr 20

Garth Greenwell
Ottessa Moshfegh
Wed, Apr 22

An Evening of Chekhov
with Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky
Mon, Apr 27

Anna Burns
Miriam Toews
Thu, May 7

Discovery Poetry Contest Winners’ Reading
Thu, May 14

Richard Ford
Elizabeth Strout
Wed, Jun 17

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Apr 5

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The voice of literature
The Fall of Men

Barrett Swanson’s take on Evryman retreats and the “new men’s groups” (“Men at Work,” Report, November) is understandably skeptical. As a veteran of several of these groups—having, in fact, started one in college with one of the Evryman founders—I thought Swanson’s ambivalence was illuminating. In my experience, what men need most aren’t opportunities to engage with their ids or reinforcement of their anguish; they need to be engaged in a rigorous practice of learning how to listen.

Jonathan Gold
Providence, R.I.

Barrett Swanson rightly draws parallels between men’s groups like Evryman and the irritating bounty of life-hack companies sprouting in Silicon Valley and related cure-all services advertised in New York City subways. A sense of nostrum abounds in the Evryman ethos, with its blind appropriation of various healing practices and terminologies. Having spoken at mental-health events with members of this community, I’ve observed this tendency firsthand.

That said, Swanson’s article is disappointingly reductive. The bulwarks that privilege has historically afforded men are being pulled apart, and the results, as Swanson acknowledges, can be devastating. In dismissing the Evryman retreats, he risks ignoring the bedrock principle on which much contemporary therapy and healing is founded—that is, that we must meet people where they are. For all its failings and millennial marketing trappings, Evryman offers a program that can help men who otherwise wouldn’t examine themselves gain a cursory sense of emotional intelligence.

The only way to eradicate toxic masculinity is for men to interrogate and reconceive the systems that support it, but one can hardly expect a man who has never carefully considered his own issues to see the broader implications of institutional patriarchy. Evryman should certainly augment its program to account for the
larger social implications of its work, but to deride it for exploring masculinity at the personal level is as elitist as it is counterproductive.

Mike Rosen
Brooklyn, N.Y.

The more skeptical and disappointing Barrett Swanson grew of the Evryman retreat he attended, the more moved I was by it. I found his argument—that these retreats are, at best, Band-Aid solutions to toxic masculinity and, at worst, detours that distract from the work of addressing the root of the problem—unfair. The problem is that his expectations are unrealistic. “The relevant question for me,” Swanson writes, “is whether this torrent of emotion is a meaningful intervention into the debate about masculinity, whether Evryman is treating the symptom or the cause.” But what would such a “meaningful intervention” look like? How can we expect a retreat to solve a problem that goes back thousands of years and has no clear cause?

In Swanson’s view, the retreats embody the modern tendency to decry “personal deprivations” without recognizing their “social or political dimensions.” It’s true that these groups have not developed a mechanism for the total eradication of toxic masculinity. But he describes, and seems to have experienced, numerous instances of real and compelling human connection. While not a perfect or comprehensive cure, the retreats do offer a measure of relief, and they can serve as opportunities for productive introspection. I can’t help thinking this should be enough.

Annie Nova
New York City

Dam Nation

Patrick Symmes writes that the cost of producing one Columbia River salmon varies from $66 to $68,031, depending on the hatchery’s location [“The $68,000 Fish,” Letter from the Columbia River, November]. These estimates are attributed to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council; in fact, they belong to a 2002 report presented to the council by a panel of independent economists. The council makes recommendations about hatchery operations but does not estimate a cost per fish, a figure that is difficult to assess, as the panel itself acknowledged. For that matter, hatchery designs and operations have changed significantly in the seventeen years since that report’s presentation.

Symmes also mischaracterizes the council and its mandate. We are a four-state planning agency responsible for assuring the Northwest has a reliable and affordable electric power supply while also mitigating any damage done to the Columbia River basin’s fish and wildlife by hydro-power dams. Our regional power plan and energy-efficiency measures have eliminated the need to build approximately eighteen thermal-fuel power plants.

John Harrison
Northwest Power and Conservation Council
Portland, Ore.

Any discussion of “the future of salmon in the Pacific Northwest” should begin with the U.S. government’s 1855 treaties with the Columbia Plateau tribes, which, along with subsequent Supreme Court rulings, established the basic legal parameters of the issue. The word “treaty” does not appear in Patrick Symmes’s essay, however, and his portrayal of the Plateau tribes is superficial and misleading as a result.

Symmes argues that “the Native American tribes . . . were more than happy to see the rivers filled with hatchery fish.” Plateau people have diverse views on hatcheries, dams, and the future of the Columbia River. By limiting his discussion to a vague pro-hatchery contingent, Symmes ignores all those Native activists leading efforts to restore the Columbia to its free-flowing state and to protect treaty fishing rights.

Today, the Nez Perce tribe’s ongoing litigation against the management of the Lower Snake River dams

Continued on page 94
As a candidate, Donald Trump declared U.S. foreign policy “a complete and total disaster.” He vowed his administration would put American interests above all other considerations. But the Trump administration has doubled down on the misguided, overly militarized policies of the last three decades.

*Fuel to the Fire* explores the key elements of Trump’s approach to the world, and explains why they have failed. The authors call for a new approach to advance American security and prosperity without embarking upon costly and counterproductive wars abroad.
As of this writing, we are still about three months away from the first vote of the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination—and already “our side” seems set to tear itself apart. Tempers are frayed, charges are flying, and there is much talk about how none of the declared candidates will do.

Part of this is life under Trump. The president is like a low-pressure system that never lifts. The sheer weight of his presence hanging over us—tweeting out ignorant pronouncements, denying reality, subjecting us to his bottomless insecurities—is enough to make us rub our temples and flex our jaws for relief.

The intraparty tension is due to a candidate selection process that is head-smackingly stupid even for the Democrats. Massive debates put the four or five serious contenders onstage with some half dozen hecklers eager to savagely dance merrily back and forth between major media outlets, the candidates, the_Senate, and the White House (and, hey, whaddaya know, having to pay out millions to the_S.C. for his own scandal, which involved kickbacks in exchange for gaining control over investing public pension funds)—warned:

Left to her own devices, [Warren] would extend the reach and weight of the federal government far further into the economy than anything even President Franklin Roosevelt imagined.

Yes, that whole crazy New Deal thing …

Trying for a closer, saner look at the candidate who seems to frighten Big Money the most, I went to hear Warren speak at her September rally in New York’s Washington Square Park. I was there with the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition (R.T.F.C.), a nonprofit group dedicated to educating the public about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and now trying to install a permanent memorial to the victims of the blaze. Warren’s campaign had reached out to the president of our coalition, Mary Anne Trasciatti, a Hofstra University professor and a brilliant speaker and writer about the fire, which was one of the worst industrial disasters in American history.

The Triangle fire killed 146 people—almost all of them women or girls, many of them teenagers—in fewer than twenty minutes. They died when a blaze broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, located on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of what was then the Asch Building, in Greenwich Village. They died because the factory’s owners had failed to provide any firefighting equipment. They died because most of the doors were locked at the Triangle, so that their handbags could be inspected before they left, lest they walk off with a few pennies’ worth of cloth. They died after rushing out to a fire escape that quickly collapsed beneath them. They died falling through a glass roof, impaled on an iron fence, tumbling down an empty elevator shaft. They died plunging through the firemen’s nets—and even through the sidewalk.

Warren was speaking where she was because of the Triangle fire, which occurred just a few hundred feet from
Washington Square. Her speech was part of a tour of key sites in the struggle for economic justice in America. The tour had started in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where an epic mill strike had taken place in 1912. If the dates make it sound as if these must be old and familiar stories, they sounded fresh and vital in Warren's telling.

She framed the tragedy at the Triangle factory in terms of corruption, which was just: the deaths happened in part thanks to the venality of the city's legendary Democratic machine, Tammany Hall. Just the year before, women had been out on a massive garment strike, the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand, and the Tammany machine that claimed to be for the people had sided with the sweatshop owners. Tammany sent the cops—and the cops brought the pimps and gangsters they controlled—to beat and arrest the women on the picket lines, and scoffed at any suggestion that New York businesses be compelled to create a workplace that wasn't a death trap. At the time of the fire, in a city already chockablock with tall buildings, New York fire trucks had no ladders that reached beyond six stories, because Tammany viewed the fire department mostly as another means of filling its pockets.

"The tragic story of the Triangle factory fire is a story about power," Warren told the thousands jammed into the park that night. "A story of what happens when the rich and the powerful take control of government and use it to increase their own profits while they stick it to working people." The aftermath of the fire, she continued, was "a different story about power." She invoked the name of "one very persistent woman," Frances Perkins, the first female Cabinet member in American history.

Perkins was born in 1880 to an old but unmoneyed New England family. After graduating from Mount Holyoke, she set out into the world—living and working in some of the harshest slums in America, becoming a friend, protégé, and student of reformers ranging from Florence Kelley to Jane Addams, Upton Sinclair to Teddy Roosevelt.

Nothing deterred her. Fighting to keep young Southern women, black and white, from being forced into prostitution when they arrived in Philadelphia, she faced down a pair of menacing pimps with nothing more than her umbrella, shouting their names until they ran away. Years later, after she became secretary of labor, she surprised corrupt officials from the Hoover Administration who were trying to dispose of damning files at the Labor Department; accompanied only by a single, elderly watchman, she ordered them out of the building. They went.

She was visiting a friend in the Village when the Triangle fire broke out, and she rushed to the site in time to see the women plunging to their deaths.

"One by one, the people would fall off," she later recalled. "They had gone to the window for air, and they jumped. It's that awful choice people talk of—what kind of choice to make?"

It was, she later said, "the day the New Deal began"—mostly because it was the day that Perkins decided to throw herself fully into what used to be called "practical politics." In New York, she brought change by allying herself with the new emerging leaders of the corrupt old machine, men such as Al Smith, Robert F. Wagner, and "Big Tim" Sullivan. She learned to drink straight whiskey to keep their company, and she wore black tri-cornered hats that reminded the pols of their mothers—then dragged them through the worst factories in the state. Change began to happen: workplaces grew safer, hours got shorter, pay increased.

Franklin Roosevelt named her New York State's first industrial commissioner, then asked her to come to Washington as his labor secretary. Perkins said she would do it if she could do big things—much like Warren's repeated calls for "big, structural change."

"You wouldn't want me if you didn't want that done," she told the president-elect. FDR agreed.

In Washington, Perkins charted a course for the New Deal. She initiated, wrote, and lobbied for legislation that abolished child labor; guaranteed workers the right to join a union; and established a minimum wage, the forty-hour workweek, overtime laws, workers' compensation, and aid to families with dependent children. She also wrote most of the Social Security Act, transforming life for the aged and disabled in America to this day.

"There is no contribution that a Cabinet member has made in the history of this country that has had the lasting kind of effect on all of us and the way we live than what Frances Perkins did," Lawrence O'Donnell notes in the new television documentary Summoned: Frances Perkins and the General Welfare.

She did some of her most courageous work in the field of human rights. During the Depression, she ceased federal cooperation with the Mexican Repatriation, in which state and local authorities deported hundreds of thousands of workers to Mexico, many of them U.S. citizens. She refused to deport Harry Bridges, the radical West Coast labor leader accused of being a Communist. She declined to intervene against striking workers—as the federal government so often had before—which allowed for major labor victories on the San Francisco waterfront and at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan. And almost alone in Washington, she recognized the threat that Adolf Hitler posed when he first came to power; she won a years-long struggle with the State Department to let refugees stay in the United States, saving the lives of at least twelve thousand Jewish Germans and tens of thousands of other Europeans desperate for sanctuary.

For her efforts, Perkins's enemies tried to impeach her. They floated a smear that she was really a secret Jewish Soviet agent named Matilda Watski—a charge Perkins was loath to deny, lest she appear anti-Semitic. "If I were a Jewess I would make no secret of it," she finally said in a public statement. "On the contrary, I would be proud to acknowledge it."

The irony was that there was no more devout Christian in the Roosevelt Administration. An Episcopalian, Perkins tried to spend one weekend a month in silent prayer and contemplation at a Catholic convent near Washington. What other spare time she had was devoted to caring for both a husband and a daughter who were repeatedly institutionalized for what is now known as bipolar disorder. Film footage of the ceremony at which FDR signed the Social Security Act into law shows Perkins moving restlessly behind him, even rolling her eyes through the speechmaking. On that day of her greatest accomplishment she had just received word that her husband had escaped his caretakers and
was lost somewhere in New York. As soon as she could, Perkins slipped out of the White House and took a train back to the city, where she managed to find her husband that evening.

“She used the same model that she and her friends had used after the Triangle fire: she worked the political system relentlessly from the inside while a sustained movement applied pressure from the outside,” Warren told us. It was a pretty fair description of how the New Deal worked—and how liberal government has always worked best.

By the end of Warren’s speech there was a sense of excitement in the air, it seemed to me, at being connected to such a woman as Frances Perkins, and to a time when Americans did big, good things. Milling around the speaker’s platform afterward while the senator worked her usual selfie line, I met three women who seemed as high as so many of us felt on the evening’s sense of possibility. They were Kate Casey, owner of the all-women Peg Woodworking company in Brooklyn, and two of her managers, Sally Suzuki and Catherine Woodard, who had made the podium Warren had just spoken from.

When Warren decided to make a speech in this place, her campaign reached out to Tomlin Perkins Coggeshall, Perkins’s grandson and a genial keeper of the flame, who still lives at the Perkins Homestead in Maine—a site designated a National Historic Landmark. Coggeshall donated some “very, very weathered” wood from the property, which Casey made into the lectern at the campaign’s request.

When the wood arrived, Casey and her team “milled down to some really, really beautiful grain,” she said, and fashioned it into a podium much like those from Perkins’s time, forty-six inches high for the woman they hoped would be the forty-sixth president of the United States. They then reached out to the women in their lives and with them wrote quotes from great women and messages of support to Warren in the glue seams and other places where they will never be seen, but where Casey hoped they might “provide a deep meaning to this piece that by the very nature of its historical material carries such weight in women’s history.”

Casey, Suzuki, and Woodard took the podium into the park and assembled it. Afterward, they walked over to stand in silent tribute in front of the building where the Triangle factory had been and where Perkins and a crowd of horrified New Yorkers had watched helplessly as so many young women died.

“Every ounce of our energy was put into this piece, with no corners cut,” said Casey, who described the work as the greatest honor of her professional life. “As a furniture maker,” she added, “I know that objects have a presence and a power.”

Warren would privately thank these “three amazing women” for the podium, which she will take with her on the campaign trail. But I thought the most telling part of the evening was that she did not mention this “bully pulpit” from which she spoke. It was, in other words, something important to her, not just another political prop.

I can’t tell you whether Senator Warren will be or even should be the Democratic nominee for president. Nor can the Triangle Coalition, as a nonprofit, endorse Warren or any other candidate. That choice, which requires such a careful balancing of head and heart, will be made by the voters. But I do think that the senator’s interest in connecting to the worthy struggles of the past—right down to the podium she grasps—tells us where her heart lies, what her core values and principles are. I would also say that, whichever candidate you choose, choose her or him on the basis of the extent to which you can discern that core. Not on the fears of Steve Rattner, or the tears and curses of Leon Cooperman, or anybody else who tells you the sky can still fall in a country that elected Donald Trump president.

No candidate can truly say exactly what their plan for something will be or what it will cost before it is negotiated with Congress. There has never been a perfect presidential campaign, or a perfect president. Even our best presidents have been what we, the people, have made them with that “sustained pressure from the outside.” Our only guide should be the courage that Frances Perkins demonstrated every day of her life.
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Peggy Gavan

Queer Objects
Edited by Chris Brickell and Judith Collard

Those Were the Days
Why All in the Family Still Matters
Jim Cullen
Number of different forms of torture the Syrian government is suspected of having used during the country’s civil war: 72
Factor by which women are more likely than men to develop P.T.S.D. over the course of their lives: 2.5
Average penalty, in lost vacation days, for N.Y.P.D. officers the department finds to have committed domestic violence: 30
For officers the department finds to have been discourteous to a supervisor: 60
Rank of 2018 among the deadliest years since 1990 for cyclists in the United States: 1
For pedestrians: 1
Percentage of Uber riders who never tip: 60
Who always tip: 1
Percentage by which male riders give higher tips to female drivers than to male drivers: 12
Value of the personal possessions that the average American lost while drinking alcohol last year: $192
That the average North Dakotan lost: $380
Percentage by which new plastic was more expensive than recycled plastic in 2018: 20
By which recycled plastic is now more expensive: 19
Number of grams of plastic that the average person ingests per week: 5
Percentage of U.S. gamers who say they have skipped a meal to continue playing video games: 38
Who say they have skipped a shower: 25
Average number of minutes that teens in households making $100,000 or more per year spend on screens for leisure each day: 409
That teens in households making $35,000 or less per year do: 512
Number of states that have passed or proposed laws allowing students to take days off for mental health: 4
Chance that a millennial has voluntarily left a job for mental-health reasons: 1 in 3
That a Gen Z-er has: 1 in 2
Percentage of U.S. schools that have at least one police officer stationed inside a school building: 40
Factor by which U.S. public school districts’ spending on email-monitoring services has increased since 2013: 2
Minimum number of U.S. colleges and universities that track prospective students’ web activity: 33
Minimum number of states that use artificial intelligence to grade student essays: 21
Estimated number of people who could go unaccounted for in the 2020 census because of an “increased climate of fear”: 4,000,000
Minimum number of polling places that states in the South have closed since 2012: 1,327
Portion of those that were in Texas: 1/2
Percentage of Republicans who regard the Democratic party as “too extreme”: 76
Of Democrats who regard the Republican party as such: 76
Average effective tax rate, as a percentage of income, paid by the richest 400 households in the United States in 2018: 23
By the poorest half of American households: 24
Percentage of all public tweets from U.S. adults that come from people 50 and older: 29
Percentage of public political tweets that do: 73
Percentage of white Americans who say they follow local news very closely: 28
Of black Americans: 46
Portion of new digital New York Times subscriptions in 2018 that were for its cooking or crossword apps: 1/3
Percentage by which owning a dog lowers one’s risk of death: 24
Number of states expected to lose the majority of their summer state-bird populations by 2050: 7

Figures cited are the latest available as of November 2019. Sources are listed on page 64.
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Ten years ago, we set out to create a press that would celebrate the smart, tough, hilarious, daring, innovative writing by women that we knew was out there but was being passed over. We would focus on fiction (and what we call “near fiction”) and would stay small and slow (we publish only two books each year), but would work hard to get our books into as many hands as possible. Since 2010, we have been honored to debut award-winning writers like Nell Zink, Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi, and Jen George; to bring back into print feminist masters like Leonora Carrington and Barbara Comyns; to publish translations of major international writers like Marguerite Duras, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Nathalie Léger; and to create a home for many other boundary-breaking projects, like poet and artist Renee Gladman’s Ravicka series of novels.

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MINOR THREATS

By Jean Genet, from The Criminal Child: Selected Essays, published this month by NYRB Classics. This text is an abridged version of the essay “The Criminal Child,” which was commissioned in 1947 by the national French radio program Carte Blanche. The show’s producers requested that Genet write on the topic of criminal justice. Genet submitted, in his own words, “not a criminal’s complaint, but rather his exaltation.” The text was rejected. Translated from the French by Jeffrey Zuckerman.

Scattered throughout the French countryside, often in the most elegant locales, there are several places that have never ceased to fascinate me. These are correctional facilities that now bear the official and officious titles Moral Rehabilitation Facility, Reeducation Center, Home for the Rectification of Delinquent Youths.

One time, a director at one of these institutions showed me, in his desk, a collection he took pride in: some twenty knives belonging to the kids.

“Monsieur Genet,” he said, “the administration requires me to take away these knives. I do so accordingly. But look at them. Are you going to tell me they’re dangerous? They’re tin. Tin! You can’t kill anyone with tin.”

Didn’t he realize that when an object is removed from its practical purpose it becomes a symbol? Even its form changes sometimes; it becomes stylized. And so it acts silently; it carves ever more deeply into children’s souls. Buried in a straw mattress at night, or hidden in the folds of a jacket, or rather of some pants—not for convenience but to lie nearer the organ it thoroughly symbolizes—it is the very sign of the murder the child will never carry out in reality; instead, it impregnates his dreams and drives them, I hope, toward the most criminal acts. What use is it, then, to take these knives away? The child will choose another, seemingly more benign object to signify murder, and if that, too, is taken away from him, he will guard carefully the object within himself, the image of the weapon.

I apologize for using language as seemingly imprecise as mine. But weren’t you the first ones to speak of the “power of shadows,” of “the dark power of evil”? You don’t shy away from a metaphor when it can convince. I find metaphors more effective for talking about this nocturnal side of man that can only be explored, that can only be understood once armed and armored and adorned with all the accoutrements of language. When you endeavor to accomplish Good, you know where you’re headed. When it’s Evil, you won’t know what you’re speaking of. But I know that Evil is the only thing that can spark enthusiasm when writing with my pen, a sign of my heart’s allegiance.

Indeed, I don’t know any criterion for beauty in an act, an object, or a being, other than the song that it rouses in me, that I translate into words to share with you: this is lyricism. If my song were beautiful, if it affected you, would you dare to say that the man who inspired it was vile? You could claim that there are words that have long been charged with expressing the most exalted stances, and that it is those words I use so that the least thing might seem exalted. I could answer that my emotion rightly called forth these words and that they naturally come to serve it. And so, if your soul is low,
call it recklessness, the movement that carries
the fifteen-year-old child toward offense or
crime; I call it by another name. Because it takes
some nerve—great courage—to rebel against a
formidable society, against the harshest institu-
tions, against laws upheld by the police whose
force is in the legendary, mythical, amorphous
fear they instill in children’s hearts.

What drives these children to crime is roman-
tic belief, which projects them into the most
magnificent, audacious, and ultimately danger-
ous of lives. I am translating for them because
they have the right to use whatever language al-
 lows them to venture... Where? you might ask. I
do not know. Nor do they, even if their dreams
purport to be precise, but certainly it’s outside
your homes. And I wonder whether you aren’t

pursuing them out of spite, because they sneered
at you and they’re abandoning you.

I won’t make any recommendations. I have
been talking not to the educators but to the
criminals. And I don’t want to invent any new
plan for society to protect them. I trust society;
it knows how to ward off the amiable danger
that is a criminal child. These children are the
ones I’m talking to. I ask them never to feel
shame at what they’re doing, to keep intact the
rebelliousness that has made them so beautiful.
I would hope that there is no cure for heroism.
Whoever seeks, out of benevolence or privilege,
to attenuate or abolish rebellion destroys any
chance of salvation for himself.

Since we are divided between you who are
not guilty and we who are guilty, remember
that it’s a whole life that you’re leading on the
side of the bar where you believe you have
power, are free from danger, and enjoy moral
comfort, and we hold out our hands to shake.
As for me, I’ve made my decision: I’m on the
side of crime. And I’ll help these children, not
to return them to your houses, your factories,
your schools, your laws, and your
sacraments, but to steal them.

The papers still show photographs of corpses
overflowing from silos or littering fields, stuck
in barbed wire, in the crematory ovens; they
show nails torn out, skins tattooed and tanned
for lampshades: these are Hitlerian crimes. But
nobody seems to realize that there have always
been torturers in children’s jails, in prisons, tor-
menting children and men. It doesn’t make any
difference to know that some are innocent and
others guilty in the eyes of divine or strictly hu-
man justice. In the eyes of the Germans, the
French were guilty. In prison we were so mis-
treated, in such a cowardly way, that I envy you
your tortures. Because they are akin to and bet-
ter than ours. It’s as a result of heat that a plant
grows. Because it was sown by the bourgeoisie
who built prisons of stone, with their guards of
flesh and mind, I am overjoyed to finally see
the sower devoured.

But we will continue to be your conscience.
And for no reason other than to give yet more
beauty to our adventure, because we know
that beauty depends on the distance separat-
ing us from you, because wherever we wash
up, I am sure, the shores won’t be any differ-
ent, but on your well-established beaches,
we’ll recognize you immediately: small, slim,
sullen, we’ll sense your powerlessness and your
benedictions. Rejoice all the same. If the cruel
and malicious ones represent the forces you’re
fighting against, then we’ll be a force for evil.
We’ll be that which resists, without which
there would be no artists.

[Abuses]

**KINDERGARTEN COPS**

From records of alleged behavior by U.S. Customs
and Border Protection officers, as reported by unac-
companied minors, dating from 2009 to 2014. The
A.C.L.U. Foundation of San Diego and Imperial
Counties obtained the complaints from the Depart-
ment of Homeland Security through a Freedom of
Information Act lawsuit.

Called a child a pig
Called a child an idiot
Called a child a she-male
Told a child that girls came to the United States
to contaminate the country with their babies
Told a child to strip to his underwear
Threatened a child with rape
Locked a child in a freezing room in just his boxers
Fed a child frozen ham
Threw a child’s frozen bologna on the ground
Threw a child’s Bible in the garbage
Kneed a child in the stomach
Hit a child in the head with a flashlight
Pulled a child to a standing position by his hair
Lifted a child by the neck and pushed him against
a glass structure
Pointed a gun at a child
Tased a child
Threw a child to the ground
Threw two children on top of another child
Stomped on a child
Kicked a child in the ribs
Ran over a child with a CBP vehicle
I know that the morality driving you to hunt down children isn’t one you subscribe to at all. I don’t hold that against you. Your merit is in professing principles that tend to order your life. But you have far too little fortitude to give yourself over entirely to virtue or to evil. You preach the one and disavow the other despite profiting from it. I concede you your practicality. But I cannot sing it.

You’ve been cheating for far too long. Dangerous carelessness has brought you to the courtroom in a patched-up robe with its lining sometimes not even made of silk, but of rayon or glazed cotton. The criminal child no longer believes in your dignity because he’s realized that it’s made from an unraveling rope, a torn-off insignia, a threadbare fur.

None of your functionaries will be able to take these children and help them succeed in the adventures they themselves have begun. Nothing will replace the allure of outlaws. Because the criminal act is far more important than any other act, since it’s an act
of rebelling against such a great moral and physical force.

All that’s left for you to do, if you don’t win over these children with sweet words, is to cure them, since you have your psychiatrists. As for these psychiatrists, all they have to do is ask a few simple questions, which have been asked a hundred times. If their function is to modify children’s moral behavior, then what kind of morality are they being led to? The kind taught in school books? Yet men of science wouldn’t dare take that seriously. Is there a particular morality outlined by each doctor? What does their authority rest upon? What’s the use of these questions? They’ll be evaded. I know this is a matter of ordinary morality, invoked by psychiatrists in bestowing the label of misfit on children. How can I respond to that? I’ll always counter your cunning with my craftiness.

As a poet who was once one of those children, I want to reiterate my love for these ruthless little kids once more. I hold no illusions. My words fall in darkness on deaf ears, but even just for my own sake, I want to insult yet again the insulters.

[Interview]

DEADLY POETS SOCIETY

By Jessica Stern, from My War Criminal: Personal Encounters with an Architect of Genocide, out this month from Ecco. The book recounts the author’s interviews, conducted between October 2014 and November 2016, with Radovan Karadžić, a former Bosnian Serb politician convicted for his actions in the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, in which more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were killed.

I sought a lot of advice about how best to interview Radovan Karadžić. One idea, suggested to me by the eminent scholar of Slavic literature Andrew Wachtel, was to ask Karadžić to interpret his own poems. Together, Karadžić and I went through many of his works. Some are astonishingly violent. I was most intrigued by our discussion of “Goodbye, Assassins.” It begins with the lines:

Dantor a Anais and Sanité Bélair, mixed-media artworks by Didier William, whose work is on view this month at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, in Hartford, Connecticut.
Karadžić explained that the poem is about Gavrilo Princip, the Bosnian Serb who shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, precipitating World War I.

He reminded me of the history. With the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, Serbia had finally achieved full independence from the Ottoman Empire. Bosnia was liberated from the Ottomans at the same time, only to be commandeered by Austria-Hungary. Bosnian Serbs were particularly resentful of the occupation. “Croats and Muslims both found a way to benefit during the Hapsburg occupation,” Karadžić said, sounding as angry as he would have been had these events occurred only the day before. “In 1914 Princip fought for all Bosnians, not just Bosnian Serbs! But Muslims glorify the archduke.”

In truth, Bosnian Muslims are somewhat divided in relation to Princip. Prior to Bosnia’s independence, Princip was viewed as a hero for fighting to liberate Bosnia from Hapsburg rule, and he was celebrated with a plaque placed at the spot where the murder occurred. During the wars in the 1990s, when Bosnia was fighting for its independence from Yugoslavia, the view of Princip changed. He was seen as a terrorist, a participant in a Serbian plot against Bosnia. The memorial plaque was smashed. After the 1990s wars were over, a new plaque was put up, with a more neutral telling of the same history.

“Princip had two natures,” Karadžić said. “He was not just an assassin but also a poet.”

I hadn’t realized that.

“Before the 1970s, we all read Princip’s poetry. I was thinking, Who is this guy who writes poetry, who also assassinated the archduke?” The revolutionary movement Young Bosnia, Karadžić said, didn’t just plot the assassination but also held literary meetings.

“There is Princip the poet, a member of the intelligentsia. And there is Princip the assassin, who feels compelled to shoot at senseless decoration.”

I assumed he meant the trappings of the fading Austro-Hungarian Empire.

“Princip has a conflict within himself. In my poem, he is saying: Let someone else be the assassin,” Karadžić said. “The poet is trying to get rid of Princip the fighter. He wasn’t interested in business affairs or in fighting or killing. He is saying, I will answer the call to be a poet. He loves the mountains and streams.”

He returned to the poem:

Goodbye, assassins, it seems from now on
The gentlefolks’ aortas will gush without me.
The last chance to get stained with blood
I let go by.

“Gentle … as if in times of fasting,” Karadžić repeated.

“Princip is saying, I cannot share in this madness, this violence. The poet knows that something terrible is about to happen. He senses disaster. He understands the futility of plotting the assassination. Everything is going in the wrong direction. Heading toward war, toward a target or bullet.”

Until now, I’d not crossed Karadžić in any way. I was there to learn about how he came to be the man he is today, the man convicted of genocide. But a thought came to me, and I uttered it before having a chance to worry he’d turn against me. “This poem is about you,” I said.

I saw a new look on his face, which I had trouble interpreting. “Why didn’t you tell me that you studied so much psychoanalysis?” he asked, now looking like a petulant child. “You’re scaring me.”

“I’m just interpreting a poem. You told me that you let your unconscious run free when you write poems.”

“You’re scaring me,” he said again.

He would repeat this phrase many times over the following year and a half. I believe that the first time he said it he probably meant it. But the second, third, and fourth times, what I think he meant was, I’ve got you. I had noticed the division within him—of poet and assassin—and in the moment I brought that observation into the room, I believe he hated me. But he still wanted to use me. He hoped against hope that I might tell his story as he wanted it told.

[Notes]

PAPERBACK TO THE FUTURE


The other day I was asked a question of fact that I could not answer about a book I had once known well but hadn’t looked at in years. Naturally, I thought that if I just riffled through it, I’d soon have the information that now eluded me. As it happened, the copy of this book that had been sitting on my bookshelf, untouched for decades, was a cheap 1970s paperback that began
to fall apart in my hands no sooner than I had picked it up. I turned back the cover and the first page instantly came away from the spine of the book; then page after page came loose and bits of paper from their crumbling edges began to rain down. Soon I was looking at more than four hundred loose pages lying all about, on my lap, on the desk, on the floor.

Somehow, this devastation of the book went through me like an electric shock. It was as though the physical book had been a living thing, and I could not bear to sweep its tortured remains into the trash. I began picking up random pages, holding one after another up close to my eyes as if committing to new memory its fading print, and then to my nose, as if intent on inhaling some essence of book. After that, I alternated between concentrating on individual pages and examining the dried-out glue along the spine, as if it held some scientific secret that would explain what had happened.

Suddenly my attention was caught by the sight of a sentence I must have underlined some forty years ago, and after that a paragraph I'd circled, and in a margin two exclamation points standing side by side. I looked first at the underlined sentence: it puzzled me. Why did you underline this, I asked myself, what's so interesting here? Then again, look at this one you've also underlined—how obvious!—what were you thinking? My eyes drifted to a sentence on the page opposite where nothing was underlined, and I thought, Now here's something really interesting, how come this didn't attract your attention all those years ago?

How come indeed.

I began to read the various pages with reader's marks on them; and then I began to piece them together, like an archaeologist poring over ancient fragments to see which order will yield some design worth having been excavated, and soon enough I saw my younger reading self clear enough, marveling at the most elementary insights this wonderful book had yielded up. Very nearly, it was as though I'd written “So true!” all over the margins.

I put the pages back together in their proper order and sat down to read the book anew, this time underlining and circling in a pen of another color the sentences and passages that now struck me as worth noting. Then I bound the pages together with a thick rubber band and put the book back on the shelf where it had been sitting all this time. I hope I live long enough to read it again, with a pen of yet another color in hand.

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[Results]

POWERS FOR ALGERNON

From news reports of tasks that various types of rodents have been trained to perform.

Distinguish healthy patients from tuberculosis patients
Distinguish Japanese speech from Dutch speech
Fear cherry blossoms
Fear terrorists
Find land mines
Detect severed animal body parts
Regain the use of their limbs
Search for humans
Assault other rodents
Hide
Find marijuana
Take ecstasy
Find cocaine
Use cocaine
Trade in foreign-exchange and commodity futures markets

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[Census]

LEFTOVERS

By Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, from Children of the Land, a memoir published this month by Harper. Hernandez Castillo was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States when he was five years old.

The butcher went to the other side. His son, the one with the amputated leg, also went to the other side. They settled in Georgia. The middle school math teacher went to the other side—her cousin swore she could make forty dollars in a single day picking oranges if she was fast enough. No math required.

She wouldn't be fast enough.

The priest went to the other side and left the believers to wander through the church, blessing everything they touched. The Virgen de Guadalupe and the Pale Christ abandoned the altar and went to serve food in a Denny's on the other side. They went by Chuy and Lupe, and they took English
classes at the library at night. The neighbors to our right went, but only half of the family; the other half sat anxiously every day, waiting for the mail to arrive. The mayor went to the other side to enroll his children in school.

Every Sunday the crowds that gathered at the plaza shrank by one or two. It was hardly even noticeable at first. The sheriff went to the other side and left his uniforms in the street to whoever would claim them. No one claimed them. The drunks who spent their mornings in the cantina went to the other side, as did their bartender, serving them drinks along the way, all lamenting the women who had left them. The young man who went to the national track-and-field championship tried to go to the other side but died in the crossing. His running was only good for circles.

The dogs went to the other side. The women waiting on the corner for their bus to the market went to the other side. The markets went to the other side.

The debts all went to the other side—the only things that death could not touch. All the paper
in the town was taken to the other side, so people reverted to memorization. The stonemasons, their tools, the trees, the money, the nuns, have gone to the other side.

It seemed like there was hardly anything left except the mothers who sent their sons ahead of them.

Eventually, all that was left was a lamppost next to a fruit stand where Angelica, my uncle's mistress, sold mangoes to anyone passing by. No one passed by anymore, but she still waved the parched mangoes in the air, yelling, "Dos por diez pesos." She bit into a mango and spat the pulp onto the road. There were still roads, yes, but no signs, so she might as well have been anywhere. She picked her teeth with a fingernail, trying to pry loose the small fibers lodged in her gums.

The streetlight turned on, and the mangoes got sweeter and sweeter in their box.

[Fi c t i o n]

THE COUNTRY IN THE WOMAN

By Zora Neale Hurston, from Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick, a book of short stories including previously uncollected work, published this month by Amistad.

“Looka heah Call'line, you oughta stop dis heah foolishness you got. Youse in New Yawk now—you ain't down in Florida. Thaas just what Ah say—you kin git a woman out de country, but you can't git a country out de woman.”

The woman, Caroline Potts, in sloppy clothes and rundown shoes, was standing arrogantly akimbo at Seventh Avenue and 134th Street. She was standing between her husband, Mitchell Potts, and a woman, heavy built and stylish in a Lenox Avenue way.

The woman was easing on down 134th Street away from the threatening black eyes of Caroline. Mitchell wanted to vanish, too, but his wife was blocking his way. He didn't know whether to run, to fight, or to cajole, for Caroline was as temperamental as Mercury. Nobody ever knew how she would take things. Back in the Florida village from which they had emigrated, Caroline Potts and her doings were the chief topics of conversation. Whatever she did was original. Mitchell was always having a side gal and Caroline was always catching him. No one besides her husband believed that she was jealous. She had an uncultivated sense of humor. She enjoyed the situation. Men and women behave so queerly when caught red-handed at anything. Sometimes when they expected fight she laughed and passed on. Sometimes she thought out ingenious, embarrassing situations and engineered the two into them, with all the cruelty of the rural.

Her body was wiry and tough as nails and she could hold up her end of the argument anytime in a rough and tumble with her husband, so he couldn't hope to settle things that way. All these things were in Mitchell's mind as he faced her on Seventh Avenue. He saw a number of people crowding around them and he was eager to be going.

"Les us g'wan home, Cal'line."

"You wuzn't headed dat way when Ah met you."

"Yes, Ah wuz, too. Ah just walked a piece of de way wid Lucy Taylor."

"You done walked enough 'pieces' wid dat oman to carry you back down home."

Mitchell caught her arm cajolingly. "Aw come, dese heah folks is all standing 'round tryin' to git into mine and yo' bizness."

She permitted herself to be led, but before she moved she let out: "Maybe dat hussy think she's a big henny but she don't lay any gobbler eggs. She might be a big cigar, but I sho kin smoke her. The very next time she gits in my way, I'll kick her clothes up round her neck like a horse collar. She'll think lightnin' struck her all right, now."

All of which was very delectable to the ears of the crowd on the street but pizen to Mitchell. He led her away to their flat in the Caribbean Forties with as much anxiety as if she had been so much trinitrotoluene.

There she grew as calm as if nothing had happened and cooked him a fine dinner which they might speak of as supper. After which he felt encouraged to read her a lecture on getting the country out of the woman.

"Lissen, Cal'line, you oughten ack lak you did today. Folks up heah don't run after they husbands and carry on cause they sees him swappin' a few jokes wid another woman. You ain't down in de basement no more—youse in New Yawk."

"Swappin JOKES! So you tryin' to jerk de wool over MY eyes? New Yawk! Humph! Youse the same guy you wuz down home. You ain't one bit different—ain't nothin' changed but you clothes."

"How come YOU don't git YO'SELF some more? Ah sho is tired uh dat way down in Dixie look you totes."

"Who, me? Humph! Ah ain't studying about all dese all-front-and-no-back colored folks up in Harlem. Ah totes de cash on MAH hip. Don't try to git 'way from de subjick. You better gimme dat oman if you don't want trouble outa me. Ah ain't nobody's fool."

Mitchell jumped to his feet. "You ain't going to show off on me in Harlem like you useder down..."
home. Carryin’ on and cuttin de fool! I’ll take my fist to you.”

“Yas, and if you do, Ah’ll up wid MAH fist and lamm you so hard you’ll lay an egg. Don’t you git ME mad, Mitchell Potts.”

“Well, then you stop running down women like Lucy Taylor. She’s a NICE woman. You just keep her name out yo’ mouth. Fack is, you oughter be made to beg her pardon.”

Caroline turned from the dishpan very coolly. That was just it—NOTHING seemed to stir her up. Even her anger seemed unemotional—a pretense, the effort of a good performer.

“Ah let Lucy Taylor g’wan home today, an’ didn’t lay de weight of mah hand on her, so her egg-bag oughter rest easy. But don’t you nor her try to bulldoze me; cause if you do, you’ll meet your mammy drunk. Ah ain’t goin’ to talk no mo.”

They went to bed that night full of feelings. No one could know what the paradoxical Caroline had stewing inside her, but all who ran might read the heart of Mitchell.

His body was warm for Lucy Taylor with all the ardor of a new affair. Caroline’s encounter had aroused his protective instinct, too. Moreover he was mad clear through because his vanity was injured—all by this dark brown lump of country contrariness that was lying beside him in a yellow homespun nightgown. He wanted to feel his fist crashing against her jaw and forehead and see her hitting the floor time after time. But he knew he couldn’t win that way. She was too tough. Every one of their battles had ended in a draw.

He thought too of the side gals he had had down in Florida and how his wife had not only worsted them, but had made them all—and HIM—low foolish.

1. Daisy Miller—he had bought her shoes—that which all rural ladies of pleasure crave—and Caroline had found out and had come out to a picnic where Daisy was fluttering triumphantly and had forced her to remove the shoes before everybody and walk back to town barefoot, while Caroline rode comfortably along in her buckboard with a rawhide whip dangling significantly from her masculine fist. Daisy was laughed out of town.

2. Delphine Hicks—Caroline had waited for her beside the church steps one First Sunday (big meeting day) and had thrown her to the ground and robbed the abashed vampire of her underthings. Billowy underclothes were the fashion and in addition Delphine was large. Caroline had seen fit to have her pony make the homeward trip with its hindquarters thrust into Delphine’s ravished clothes.

[Poem]

AN INSTANT OF NOWHERE

By Stéphane Bouquet, from “Translating Paul Blackburn,” published in The Next Loves, a collection of poetry that was released in September by Nightboat Books. Translated from the French by Lindsey Turner.

Finally I gave up
overwhelmed

counting the powerful ankles
in this city, even the ones behind which
I’m walking right now

ultra-blond • super-rivery

if only he knew: it would take so little
to be saved but ok

I just go straight to dinner—
the building bizarrely lost
in an instant of nowhere
between the R
and nothing

night falls the wind
picks up the storm we close the windows
tip out buckets of second-light

we eat blueberries we listen
to the voices of Paul and Frank

and why have I
suddenly a mouthful of tears

for not having known

how to protect them? from death no matter if I wasn’t really
born yet of course
(remember the falling rain)
I could have made the effort
3. She had removed a hat from the head of Della Clarke and had cleared her throat rau-
cously and spat into it. She had then forced Della
to put it back upon her head and wear it all during the
big Odd Fellows barbecue and logrolling.

Mitchell thought and his heart hardened. Every-
body in the country cut the fool over husbands and
wives—violence was the rule. But he was in New
Yawk and—and—just let her start something!

Mitchell had changed. He loved Caroline in a
way, but he wanted his fling too. The country had
cramped his style, but Harlem was big—Caroline
couldn't keep up with him here. He looked the big
town and tried hard to act it. After work, he af-
fected Seventh Avenue corners and a man-about-
town air. Silk Shebas, too; no cotton
underwear for him.

Time went past in weekly chunks and Caro-
line said nothing more, and so Mitchell decided
she had forgotten. He told the men at work about it
and they all laughed and confessed the same
sort of affairs, but they all added that their wives
paid no attention.

"Man, you oughter make her stop that foolish-
ness; she's up North now. Make her know it."

Mitchell felt vindicated and saw Lucy Taylor
with greater frequency. Much silk underwear
passed under the bridge and there was talk of a fur
coat for Thanksgiving. But he had ceased to meet
her on 134th Street. They switched to 132nd,
between Seventh and Lenox.

Whenever they passed his friends before the
poolroom at 132nd and Seventh, the men acted
wisely; unknowing Caroline would never find out
through them, surely.

One Saturday near the middle of November, late
in the afternoon, Mitchell strolled into the pool-
room in the Lafayette Building, with a natural
muskrat coat over his arm.

"Hi, Mitch," a friend hailed him; "I see you got
d'herbs with you. Must be putting it over on your
lifetime loudspeaker."

"You talking outa turn, big boy. Come on out-
side." They went out on the sidewalk.

"Say, Mitch, I didn't know you had it in you—
you're a real big-timer! What's become of your
wife lately?"

Mitchell couldn't resist a little swagger after the
admiration in his friend's voice. He held up the coat
for inspection.

"Smoke it over, kid. What you think of it? Set
the belt buckle clacking a little in the breeze.

"Somebody ought to overtake her and take
that axe away."

"Somebody ought to have stopped her. That
dense clodhopper is going to split Mitch's head—
and he's a good scout."

"We ought to call the police."

"Somebody ought to stop—tang! And
take that axe away."

"Who for instance?"

So it rested there. No one felt like trying to
take an axe from Caroline. She went on and
they waited, full of anxiety.

A few minutes later they saw her returning just
as leisurely, her wiry frame wrapped in the loose
folds of a natural muskrat coat. Over her shoulder,
lake a Roman lictor, she bore the axe, and from the
head of it hung the trousers of Mitchell's natty suit,
the belt buckle clacking a little in the breeze.

It was nearly five weeks—long after
Thanksgiving—before the corner saw Mitchell
again, and then he seemed a bit shy and diffident.

"Say, Mitch, where you been so long? And
how's your sweet stuff making it?"

"You KNOW it's for Lucy. Dat wife of mine don't
need no coat like dis. But, man, Ah sho done tamed
her. She don't dare stick her paddle in my boat no
mo—done got some of dat country out of her."

"I'm glad to hear dat 'cause there ain't no
more like her nowheres. Naw sir! Folks like
her comes one at a time—like lawyers going
to Heaven."

"Well, any of 'em will cool down after I massage
their jaw wid mah African soup bone, yessir! I
knocks 'em into a good humor," Mitchell lied
boldly. "Heah come Lucy, now. Oh boy! She sho
is propaganda!"

"I'll say she's red hot—she just want don't for
the red light!"

She came up smiling coyly as she noticed, in
the order of their importance to her, the new fur
coat, Mitchell's nifty suit, and Mitchell.

"Well, so long Tweety, see you in the funny
papers."

"So long, Mitch, I'll pick you up off the junk pile."

Lucy and the fur-bearing Mitchell strolled off
down 132nd Street. It was nearly sundown and
the sidewalk was becoming crowded.

About twenty minutes later the loungers were
amazed to see a woman on Seventh Avenue
strolling leisurely along with an axe over her
shoulder. Tweety recognized Caroline and grew
cold. Somehow she had found out and was in
pursuit—with an axe! He grew cold with fear for
Mitchell, but he hadn't the least idea which of the
brownstone fronts hid the lovers. He tried to stop
Caroline with conversation.

"Howdy do, Mrs. Potts; going to chop some
wood?"

"Very unemotionally, "Ah speck so."

"Ha, ha! You forgot you ain't back down South,
don't you?"

"Nope. Thays wood to be chopped up North
too," and she passed on, leaving the corner agog.

"Somebody ought to have stopped her. That
dense clodhopper is going to split Mitch's head—
and he's a good scout."

"We ought to call the police."

"Somebody ought to stop—tang! And
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Thanksgiving—before the corner saw Mitchell
again, and then he seemed a bit shy and diffident.

"Say, Mitch, where you been so long? And
how's your sweet stuff making it?"

"Oh Lucy! Ain't seen her since the last time."

"How come—y'all ain't mad?"

"Naw, it's dat wife of mine. Ah cain't git de
country out dat woman. Let's go somewhere
and get a drink."
“Untitled (Forest 2),” a photograph by Sandra Kantanen, whose work was on view in November at Elizabeth Houston Gallery, in New York City. Kantanen’s monograph, More Landscapes, was published last year by Hatje Cantz Verlag.
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The Chinese Pleasure Book
MICHAEL NYLAN
Rated Agency
MICHEL FEHER
Into the White
CHRISTOPHER HEUER
CLICK HERE TO KILL
The dark world of online murder markets
By Brian Merchant

On a sunny July day in 2018, Alexis Stern was sitting behind the wheel of the red Ford Fusion her parents had given her the previous year when she’d learned to drive. Robbie Olsen, the boy she’d recently started dating, was in the passenger seat. They were in the kind of high spirits unique to teenagers on summer vacation with nothing much to do and nowhere in particular to go. They were about to take a drive, maybe get some food, when Stern’s phone buzzed. It was the police. An officer with the local department told her to come down to the station immediately. “I was like, am I going to get arrested?” she said.

Stern had graduated from high school the month before, in Big Lake, Minnesota, a former resort town turned exurb, forty miles northwest of the Twin Cities. So far she had spent the summer visiting family, hanging out with her new boyfriend, and writing what she describes as “action-packed and brutal sci-fi fantasy fiction.” At sixteen, she’d self-published her first novel, Inner Monster, about a secret agent named Justin Redfield whose mind has been invaded by a malevolent alter ego that puts the lives of his loved ones at risk. “It isn’t until his inner demon returns that he realizes how much trouble he really is in,” the synopsis reads. “Facing issues with his girlfriend and attempting to gain control of his dark side, the tension intensifies. Being the best agent comes at a price, a price of kidnapping, torture and even death.”

At the station, the police told Stern a story that could have been a plot from one of her books. They said that a credible threat had been made on her life through an assassination marketplace on the dark web, the unregulated stretch of the internet, not indexed by Google or other traditional search engines, that’s home to many forms of illicit activity. Her murder had apparently been ordered on a website called Camorra Hitmen, which advertised gun-for-hire
services with the promise of keeping its clients anonymous.

Earlier that month, a user had logged on to Camorra Hitmen with the Tor browser—the most popular way to access the dark web—and created an account with the alias Mastermind365. Five days later, Mastermind365 sent a message asking whether it was possible for a hit man to carry out a kidnapping instead of a murder. The site's administrator replied that it was, but it would be more expensive, because such an operation was riskier.

A week later, on July 15, Mastermind365 sent another message. “I have changed my mind since I previously spoke to you,” the user wrote.

“I would just like this person to be shot and killed. Where, how and what with does not bother me at all.”

And with that, Mastermind365 sent more than $5,000 in bitcoin to Camorra Hitmen, along with a photo of Stern—a portrait she’d posted on a website she’d built in one of her classes.

Stern remembers leaving the station in a state of shock. She was supposed to be taking courses at the local community college, but now she felt she couldn’t trust anyone, and she was afraid to be on campus. Her parents installed a home security system and bought her police-grade pepper spray. She took a self-defense class. Her father gave her a pocketknife, and her boyfriend gave her a bigger knife to carry in her purse.

Not long after her interview with Big Lake police, Stern was told that the FBI and DHS would be taking over the case. Agents visited Big Lake and questioned her about who might want to harm her. She said she honestly didn’t know, but she gave them the names of some ex-boyfriends. One, a young British man she’d met and mostly dated online, and who’d recently visited her in Minnesota, had taken their breakup hard. “But he was this sensitive soul who would faint at the sight of blood,” she said. “He couldn’t even finish reading my novel— he said it was too intense and gruesome.”

In the weeks after law enforcement alerted Stern to the hit, she received no updates on her case. If the FBI had learned anything new, the bureau wasn’t sharing it with her. She was beginning to despair, and she felt, pervasively, as though the threat was her fault. In Inner Monster, she had written about hidden identities, the dark web, and torture. “I feel like I somehow helped make this happen,” she told me. “Like I wrote about the dark web in my novel, and now I’ve made all this real.”

Writing used to be something that sustained her. “I spent most of my time alone, and I didn’t really have many friends,” she said. When she was out in public, she would frequently stop to consider how people behaved in various situations, so that she might better draw her characters later. Through them, she explored things that were hard to talk about, like her personal history with anorexia and self-harm. “I’ve always been fascinated with the darker side of humanity,” she told me. “What people can come up with, the stuff people are willing to do, and how far they’re willing to take it.”

But the reality of a murder plot was more unsettling than anything she had written. Both the FBI and DHS seemed hapless in the face of it, and Stern was becoming paranoid. “I was just constantly looking over my shoulder, keeping an eye on anyone that seemed to notice me, checking behind cars and under them,” she said. “You don’t know what you’re looking for.”

The idea of an online assassination market was conceived long before it was possible to build one, and long before there was anything resembling the dark web. In 1995, Jim Bell, an anarcho-libertarian, wrote a serialized essay titled “Assassination Politics” that proposed a theoretical framework for encouraging and crowdsourcing the murder of public officials. Inspired by a Scientific American article on the new-fangled concept of encrypted “digital cash”—which did not yet exist in any meaningful way—Bell created one of the most sinister thought experiments of the early web.

The essay imagined a website or platform where users could anonymously nominate someone to be killed and pledge a dollar amount toward the bounty. They’d also be able to pay a small fee to make a “prediction”—an encrypted message that only the predictor and the site were privy to—as to when that person would be killed.

Once the person was confirmed dead, the predictions would be decrypted and the pledged funds automatically transferred to the successful predictor. Implicit in the design was that the best way to predict when someone is going to die is to kill them yourself.

An ardent anarcho-libertarian, Bell was one of the more extreme cypherpunks, a group of internet privacy and cryptography advocates that coalesced around a mailing list in the early Nineties. (John Gilmore, a founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and Timothy C. May, a senior scientist at Intel, were among the first contributors.) Bell’s own politics were animated by a pronounced distrust of government. He believed that his system would bring power to heel and usher in a new anarchic order. “If only 0.1% of the population, or one person in a thousand, was willing to pay $1 to see some government slimeball dead,” Bell wrote, that would be, in effect, a $250,000 bounty on his head. . . . Perfect anonymity, perfect secrecy, and perfect security. . . . Chances are good that nobody above the level of county commissioner would even risk staying in office.

Since conspirators would never meet, or even be aware of one another’s identities, it would be impossible to rat anyone out. The money trail would be invisible. Back in 1995, there was no such thing as bitcoin or any other tradeable cryptocurrency, and few had access to encrypted web browsing. Now it’s easy to purchase bitcoins on any number of mainstream markets and “tumble” them so that their point of
purchase is obscured. Similarly, thanks to Tor, accessing the dark web requires only opening a browser and enduring slower download speeds.

In 2013, a developer using the alias Kuwabatak Sanjuro created what he called the Assassination Market. It was built largely according to Bell's specifications, with a system in place for submitting predictions and donations. In an interview with Forbes, Sanjuro said that his ultimate intent was to destroy “all governments, everywhere.” Bounties of up to $75,000 were placed on the heads of President Obama; Ben Bernanke, the chair of the Federal Reserve; and Keith Alexander, the director of the National Security Agency. No one took the site very seriously, and it sat idle until 2018, when Sanjuro, apparently realizing that the bitcoin collected there had accrued over a million dollars in value, cashed out.

In July 2018—the same month that a hit was taken out on Alexis Stern—the Forecast Foundation, a nonprofit that promotes decentralized technologies, launched a user-friendly protocol called Augur that made it easy to set up blockchain-based prediction markets. Augur’s debut immediately gave rise to a spate of new assassination markets and death pools, the vast majority of which were almost certainly created as stunts. Because the betting pools are small, and because no one has any confidence in them, there is little risk that they will engender any killing. But the technology Augur demonstrates—a distributed, encrypted, and anonymous prediction market—is enough to lend encouragement to Jim Bell, who has never given up on his dream.

“These people are doing a great thing,” Bell said when I reached him over Skype in Vancouver, Washington, where he now lives. Bell was arrested in the Nineties for obstructing the work of IRS agents and using false Social Security numbers, and he spent just under a year in prison. Shortly afterward, he was found to have violated his parole by researching the FBI agents assigned to tail him, and he returned to prison for most of the Aughts. Since being released, he’s continued to promote his assassination prediction system, giving talks in the Czech Republic and at Anarchapulco, a libertarian conference in Mexico. “This is not the kind of thing that was going to happen overnight,” he said, referring to the new wave of prediction markets. “I’ve been waiting twenty-three years. I’m happy they’re finally getting around to making this happen.”

There is just one reason that a local police department in Minnesota was aware that someone had paid an obscure site on the dark web to have one of its teenage residents killed, and that reason is Chris Monteiro. Monteiro, a systems administrator who runs I.T. security for a midsize firm in London, spends his nights as a white-hat hacker and independent cybercrime researcher, navigating the shadowy spaces of the dark web. Murder marketplaces have in recent years become both his signature area of expertise and his exhausting burden. “Alexis Stern,” after all, is only one name among hundreds of potential victims on dark-net kill lists.

In early 2016, Monteiro was passing an evening as he typically did, bathed in the glow of six computer monitors in his flat, browsing dark-web message boards and bazaars, when he stumbled upon a site called Besa Mafia, which promised to provide hit men in exchange for bitcoin. It offered visitors a menu of options ranging from maiming to kidnapping to murder, a built-in messaging system, and a portal where users could apply to be hit men. Besa Mafia had a somewhat slicker graphical interface than the dark-web assassination markets Monteiro had seen before, but it was nevertheless clear to him that this one, like the others, was a scam, designed to pilfer money from gullible users.

Monteiro wrote up a sneering list of Besa Mafia’s frauds and flaws, and published the report to his blog, Pirate Dot London. Soon after, he received a furious message from someone named Yura, who claimed to be Besa Mafia’s administrator and first implored, then tried to bribe, Monteiro to take down the critical post. Monteiro refused. A few days later, Yura sent him a link to a YouTube video in which a hooded figure could be seen setting a car ablaze, holding up a sheet of paper saying that the act of vandalism was a “dedication to pirate london.” “Honestly, I was intimidated,” Monteiro told me. “This was not typical scammer behavior. This was someone who wanted to protect the reputation of their operation.”

Nonetheless, Monteiro kept probing the site. He exploited a vulnerability in the Besa Mafia messaging system that allowed him to see every order that flowed through it, and he built an automated system that kept a record of the desired hits. Months later, with the help of a friend—a prominent cybersecurity officer who wished to be identified only by his online alias, Judge Judy—Monteiro hacked into the site and shut it down entirely.

Yura quickly built a new site, one unstained by the reputational damage
inflicted by Monteiro’s criticisms and hacks. Monteiro took aim at that one, too. Since then, this process has repeated itself over and over. There have been Sicilian Hitmen, Azerbaijani Eagles, and Camorra Hitmen, the site Mastermind365 used to place the hit on Stern.

On each of Yura’s sites, users set up an anonymous account, select from a drop-down menu the kind of violence they would like inflicted, upload the photo and address of their intended target, and wait to hear back through the messaging system. Users often have questions for Yura: How do I know you’re for real? Can you make it look like an accident? When they are satisfied, the user transfers bitcoin into a special wallet on the site, where it will ostensibly be held until the job is completed. Instead, Yura takes the money immediately, and makes no attempt to complete the job. The user complains; Yura says he needs more money to hire a better hit man; the user either pays again or asks for a refund; and Yura either disappears or attempts to extort the user by threatening to turn information over to the authorities. Yura sometimes goes by Barbosa or Juan, but Monteiro believes they are all the same scammer, who likely lives in Romania.

On a cold day in December, I went to visit Monteiro at his flat in London. It was early morning, raining lightly, and the sky was the gray-beige color of an old PC. An Uber dropped me off in front of a homely apartment complex in the southeast part of the city. I couldn’t find Monteiro’s unit, so, with no phone service, I wandered from door to door in the winter chill. When I finally ran into Monteiro outside his apartment, he was smiling faintly, as though he’d expected me to get lost.

Monteiro is in his mid-thirties, with thick black hair that’s going silver around his ears. He narrows his eyes when he talks, and is prone to shifting his glance abruptly to the side. Inside his flat, dirty dishes filled the kitchen sink, and a guitar leaned against the couch in his spartan living room, much of which was given over to his formidable computer station. “Look at that,” he said, after we’d sat down at the monitors. “It’s a brand-new assassination market.”

The site he was browsing displayed, on one side, images of what appeared to be Latin-American gang members staring grimly into the camera and, on the other, a body stabbed with dozens of knives. It advertised the sale of weapons, drugs, and murder-for-hire services—all, it claimed, at reasonable rates. There was an “About” section, a field for submitting inquiries, and an FAQ, which included items such as “Q: Do you kill women? A: Of course. Some of our contract killers might refuse to kill women but we have plenty of other contract killers that are willing to kill women.”

Squinting up at the screens, Monteiro scanned the entries. “It’s Yura,” he said, “it has to be. It’s a bit different than usual; let’s see what he did.” After a few minutes, Monteiro succeeded in hacking into the site with stolen administrator codes and installing an automated script that scraped the entire site every three hours and dumped the data on his server.

Monteiro started scrolling through messages he had cached from Yura’s previous sites. The markets may have been scams, but the desire for violence was real. Monteiro had amassed a running list of people who had been singled out for death; people who’d had bounties placed on their heads, and a log of detailed conversations about how and why their would-be killers wanted them beaten, tortured, kidnapped, and murdered. It was like a Wikipedia entry for the outer extremes of human cruelty. Before I left, Monteiro gave me the password so I’d be able to keep tabs on it myself.

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In May of that year, another hacker, bRspd, broke into Yura’s operation and dumped these early messages online, and the FBI looked into the handful of identifiable targets found there. They visited the Allwines’ home and informed them that someone had ordered a hit on Amy. The agents suggested the Allwines beef up security, and then they left. Amy and Stephen installed a home security system and bought a gun. Six months later, Stephen shot Amy in the head with it.

Stephen Allwine was dogdaygod; he’d been arranging affairs through the infidelity website Ashley Madison but could not consider divorce because of his position in the church. He had taken out a $700,000 life-insurance policy on his wife, and had been sending her threats and exhortations to kill herself through various aliases online. His exchanges with Yura would prove central to the state’s investigation into Amy’s death: the bitcoin signature of the payment to Besa Mafia matched the key that authorities found on Stephen’s hard drive at home. Stephen had attempted to make the death look like
that his operation was under greater scrutiny, had either written or paid someone to write blog posts alleging that Monteiro was the site's administrator. Monteiro spent two days and two nights in jail before the NCA realized its mistake and released him.

Alexis Stern, too, was fed up with law enforcement. Months had gone by with seemingly no progress on her case, and the check-ins from the FBI and DHS had become less frequent. The police had told Stern they would be patrolling her neighborhood more often, but she couldn't detect any change. “I never saw them in my neighborhood, not once,” Stern said. When she turned over her phone so that the FBI could log her messages as evidence, she claims the agents accidentally deleted them instead. “They said they'd never had anything like that happen before,” she said. They handed her back a wiped phone, seeming embarrassed. It did not inspire confidence.

Stern dropped out of community college and quit her job at the local movie theater, worried that too many people knew where she worked. “I couldn’t be left alone; I couldn’t drive by myself; I had all my freedom taken away,” she said. She spent most of her time with her boyfriend, with whom she felt safe, in the neighboring town of Monticello.

She had started to suspect her British ex-boyfriend, Adrian Fry, of ordering the hit on her life. Fry was older, worked as an accountant, and was the only person she could think of who had access to that kind of money. Plus, he'd become pushy, even aggressive, in their chats and texts since they'd broken up. But she couldn't prove anything, or even point to any evidence.

I asked her whether she'd recognized Mastermind365’s conversational style, since most of her interactions with Fry had taken place via text message or Facebook Messenger. “I haven't seen the chat logs,” she told me. “I asked. But the FBI wouldn't let me see them. They said they'd only show them to me if they thought it would help.”

This seemed odd to me—here was a relationship built, as many teenage relationships now are, over messaging platforms. If law enforcement was serious about investigating the case, wouldn't they show her the logs to see if she could ID any notable traits in the phrasing? If the FBI couldn't help, maybe I could. I had access to the chat logs, after all.

So I copied the messages between Mastermind365 and Yura from Monteiro’s database and emailed them to Stern.

If Stern hadn’t been shown key parts of the evidence that might help her identify her would-be assassin, who else on the kill list might have been kept in the dark? Did all these people know that they might be in danger at this very moment? The list had begun to haunt me, as it haunted Chris Monteiro. It infected my sleep. The grainy portraits of those marked for death popped into my head at unexpected times: the faces of wives, husbands, students, friends, lovers, kids—a shy teenager mustering a
smile; a bemused middle-aged man, mouth agape; a young woman posed for a glamorous selfie. I could see them in front of me. My wife worried about my mental health.

I began calling, emailing, and reaching out on social media to massage therapists and managers of Chinese restaurants and right-wing bloggers and I.T. guys and aerospace engineers and sex offenders and web developers. Some I couldn't track down at all; others never answered their phones or returned my messages. I didn't blame them. There is no easy way to say, "Hello, I found your name on a kill list on the dark net, and while the site is a scam the order is not; someone you likely know wants you dead badly enough to pay thousands of dollars to an impossibly shady website. Give me a ring back anytime," though I tried every imaginable permutation. I was blocked on Twitter, hung up on, and, occasionally, kindly received.

Of those I was able to contact, about half said they had never been alerted by the police. An Instacart delivery driver told me that the cops had called her, but they were vague about why they wanted to speak to her. "They said, 'We can meet you at any police station,'" she told me. "I said, 'Give me your badge number.' They said, 'We can meet in the lobby.' I said, 'I don't think so.'"

I did my best to fill her in—a user going by Say279 had sent a down payment of $357 for an assassination they'd "like to look like a car accident or robbery gone wrong"—but, perhaps confused by all the talk of scammers and dark-net markets, she waved it off. "I'm a strong believer in God, and if it's my time and someone wants to kill me... I've got a burial plot and a casket ready." —Yura

I'm a strong believer in God, and if it's my time and someone wants to kill me... I've got a burial plot and a casket ready

U.S. military serviceman who, before he died, had made a female friend the beneficiary of his life-insurance policy. His father questions whether the death was a suicide, but the local police department has said that it is aware of the dark-web assassination order and stands by its conclusion.

Despite the repulsive intent, there's an element of black comedy to some of the logs from Yura's sites. For one thing, the users' eagerness to believe the service is real leads them to ignore obvious signs that they are being scammed. Yura's marketplaces, for example, use stock photos of assassins or photos pulled from Google image searches. His poor English and poorer knowledge of U.S. geography result in glaring slipups, and the language he employs can make him sound like a customer service representative channeling a B-grade Mafia film.

During the back-and-forth on one recent order, the user Happynewyear asked Yura if he could send hit men to Hawaii. "Yes," Yura responded, "we have someone in a nearby state. He can drive to the location with a stolen car and do the job with no problems." Overlooking the fact that the nearest state is 2,500 miles and a considerable swath of the Pacific Ocean away, the user paid him around three thousand dollars.

Reading through the kill orders, it's easy to spot the online disinhibition effect—the psychologist John Suler's theory of why and how human behavior changes when we log on. "We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats," Suler wrote in a 2004 paper.

People visit the dark underworld of the Internet—places of pornography, crime, and violence— territory they would never explore in the real world. We may call this toxic disinhibition.

The paper describes six factors involved in producing the disinhibition effect—including the sense of anonymity and invisibility—which contribute to some users' propensity for treating life online as a game in which rules and norms no longer apply.

For that reason, it can be hard to distinguish genuine intent from rage-clicking through a dumb-looking website. A user named Frankie116 was apparently furious at the operators of the sports-betting website FanDuel for not refunding his money, which, he told Yura, "ruined my life." So he'd paid $6,232 to order the murder of the customer service representative who delivered the bad news to him over the phone. This sort of spontaneous anger, which might otherwise be spent on a Twitter or Reddit thread, can now be unleashed on sites where users believe their clicks can kill.

So far, according to Monteiro, eight people have been arrested for ordering murders through Yura's websites, on the basis of evidence Monteiro passed to law enforcement. One of them, a young Californian named Beau Brigham, had paid less than $5 toward a hit on his head.---

Yura replied, “Yes, 14 years old is acceptable," and named the price as $18,500, which agentisai promptly paid. There is now a boy in New Jersey with nearly $20,000 hit on his head.

I told Monteiro what I was up to. “This is my life," he said, adding, "It's deeply unpleasant."

In June 2018, news came of a second death from the kill list. Twenty-one-year-old Bryan Njoroge was found dead in Indiana, shot in the head on a baseball field. The police ruled the death a suicide. Weeks earlier, a user with the alias Toonbib had paid around $5,500 to order his murder and provided details of his upcoming travel. Njoroge was a

"I'm a strong believer in God, and if it's my time and someone wants to kill me... I've got a burial plot and a casket ready"
dom, was acquitted of attempted-murder charges after ordering a hit on a financial adviser who’d lost most of his pension, because he had never transferred any money to Yura. In court, Crichton claimed he had been trying to “clear his head” of his own suicidal thoughts, and that he’d never really wanted the killing to happen.

It’s definitely him,” Stern said when I reached her by phone last March. She had been going through the logs I’d sent her, and was now convinced that Fry was the person who had tried to order her assassination. The two had met online through friends, and carried out an intense relationship over Facebook, texts, and video chat for a few years. They talked every day, and had at one point become very serious. “I was planning on moving overseas with him,” Stern said. “I sent him some personal belongings.”

In March 2018, Fry came to visit Stern in Minnesota and spent a week at her parents’ house. But the relationship had been fraying for several months, she said. He had become increasingly pushy and controlling, and he didn’t like it when Stern went out with her friends. She wound up breaking up with him while he was in the States.

“I said very clearly I didn’t want to be with him, and he tried telling me I wasn’t thinking right and I was making a mistake,” she said. “He just kept pushing it onto me and guilt-tripping me, saying he wouldn’t find anyone else, and made me do sexual things I didn’t want to do. Overall, toward the end he was a manipulative bastard.”

Even after Fry returned home, he continued pursuing her. “He wouldn’t take no for an answer,” Stern said. He kept sending her messages, to which she would respond perfunctorily, politely, the way you do when you’re moving on. But he didn’t stop, even after the hit on her was ordered.

There were three intriguing pieces of evidence in the logs I’d sent to Stern. Mastermind365 had a habit of writing “thankyou” as one word—something that was also present in Fry’s correspondence with Stern. Second, Mastermind365 tried to buy a gun, which he would not need to do over the dark web if he lived in the United States. And finally, Mastermind365 changed the order from kidnapping to murder on the same day that Stern told Fry that she was seeing someone new. Stern sent me screenshots of their text conversation, and they confirm the timing.

Minnesota was swept by a blizzard the weekend I went to meet Stern and her then-boyfriend, Robbie Olsen. I drove my mockingly named Chevy Malibu through a dim white haze—drifts of snow blowing across the highway like steam off dry ice—and tried to avoid the cliché of any of this to Fargo. It was hard. The immediate setting aside, I was interviewing the victims of a harebrained scheme to sic contract killers on an innocent woman—people who’d found themselves in a situation that was at once ridiculous and brutal, darkly comic and deeply sad.

Monticello, where I met Stern and Olsen at a diner, is the kind of depressed working-class town with plenty of closed shops, weather-stained buildings, and almost no one on the streets. “They call it Methicello,” Olsen said. “It’s pretty bad.”

They were late to meet me, and I’d started to worry they were going to blow me off; I’d received a semi-cryptic message from Stern late the night before, and I’d sat at a coffee shop that morning for hours before she texted me apologetically. When they eventually drifted into the diner, they did so like ghosts; it was clear that neither had slept much.

Stern has brown wavy hair and glasses, and she was wearing a black Deadpool shirt over her slight frame. Her cautious smile was the same as the one on her kill-list picture, only wearier. After Stern and Olsen sat down and ordered breakfast, they told me why they were so late. For the first time since all this began, they said, they had had a genuine scare. The night before, around eleven o’clock, as they were dropping off Olsen’s mother at the trailer park where she lives, they noticed a car following them. It tailed them into the park and moved to block the exit. The car didn’t budge as they inched their own vehicle forward. After a few minutes, Olsen unbuckled his seat belt.

“Lock the doors and don’t get out,” he told Stern.

“I was ready to throw a block of ice through a window, just to get someone’s attention,” Olsen said. “I got out and walked up to the car, and they sped away. I tried to get a good look at them, but I couldn’t.”

Stern and Olsen called law enforcement. The police tracked down the vehicle and determined that the driver was an undocumented immigrant who had accidentally followed the wrong car. He didn’t speak English. Stern’s contact at the FBI said he would pay them a visit anyway, but he never showed. “The FBI isn’t doing anything,” Stern said. “I’ve learned more from you than I have in months from the FBI. They keep saying it takes time, but, like, how long? They told me, ‘If this was my daughter, I’d want this taken care of, too—don’t worry,’ and then they don’t do anything.”

They were both clearly rattled. They said they had debated whether to meet with me at all—I’m a journalist with a public profile, but how could they be sure I was who I said I was? Stern’s parents had told her not to come. The hit had hobbed her capacity for trust, especially in people with whom she’d communicated only electronically.

If Stern was correct and the offending party lived in the United Kingdom, it would be hard to extradite and try him in the United States. Stern said that either the FBI or DHS had told her that Fry’s name was on a flight watch list and that she would be alerted if he attempted to travel to the United States, but she wasn’t reassured. “I mean, if he was willing to take out a hit and try to buy a gun on this website, how do I know he wouldn’t try to do it again on another site, under a different name?”

Stern ate hungrily but warily, as if there were a chance someone had poisoned her food. She told me she hadn’t been writing as much lately, but when she did, the plotlines were even darker than before. “I’m more bitter,” she said. “I’ve definitely changed. I still want to be an author, but I worry about attracting attention now.” She remained shaken, angry, and exasperated. She fidgeted in her seat, and when she spoke, she mostly looked down at her plate. Seeing her in person made it abundantly clear: whoever had targeted Stern had succeeded in shattering her sense of security and well-being.

Before she left the diner, Stern gave me permission to contact Fry, who now...
works as a clerk for a large network of veterinary clinics in Bath. By night, he hosts a Twitch channel, where he plays video games like League of Legends, and later uploads the streams to YouTube. Most have around a dozen views. He is also on Twitter, where his avatar is a cartoonish, pixelated depiction of his portrait: a young man with mid-length hair pushed to one side, big glasses, and a small smile.

In his streams, Fry sits in a black-and-white chair with a bulky headset on, looking pale and serious. “It’s been a while, it’s been a while, boys and girls,” he said in September, introducing one of his Twitch sessions. The room behind him is sparse; the only thing visible is a black-and-white curtain.

I tried to call Fry on his cell phone and to reach him at work, but he never picked up. He didn’t respond to a request for an interview I sent him in a direct message on Twitter, either. So after a week, I sent another message explaining that he had been linked to an order made on the dark web, first to kidnap, then to murder, a woman named Alexis Stern.

To my surprise, the string of jumping blue dots that indicate typing popped up on my screen. They disappeared, reappeared, disappeared, and appeared again. Fry finally responded, saying he didn’t know what I was talking about. I told him that it was imperative that we speak if he believed my information to be incorrect. The blue dots came and went for several minutes before a new message arrived. “I would not like to speak about it,” he wrote, “but thankyou for the offer.”

While I was working on this story, journalists at BBC News Russia confirmed the first known case of a murder being ordered on the dark web and successfully carried out by hired assassins. On March 12, 2019, two young men, aged seventeen and nineteen, were arrested for the murder of a prominent investigator in Moscow who had been aggressively pursuing a drug-trafficking operation. The murder was not orchestrated over any of Yura’s scam sites, but over a standard, all-purpose dark-web marketplace similar to the Silk Road, according to Andrei Soshnikov, one of the reporters who broke the story. The killers never met the person who posted the job. They were paid anonymously, in bitcoin, and one of them attended a concert later that night.

A threshold had been crossed. For years, “dark-net hit man” stories made for good clickbait and little else. Experienced tech journalists emphatically debunked such stories as myths, because for years, that’s all they were: myths and fearmongering. But the fact that the hits didn’t happen was never really about the technology; it was an issue of trust. There has never been any serious question that the technology behind the dark web could preserve anonymity and allow users to move untraced through its pages: it absolutely can. That’s why the FBI resorts to old-fashioned methods of going undercover as drug buyers, child pornographers, and hit men in an effort to catch criminals there.

As the dark web matured, drug and weapons buyers were able to document that yes, this pound of marijuana was indeed delivered to my address; yes, I received this Glock as advertised. Users verified and began to trust those markets. “On the early dark net, it used to be impossible to buy a real rhino horn, for example,” Monteiro told me. “It was all hoaxes. Now it’s not.” The change matters, though it’s too early to say how much. A murder was ordered online and cryptocurrency changed hands, entirely anonymously. The killers were caught, not because they had a motive, but because surveillance cameras captured their faces. This raises the question: Have online contract killings happened before and passed unnoticed?

David Wilson, a professor of criminology at Birmingham City University who studies contract killers, says that a surprising number of economically desperate young men are willing to take on these brutal jobs. The man who torched the car to intimidate Monteiro, for example, was hired by Yura after applying through Besa Mafia. “I am offering my services because I am broke (of course),” he wrote, “and am looking for quick cash [and] I have military training (US Navy).” He provided a price list that started at $750 for a beating all the way up to a “sharp object kill” for $7,500. Dozens of others have made such inquiries. “We know how adept capitalism is at finding new markets,” Wilson says. “There are always going to be husbands who want divorces and businessmen who want to eradicate rivals. And sadly, the cost of life can be quite cheap.”

Assassination markets do not need to be foolproof, Jim Bell–style operations for users to turn to them. The fear is that as more out-of-work men hear that it is possible to make money contracting on the dark web, even shoddy, scammy, and slipshod marketplaces could help arrange killings. As a result, Jim Bell himself is feeling sanguine. “If anything, I’d argue it’s not nearly as controversial as I thought it’d be twenty years ago,” he said. “People are pissed off at politics and government. The level of hate is astonishing.” I asked him how he felt about online marketplaces being used to target not government officials but regular citizens like Alexis Stern. “I would target no one other than those who aggressed against the public,” he wrote in reply. “I can’t prevent other people… from not being so selective.”

After years of being ignored by the FBI and burned by the NCA, Monteiro, for his part, is glad that other agencies are finally paying attention. He’s been in close contact with a branch of DHS, which is working with him to identify targets. According to him, DHS plans to pursue everyone who’s made a transaction on Yura’s sites with the intent of ordering a killing, and even some who have posted names and expressed intent without paying, if the threat is determined to be serious enough.

But, in many cases, Monteiro worries, it may be too late. “There are hundreds of names,” he told me. By the time law enforcement sorts through the list of potential victims, “some will be dead.”
Just over an hour after he had been threatened with assassination in Sacramento, President Ford spoke about the troubling rise in crime in the United States. The little of his remarks that were quoted in the newspapers suggested that the president contented himself with platitudes. “Peace on Tenth Street in Sacramento,” he said, “is as important to the people who walk and work there as peace in the Sinai Desert”; “one man or woman or child becomes just as dead from a switchblade slash as from a nuclear missile blast”; “the billions of dollars spent at all levels of government since 1960 have not done the job,” et cetera.

The president had looked into the barrel of a pistol and seen the nearness of his own death, but he apparently failed to understand that he also had seen a magical transformation. With a single gesture, a deranged girl named Lynette Fromme, aged twenty-six and dressed in the red robe of an imaginary religious order, had become a national celebrity. Within a matter of hours it became necessary to know about her unhappy childhood, about her belief in “the people’s court of retribution,” about her squeaky voice and her devotion to the murderous fantasies of Charles Manson.

The present admiration of the criminal no doubt arises from what sociologists would describe as a condition of alienation. If the state can be perceived as a hostile abstraction, and if too many people cannot conceive of a nation held together by a common idea of justice, then we must make do with the primitive loyalties of the Mafia. The collective glorification of organized crime seems to me analogous not only to the psychotic fantasies of the Manson family but also to the wistful longings of those intellectuals who wish that the world could be restored to the spiritual purity of the late Middle Ages. I can understand the desire for simplification, but the celebration of the criminal is a confession of defeat. The predatory mode of doing business depends upon the equation of something for nothing: draw the three of diamonds and live happily ever after; steal another man’s invention and sell it into the mass market; borrow from the government and let the next generation pay the debt.

All well and good, and maybe even successful, but to what purpose? If I think of the thieves and confidence men whom I have met, I remember the boredom in their eyes and their lack of interest in anything beyond the next day’s scam. Contrary to popular report, the criminal mind is remarkably dull. Because it believes in nothing, it doesn’t take the time or the trouble to make anything of value—not families, books, laws, nor civilizations. The grand predators come and go like so many lizards in the desert, killing and feeding and leaving nothing to their heirs except a tape-recorded conversation with David Frost.

No doubt it is unfair to expect President Ford to think of such things at the moment when Squeaky Fromme pointed a gun at him. One virtue of the politician is his willingness to learn slowly, changing his opinion to conform with the opinions held by a majority of his constituents, but unless Ford learns to recognize his enemies in all their personae, he must bear the constant risk of assassination. Some people might say that a president accepts such a risk with his office, that he is a brave man for doing so, that he should be congratulated for the risk, which he also imposes on everybody else in the country. Possibly true, but it is the courage of lost causes and inevitable defeats, the courage of the man who prefers to die with his stupidity rather than try to find a way out of the desert. The newspapers gave the distance between the president and Manson’s “main lady” as two feet, but the distance in time was much greater. It was the distance between the Neolithic hunt and the articles of the American Constitution, between the ritual sacrifice of the Aztecs and the science of celestial navigation. The distance is worth preserving, but it is a difficult thing to do in a society that makes celebrities of the people who would destroy it.

From “The Assassin as Celebrity,” which appeared in the November 1975 issue of Harper’s Magazine. The complete essay—along with the magazine’s entire 169-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.
This is what I feared, that she would speak about the news . . . about how her father always said that the news exists so it can disappear, this is the point of news, whatever story, wherever it is happening. We depend on the news to disappear . . . —Don DeLillo, “Hammer and Sickle”

What a story. What a fucking story. —Dean Baquet, on the election of Donald Trump

A CIRCULAR CONVERSATION

What is the news? That which is new. But everything is new: a flower blooms; a man hugs his daughter, not for the first time, but for the first time this time . . . That which is important and new. Important in what sense? In being consequential. And this has been measured? What? The relationship between what is covered in the news and what is consequential. Not measured? Why? Its consequence is ensured. Ensured . . . ? It’s in the news. But then who makes it news? Editors. Editors dictate consequence? Not entirely. Not entirely! It matters what people read and watch—you can’t bore them. Then boredom decides! Boredom and a sense of what’s important. But what is important? What’s in the news.

I

In his 1962 book The Image, Daniel J. Boorstin explains, “There was a time when the reader of an unexciting newspaper would remark, ‘How dull is the world today!’ Nowadays he says, ‘What a dull newspaper!’” The first American paper, Benjamin Harris’s Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick, committed to appearing only once a month—or “oftener if any Glut of Occurrences happen.” Clearly, things have changed. “We need not be theologians,” writes Boorstin, “to see that we have shifted responsibility for making the world interesting from God to the newspaperman.” The chief tool in this new labor is the pseudo-event. What is a pseudo-event? They are everywhere; we hardly notice. Some familiar examples: the speech, the rally, the press conference, the briefing, the ribbon cutting, the political announcement, the political response, the interview, the profile, the televised debate, the televised argument, the televised shouting match, the televised roundup of other televised events, the official expression of outrage, remorse, righteousness, fear, sanctimony, jingoism, smarm, or folksiness. The talking point is its handmaiden. News analysis is a second-order pseudo-event, not an event per se but the dissection of pseudo-events: that is, theater criticism. It is not that pseudo-events are always uninteresting or meaningless but that they are always not news. They only exist to be reported on. To supply a format. To make up for the non-glut of occurrences. Take away the pseudo-event and what is left to fill the news?

II

To meet our demand for newness and stimulation, we refashioned public life as a ritual sequence of pseudo-events. This transformed politics from an industry of policy and legislation into an industry of emotion and entertainment. If the news covered only the proposal and passage of specific legislation—or the proposal and enactment of specific policy—we would have little news, and audience interest would quickly fade. But the work of politicians is to feed the emotional-entertainment industry that we call “news,” which is accomplished by grandstanding and self-promotion. Reporters and pundits cover politics
by analyzing how politicians succeed and fail as spokespeople and media figures. Interest shifts, by turns, to how the game is played, how the media fits into this game, and, eventually, how journalists do their jobs. The news today, properly understood, is about the careers of politicians and journalists. It is career drama.

III.

Television news aims to alert you to problems. In life, when someone alerts you to a problem, the problem’s meaning takes shape within an implicit context, answering: (1) How important is this problem? (2) Where does it fit into the rest of my life? (3) What should I do about it? News shows cannot answer these questions because their format and their content are at odds. Their content says, “This is very important,” but their format says: (1) No more important than the next segment; (2) In a time slot; (3) Keep watching. If you are a teacher or a car mechanic or a doctor, your job is not simply to identify a problem but to connect people to a solution. The news media doesn’t do this. It believes it does—insofar as its audience members vote—but hundreds of hours spent consuming news in a given year put to the service of one vote in one election is a terrible use of any person’s time. Consider what all these people, with all these hours, might otherwise accomplish. Consider that most viewers would vote similarly, and not necessarily less well, with much less information. The principal effect of TV news is to create engagement through distress. News shows cannot connect viewers to meaningful actions they might take in their own lives to relieve this distress because these actions would mean ceasing to watch TV. And this is the goal to which all others will be sacrificed: to keep you watching.

IV.

Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure. That is why even on news shows which provide us daily with fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged by the newscasters to “join them tomorrow.” What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept the newscasters’ invitation because we know that the “news” is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun, so to say.

—Neil Postman

Analyses of the news tend to focus on how the internet has changed things, and there is no doubt that the intrusions of Facebook’s news feed and Google News, online aggregation and free content, real-time reporting, YouTube, blogging, podcasting, and Twitter have roiled and remade the news business. But the crisis in news as an industry is not the same as the crisis in news as a cultural institution. The latter took root long before we connected online. It is for this reason, because so much media today represents the continuation, even the culmination, of trends that originated in the late Seventies and early Eighties, that writers such as Neil Postman remain relevant. They saw that the news was moving in two directions even then: toward entertainment and away from the local reality of people’s lives. For all the intervening technological change, entertainment on TV remains the dominant modality of all twenty-first-century news.

And while the news may not feel like fun, it is fun in the sense that it is stimulating without demanding effort—that doing anything else would require more energy and commitment, even turning off the TV. Watching television leaves no meaningful residue of knowledge or skill. When I visited Amsterdam many years ago, kids staying at the hostels liked to tour the Heineken brewery for an afternoon. They wanted to do something “cultural,” an activity that justified having traveled to the Netherlands, but really they wanted to drink beer. This is the logic of all infotainment, all TV and most internet news: it soothes the mind’s demand for constructive activity while delivering entertainment—a sugary drink sold on its vitamin content. Prestige TV works the same way: by convincing people that they are engaging with art. Make no mistake—well-wrought entertainment can require as much talent as art to create, but that alone does not make it art. Likewise, not all experiences of information are the same,
since more or less passive forms of learning involve us differently. What distinguishes art (or knowledge) from entertainment (or infotainment) is that art asks something of its audience, and that its form serves the artwork, and not the other way around. Until the news can say, “We have no show (or paper) today because there is nothing of significance to concern you,” the news will build its monument to truth on a lie.

V.

When you think you are doing something serious but you are doing something trivial and fun, you grow to believe that serious things are effortless and enjoyable. You are experiencing a format, while believing you are experiencing a content. The content suggests you are learning about truth, when you are really learning how to feel. You are learning how you should feel in the presence of certain information. These feelings go on to determine your expectations and worldview.

The formal message of the news is simultaneously the vital importance and utter triviality of everything that is happening. For weeks leading up to the 2018 midterm elections, the media covered the “migrant caravan” as the central story of the moment. Journalists understood that its salience as a crisis had been manufactured, and they devoted pages and segments and podcasts to debunking this salience, to exposing it as, in effect, a peripheral real event being turned into a central pseudo-event. These debunkings of course contributed to the critical mass of coverage, until the story, or nonstory, took up significant space in our minds: in our idea of the world “out there.” Then the election took place; the migrant caravan had served its purpose as an object of media attention, and it disappeared. Presumably it did not disappear from the face of the earth, but to judge by the sole connection it had to most people who attended it—its life as a news item—it might as well have.

Which was the truth: That it was news, and it did belong in our minds? Or that it was an irrelevant sideshow? What we can say for certain is that this question was not decided in the real world of human necessity but in the virtual world of the news. The caravan story may be notable for how precipitously it disappeared, but the same uncertainty hangs over every news story: What space does this deserve in the limited sphere of our awareness? Since media attention rarely solves the problems it fixes on, in time the news must move on, letting every story vanish like the caravan—even wars. The raw matter and proportions of the world “out there” take shape in our minds in relation to the imperatives of an industry. This proportionality, rather than fact or truth, decides the image of the world we construct: what Jean Baudrillard calls a “hyperreality,” the inseparable amalgam of the virtual and the real. The news narrativizes the world, but distortedly, according to the proclivities of its format, and so the story the news tells is always at heart the story of news: the story of curating what we recognize as news.

VI.

Is it a problem that our mental representation of the world is the product of a for-profit entertainment industry? Yes. Our government, for instance, cannot be dully competent if what we demand of it is that it isn’t boring. (After the first day of open testimony in the impeachment hearings, NBC News noted that the witnesses “testified to President Trump’s scheme, but lacked the pizzazz necessary to capture public attention.”) Journalists often rightly claim that the engaged polity should focus more on state and local politics, but people follow national politics for the same reason journalists and pundits do: because it’s interesting. Were
we to take their advice, they would be out of a job. Our attention sustains them, as it sustains politicians, and so when journalists wring their hands over the unfortunate necessity of covering Trump’s tweets—to choose another example—they mistake their own complicity in what they, again rightly, find toxic. For there is no noncircular logic that ordains the newsworthiness of the president’s tweets. As the celebrity is famous for being famous, so Trump’s tweets are news because they get covered as news. If the news media chose only to report on concrete actions and orders emanating from the White House, the activity of governing would once again become the proper object of political contemplation.

What news outlets appear to mean by insisting that they must cover Trump’s tweets and other provocative ephemera is that if they don’t, someone else will and will thereby steal their audience, or that they feel obliged to report on what their audience seems to want. But this only draws attention to the central flaw in their industry. They are not, they reveal, reporting “the news”—an expert and principled cura-
tion carefully, and come to peo-
ple like us who are tried and true and tested and proven brand names in this sphere.

Amanpour’s show is on PBS, which may partially insulate it from the market. Still, her assumptions and elisions are striking, if predictable. She does not ask whether meaningful or es-
ential truth may be different from “real news, facts, truth” as dictated by a TV news show. She glides over the question of whether she is supplying facts and information to an audience that would otherwise not have this information or fall prey to conspiracy theories and fake news. She assumes, against all reasonable belief, that people are drawn to her show because they are searching for truth or facts in a morass of confusion and deceit. She suggests, with no apparent irony, that being “responsible” means choosing your TV news “destination” carefully. Finally, while denigrating the charms of less “true and tested and proven brand names in this sphere,” she seems utterly (or conveniently) incurious about what people actually get out of her program and others like it. What she must know—just as Bharara knows it—is that she is not principally the purveyor of unique informa-
tion but a media personality, someone people like to spend time with, and that her show, while presumably made up of real news and facts and truth, is a fantasy, a shimmering hyperreality, one that in this case happens to be a fantasy about how facts and news and truth are treated, with emphases and mores that signal seriousness and impor-
tance within well-understood and fairly rigid parameters. What she is selling, in other words, is not an ex-
perience of reality but of what her viewer-
wish reality were like—that is, therapy, not news.

VII.

The coincidence of trauma and therapy, alarm and comfort, is the essence of today’s news, which requires emergency, high-
stakes drama, breaking stories, up-
dates, and alerts to keep its audience engaged, but which must then solve the problem it has created by offering explainers and analyses to give coherence to so much terrifying chaos and by employing infor-
national docents, in the form of likable media figures, to soothe our fear of a world on fire with their good humor, their intelligence, and the reassuring whisper embed-
ded in their format: the news exists so it can disappear. And the news does disappear, inevitably, because its sa-
line in the virtual sphere of our appre-
rehension is so disproportionate to its salience in our lives. But what does not disappear is the residue of the ex-
pere and how this primes us for our next encounter with news of poli-
tics and the world out there.

One consequence of inflating the stakes of ongoing political activity in order to fill formats and draw audi-
ences is that people are afraid of poli-
cies: afraid of politicians—the government—actually doing anything. Large constituencies stand ready on either side to denounce any new policy or law as the end of every-
things they cherish. The potential effect of policy gets subsumed into the virtual space of the news, where it languishes as an untested propo-
sition, an object of endless, futile de-
bate. Instead of implementing policy and evaluating it in practice, they re-
main paralyzed, and the more para-
alyzed we get—the less able to enact any or amend policy—the more the case for paralysis grows, since the chances of fixing a mistake diminish. This grants an asymmetric power to the
forces that want the government to do less, not more.

But the more pernicious effect is a psychic cancer introduced into the culture as a whole. The extreme coincidence of urgency and irrelevance, terror and impotence, turns into a maddening unsettledness and contradiction in the conceptual sphere of life, authoring fear, anger, and confusion everywhere. The essential experience of a hyperreality is angst: dread, hushed panic, ambient foreboding. A disturbing fiction at least comforts you that it is fiction. A needing friend may finally admit, “I’m just fucking with you.” The news is, on balance, just fucking with us, but it can never say so because it draws its stimulating power from the pretense that it isn’t entertainment, isn’t just “fun,” but is deeply consequential. It rigorously blurs the line between entertainment and public service, since its market share and prestige depend on this confusion. But when you ask yourself what you can do with what you have learned on the news, you see that it only permits you to consume subsequent news more conversantly.

VIII.

Whether as a news show, a podcast, or an article, chances are today the news came to you through a screen. Online news platforms differ from traditional broadcast media and newspapers in significant ways. When clicks and engagement define the metrics of success, prompts and alerts, listicles, clickbait, most-read or “top story” sections, and otherwise manipulative headlines and teasers become predominant aspects of the experience. The graphic layouts of news on TV and on websites converge, with chyrons mimicking banner ads and vice versa. Red-letter “breaking news” gets more common (and less likely to be urgent, or even news) as the thirst for constant stimulation grows. When you buy a physical newspaper, what you do with it next—what you read—is your business. Not so with news on the internet; here the publication’s interest does not end but begins at the “point of sale,” and everything about the architecture of the product is designed to attach you to more of it.

But even old-school newspapers succumbed to the tyranny of format, worshiping, in their way, a less glitzy hyperreality we call “the news of the day.” This is what a newspaper is and has been—a kind of composite pseudo-event—since the telegraph and other technologies of communication freed information from limits imposed by space and time. The news of the day comprises real- and pseudo-events and even, sometimes, real news, but it is only one of infinite possibilities of how we might narrativize the world. It strives to be factual but adheres to strict conventions of format about what can and can’t appear. It collapses the dimensionality we rely on to judge the world around us so that the proportions of the world it presents cannot agree with the proportions of our lives—“cannot” because the news is above all else this proportionality, this idiosyncratic condensation of the world out there.

This is what Neil Postman meant when he wrote, “The news of the day is a figment of our technological imagination.” Our means of apprehending reality determine the reality we apprehend. What few could foresee was that, as technological and business pressures drew the news further toward stimulation and away from representing immediate life, at a certain point the value of the news’ being true, its hewing as close as possible to an accurate picture of the world, would fall away. The news’ relationship to people’s lives had grown perilously virtual and its meaning, on an emotional level, nearly indistinguishable from entertainment. That no feedback mechanism existed to discourage people from getting their facts wrong, or to correct them when they did, underscored how deeply insignificant and remote the subject matter of the news—trumpeted for its significance and immediacy—was to the lives of its audience. In the immediate and practical sense, news and fake news became a distinction without a difference.

IX.

What we call “news” is less and less the meaningful historical facts—this happened—and more and more “opinion”: argument to substantiate an ideology or worldview. Have you noticed a recent profusion of ideology? Here’s why: ideology is an answer to the problem of conceptual questions destined to remain in the conceptual sphere. It fills a vacuum of action. You can argue using ideology, but you can’t build a bridge with it. If you spend more time arguing than building bridges, it’s very useful.

One way to tell you’re in the presence of ideology is when an entire industry of opinion exists to bolster and substantiate beliefs that people do not know how to justify on their own. Its nature is to confuse the question of who is thinking for whom and where thought or belief began. Ideology flattens people that their beliefs are their own precisely when they are not, and thus the sort of opinions and analyses that present themselves as ideology’s correctives are in fact its enablers. The consumer of opinion does not ask himself “Why do I believe this?” but “Who can remind me why I believe this?”

Much has been made of the dichotomy between news and opinion in the case of Fox News or the Wall Street Journal, but almost all news today comes with a lacing of opinion or ideology, a framing, at the very least, that helps sort through the implications of a piece of information and put it in the context of a prior ideological framework. Rarely are you left to wonder whether a given idea matches Republican or Democratic, conservative or liberal ideology. Rarely are you left to wonder what you yourself think, or what else you would like to know before forming an opinion, without someone swooping in to think for you.

Guidance from those who know more than you do is often a good thing: the substance of education. But education means to empower you to think for yourself, not indoctrinate you. The signs of education and of ideology mirror each other inversely: curiosity, open-mindedness, and self-doubt on the one hand; quickness to anger, defensiveness, and tenacity of belief on the other. One welcomes new information; the other fears it.

Most Americans are not significant consumers of news and are not especially ideological. One might hope that if news were performing the educational function it sets for itself, news-savvy, high-information Americans would be still more open-minded.
and less ideological. Studies suggest the opposite is true—that more “informed” voters are more partisan and often have less accurate, more ideologically skewed ideas about the world. This isn’t necessarily the news’ fault. Nonetheless, the news seems not to counteract or mitigate but to abet our ideological drift. It gives us the tools not to interrogate but to taxonomize belief, not to develop policy preferences but to identify to which political identity and tribe a policy belongs. In the internet age it gives us just enough to cobble together our own take—demonstrating our wonkish bona fides, unleashing a snarky dismissal or the sickest burn—just enough, that is, to pass off the scraps of other people’s expertise as an ersatz identity of our own.

I
deology grows stronger for our belief in a lie: that information has an additive property whereby at some point it becomes knowledge. This simply isn’t true. Outside the contextual frameworks that give information a place in life and a relationship to other information, it is quite literally meaningless. Would more state-issued facts about the Soviet economy in 1980, or more pages of talking points from an industry lobby, get you closer to the truth simply for not being untrue? Does knowing more trivia help someone build a better car or advance particle physics or write a more touching ballad? If we judge the “informed” as those who possess more information—more disembodied or decontextualized bits of trivia that are “true” in the sense of not being demonstrably false—we may find we have created a vacuous category ("conversance") and that we need invented contexts, like the proliferating ("conversance") and that we need invented contexts, like the proliferating "news quizzes," to put these incoherent facts to use. “Think You’re Smarter Than a Slate Senior Editor? Find Out With This Week’s News Quiz,” Slate suggests. “Did you stay up to date this week?” the New York Times’ news quiz more gently wonders. It’s only one step further to propose the news business itself and the practice of journalism as the proper object of the news connoisseur’s attention and interest. Asking such people’s opinions in polls, then, may do less to draw out “informed” commentary than to hold up a mirror to the culture’s own confusion.

“Truth” and “fact” in isolation do nothing to combat ideology and error. It merely benefits the news industry to pretend they do. I understand why people object to false equivalencies between MSNBC and Fox News, but to focus on veracity blinds us to the deeper effect of opinion and putridity per se. The pertinent question concerns the terms of the implicit contract between audience and commentator. If commentators serve the sensibility of their audiences—which the necessity of attracting and retaining viewers (or listeners or readers) in a competitive media environment ensures—it hardly matters that they traffic in fact or avoid untruth since the overall message people receive is: Your worldview is substantially right, and here are the arguments to insulate and fortify it. The purpose is to justify ideological frameworks as a way of dealing with uncertainty and to reinforce the complex social agreements on which these consensuses are built. When Fox News anchor Shepard Smith debunked what conspiracy theorists had dubbed the Hillary Clinton “uranium scandal” in 2017, his audience did not thank him for elucidating the truth, but suggested he belonged on CNN or MSNBC and that, for exposing a false story, he was anti-Trump. In other words, he had violated the terms of their contract, which was not to provide fact or best judgment but corroboration. Truth was welcome, but only truth that confirmed one view.

Thus while ideology and entertainment may seem at odds—entertainment is reputedly fun and lighthearted, where ideology is deadly serious—they are in fact flip sides of the same coin. Entertainment means to transfix, to keep you in place: watching, tuned in. It cannot ask you to endure discomfort, and the comfort it offers is often an uncomplicated intimacy, even a vicarious identification, with a celebrity—in the case of news, with the commentator or host. Because this person’s primary concern is your comfort—which is to say your attention and approval—a subtle con exists at the heart of the exchange. This person does not know who you are or, in any but the most superficial sense, care about you. But the illusion of a relationship is nonetheless paramount. It goes one step further, since part of the illusion, in the face of political confusion and distress, is that the news celebrity’s competence and clarity are your own. Her power is briefly yours, and while you inhabit the aura of her expertise you are safe from your own ignorance and the frustration of life among other people. The most fervent devotees of a cult or demagogue are those who mistake courtship for love and the power of a leader for their own. But when you step outside the aegis of a leader’s power, the aura of a pundit’s companionship, you realize, suddenly, that you are alone and unprepared. You were misled into thinking you were getting help when you were giving worship. Ideology takes root in this disappointment because the alternative is more painful: accepting that you’ve been conned.

X.

Newspapers begin with the most serious and sober news, which, though it has little to do with your life, understands that you show up with good intentions. You mean to do something civic, or at least to cast a glance over those more serious headlines on your way to controversy and gossip, celebrity and human drama.

The news, like a fractal, repeats this betrayal of good intentions on every scale. This is the poignant and tragedy of the news. We need it: the Fourth Estate, complement to government, scourge of corruption, orches-trator of public discourse. No one thinks we could get by without a press. No one who understands the work of journalism has anything but admiration for its honest practice.

But this work—to hold power to account, to safeguard the truth, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, in Finley Peter Dunne’s immortal words—has entered into a fatal bargain with an effluvium that demeans and yet supports it. Traditional reporting becomes the loss leader. It exchanges its status for a subsidy, and slowly a reluctant embrace of this co-option—by the very forces a profession that stands in opposition to power should repel—turns into an
erotic grapple, because the apotheosis of market logic is the jittery Stockholm syndrome that makes the prisoners of the market insist that it has set them free.

So we find ourselves in a situation in which an entertainment industry of spicuous value (called “news”) subsidizes a much smaller and less popular subindustry (real news), which lends its prestige to the former and permits it to call itself by the same name. As this entertainment industry subsides and replaces the news industry, a little game takes place, more or less in public. The game involves pretending—journalist and audience alike—that they have gathered to discuss a truth that exists outside the media, when, except in the rarest cases, they intend to discuss the processes of the media itself: the drama of how information and sentiment evolve and are influenced within a media environment. Like sports fans, news consumers learn the subtleties of the game. They grow “media-savvy,” and media-savvy becomes the hope of an industry. Members of the news business (and practically they alone) call for greater “media literacy”—a solution to a problem they have created that expects the reformation of their audience but not of their industry—because they do not want to choose between responsibility and popularity, or principle and career. They are selling a healthy product, they imply, which people are using the wrong way. But this is confused. No one wants the healthy product. They want its misuse. They want to believe something so stimulating and likable in a media environment, suffices to justify one’s ascendancy within it, because—despite protestations to the contrary—this logic of celebrity explains why anyone is a media figure in the first place, and why we attend them. The sober, responsible news, now in its watchdog guise, enters here—when the mechanism of its own industry has elevated a crook or a scoundrel to a position of power—promising to solve, through exposure, a problem it helped create. But it can’t undo the media mechanism without relinquishing its own power and profitability by coping to the lie on which its prestige rests.

But we need the news, don’t we? We need information spreading through society. We need people digging into convenient stories to check the facts. We need to uncover what power seeks to hide and discourage those who can abuse their power from doing so.

Of course, we can’t judge the soldier, the police officer, the watchdog only by what they do, but also by what would happen without them. And yet no one would suggest we fund the military by watching it wage war on TV, that the size of its audience should determine its budget. We understand where such incentives would lead.

But this is the way the news works. Its greatest social benefit rests in discouraging the sensational and scandalous from happening, but it needs the sensational and scandalous to attract the audience that supports it. No one would propose we fund cancer research through tobacco sales or link heart-disease treatment to McDonald’s revenue. No one would propose we fund the military by watching it wage war on TV, that the size of its audience should determine its budget. We understand where such incentives would lead.

As civic discourse—the news—becomes increasingly shaped by media-savvy and game-play, as it becomes a metadiscourse not about actual events but about the translation and distortion of actual events within a virtual sphere, the little lie about what the news is and why we follow it permits bigger lies. Charlatans, con men, demagogues, and cheats crawl out of the woodwork and operate with impunity, knowing they need not win on truth or merit, but simply win the news cycle, win within the rules of a contrived game. Playing the game well, being stimulating and likable in a media environment, suffices to justify one’s ascendancy within it, because—despite protestations to the contrary—this logic of celebrity explains why anyone is a media figure in the first place, and why we attend them. The sober, responsible news, now in its watchdog guise, enters here—when the mechanism of its own industry has elevated a crook or a scoundrel to a position of power—promising to solve, through exposure, a problem it helped create. But it can’t undo the media mechanism without relinquishing its own power and profitability by coping to the lie on which its prestige rests.
the news industry is unfair. The news is trapped in a business model that makes no sense, that rewards it for its worst behavior and refuses to pay it for what of greatest value it contributes. But the news can be blamed for confusing the issue. We need to know when we are being entertained and when we are having a different experience. Being fed trivialities when we need importance, like empty calories when we need nourishment, makes us sick. We grow to mistake bigness for importance, when importance is a measure of our involvement. Big trivialities make us psychically obese, with nowhere to expend this pent-up energy. “What a story. What a fucking story,” Dean Baquet said, watching Trump’s inauguration.

The essayist Lauren Hough writes about being a “cable guy” and describes the clenched-teeth white-knuckling of a customer who hears he will have to forgo Fox News for a week. A junkie without a fix. What is this hunger, this addiction? An addiction is a hunger briefly satisfied, then redoubled, by its object. But hunger for what? Hunger for something much more significant than the news. An answer to the incommensurable. To the incommensurability of the scope of the world and the scope of our lives. The vastness of our hopes and the range of our capabilities. Meaning and place. I feel it, too. It does not begin in anger or fear, but it can be twisted into these by a cynical exchange—too many cynical exchanges, one after the next. Too many trivialities passed off as sustenance. Too much fake intimacy. Too much stimulation to no end.

William Carlos Williams writes:

My heart roves thinking to bring you news of something that concerns you and concerns many men. Look at what passes for the new. You will not find it there but in despised poems. It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.

Good luck getting anyone to turn away from the news to a poem, but this is the lack—and the surfeit, the glut—of which we die miserably every day.

SOMETHING MISSING

When we turn away from the news, we will confront a startling loneliness. It is the loneliness of life. The loneliness of thinking, of having no one to think for us, and of uncertainty. It is a loneliness that was always there but that was obscured by an illusion, and we will miss the illusion. We will miss the illusion that we had a place in history, the sense that we were celebrities ourselves, actors on the grand stage. We will miss the voices and images that came to us daily and convinced us they were our friends. We may, if we listen closely to the echo inside this loneliness, hear the expectant beating of our own hearts and understand that what we longed for, what we asked for, and what was given us was a story—a story of such grand metaphysical proportions that reality could never meet it. Reality could only meet it by inflaming itself, and this was the danger—the danger that made our hearts beat faster and the story grow stronger. Then we will see the news for what it was: the narrator of our national epic. “The news of the day” was the next chapter in an evaporating book. And we will miss tuning in each day to hear that voice that cuts boredom and loneliness in its solution of the present tense, that like Scheherazade assures us the story is still unfolding and always will be. I don’t know whether we can give it up. We may need it too much, miss it too sharply. We may never get to the quiet place where we can read a poem, because this will mean distinguishing happiness from pleasure and understanding that happiness means boredom, means loneliness. Means life among one another, in the world; a place where drama subsides and horizons of time stretch to months, to years. Are you not bored already? Who will narrate our epic now? Will we have one? What will bind us? No one knows. What we do know is that some part of us longs for our dreams to come true. Dream of monsters long enough and you bring them into being. We make what we imagine real. And who then reminds us—and what must happen before we remember—that the drama we want in our stories is not the drama we want in our lives?
WHAT IS AVAXHOME?
AVAXHOME - the biggest Internet portal, providing you various content: brand new books, trending movies, fresh magazines, hot games, recent software, latest music releases.

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Protect your downloadings from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers
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I had been in Domoni—an ancient, ramshackle trading town on the volcanic island of Anjouan—for only a few summer days in 2018 when Onzardine Attoumane, a local English teacher, offered to show me around the medina. Already I had gotten lost several times trying to navigate the dozens of narrow, seemingly indistinguishable alleyways that zigzagged around the old town’s crumbling, lava-rock homes. But Onzardine had grown up in Domoni and was intimately familiar with its contours.

Stocky in build, with small, deep-set eyes and neatly trimmed stubble, Onzardine led me through the back-streets, our route flanked by ferns and weeds sprouting from cracks in the walls and marked by occasional piles of rubble. After a few minutes, we emerged onto a sunlit cliff offering views of the mustard-colored hills that surround the town, dotted with mango, palm, and breadfruit trees. We clambered down a trail, past scrawny goats foraging through piles of discarded plastic bottles, broken flip-flops, and corroded aluminum cans, toward a ledge where a dozen young men were waiting for the fishing boats to return to shore, gazing blankly out across the sea.

Stone paths soon gave way to dirt tracks. On a low, concrete wall, a man in a faded, dirt-caked T-shirt

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Comorians resting on the waterfront in Moroni, the capital of the Union of the Comoros. All photographs from the Comoro Islands, August 2019, by Tommy Trenchard for Harper’s Magazine © The artist
sat hunched, staring out toward the water with wild eyes. Onzardine beckoned me to follow him up a sheer slope of dusty soil to the remnants of the city’s sixteenth-century defenses. Together, we too looked out over the swell of the ocean. Toward the southeast, the faint outline of another island, Mayotte, some fifty miles away, glowed like a mirage through the haze.

Anjouan is one of three main islands that make up the Union of the Comoros, a tiny nation of fewer than a million people set in the warm waters off the eastern coast of Mozambique. One of the world’s least-visited countries, the Comoros is best known as the home of the West Indian Ocean coelacanth, an ancient fish once thought by scientists to have gone extinct sixty-five million years ago, though Comorian fisherman had been regularly catching them for as long as anyone can remember.

Largely cut off from the global economy, most Comorians make their living through subsistence agriculture. Government corruption and nepotism are endemic, public services are woefully inadequate, the natural resources on which the country’s largely rural population relies—fresh water, arable land, fisheries—are critically depleted, and the average per capita income is little more than a thousand dollars per year. Since 1975, the Comoros has seen more than twenty attempted coups.

Mayotte, by contrast, belongs to one of the world’s wealthiest nations. Despite being some five thousand miles from Paris, the shimmer of land that Onzardine and I could see across the straits was bona fide French soil. The outpost has representatives in the French parliament, is subject to French law, uses the euro, and enjoys benefits of European Union membership.

Crossing the waters before us had become the overriding goal of most ambitious young Comorians. The sea was calm that day, but in recent years thousands have drowned in attempts to reach Mayotte on flimsy fiberglass boats known as kwassakwassa. A 2012 report by the French Senate put the death toll since 1995 at between seven and ten thousand. More recently, Comorian officials have said that the true figure could be as high as fifty thousand, an estimate that would make the crisis comparable in scale to that in the Mediterranean. Without documentation, those who succeed in crossing live a precarious existence on Mayotte, unable to work legally, forever hiding from the authorities.

The longer I stayed in the archipelago, the more I began to think of it as a microcosm of a planet nearing its breaking point. It became impossible not to see the islands’ increasingly familiar constellation of problems—a rapidly growing population, the unsustainable exploitation of resources, climate change, economic inequality, and the ensuing mass migration from the poor world to the rich—as a blueprint for many crises to come.

Reaching Mayotte wasn’t always so difficult. The four islands of the Comoros archipelago—Grande Comore, Mohéli, Anjouan, and Mayotte—have been inhabited for over
a thousand years, first by mainland Africans and Southeast Asians, followed by Arab and Indian traders and, eventually, European settlers. The archipelago was traditionally ruled by an assortment of rival sultans and chiefs, with power and influence shifting among towns and islands, though their diverse populations shared the same Sunni Islamic faith and spoke dialects of the same Shikomori language. Situated advantageously between Madagascar and the African coast, the islands’ inhabitants dealt in everything from rice to slaves, first with Arab merchants and later with French, British, and Dutch trading companies.

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, however, the majority of the maritime traffic on which the islands depended disappeared. Almost overnight, the archipelago was transformed from a comparatively prosperous trading hub into a forgotten backwater. By 1886, having been drawn into the territorial scramble between European powers seeking farmland and regional military footholds, all four of the islands were either protectorates or colonies of France.

In 1974, following decades of political agitation, the French government permitted a referendum on the question of independence. While 95 percent of the total votes were cast in favor, a majority on Mayotte voted to remain part of France. Intent on retaining Mayotte for itself, the French chose to interpret the results on an island-by-island basis, and the archipelago was split in two. The decision was fiercely criticized by both the Comoros, which saw Mayotte as Comorian, and the United Nations, which claimed that France had violated the principle of territorial integrity. France, in turn, cited the right of Mahorans—as citizens of Mayotte are called—to self-determination. Two years later, Mayotte reaffirmed its decision in a second referendum. In 2011, the island was granted the status of a full overseas department of France.

By that time, Comorians had already been dying at sea for well over a decade. In 1995, the French prime minister Édouard Balladur, seeking to stem the rush of immigration that was already flowing from the Comoros, introduced a visa requirement for all Comorians visiting Mayotte. The Balladur visas, as they are universally known, were, and remain, almost impossible to obtain without
high-level connections, so most Comorians were forced to travel in secret by kwassa-kwassa, leading thousands to their deaths.

One of the dead was Onzardine’s cousin Bacar. The two had grown up in the same household, like brothers. Like many in Onzardine’s family, Bacar became a fisherman, but he decided to switch careers when he realized that he could earn as much smuggling a single group of migrants to Mayotte as he could fishing for an entire month. At his busiest, and assuming the weather cooperated, Bacar made as many as three crossings a week. On a stormy Friday in 2016, after he had dropped off his passengers safely in Mayotte, Bacar’s engine failed. “He called us and said his motor had broken,” Onzardine’s mother told me. “He said he was alone at sea and needed help. When we called him back, his phone wasn’t working. We called people to help him, but it was too late.” Fishermen searched for Bacar’s boat for ten days, finding no trace.

During my week in Anjouan, Onzardine and I met a dozen families mourning children, parents, and siblings whose boats never reached Mayotte. Some of those who died were fishermen turned smugglers like Bacar, but most were passengers trying to sustain their families amid economic hardship and agricultural and environmental decline. Over the past twenty-five years, Anjouan has lost 80 percent of its forests, cut down by farmers moving higher and higher up the island’s slopes in search of fertile land. This has led to the erosion of much of the topsoil, which has further exacerbated the situation, and, in tandem with changing weather patterns, has contributed to the disappearance of up to three quarters of the island’s rivers. One such river, Onzardine told me, used to be so deep that he and his friends could leap into it from a high bridge without hitting the bottom. Now it’s been reduced to a two-inch-deep trickle.

Government services on the islands are patchy at best—trash collection is virtually nonexistent, power outages are commonplace, the national health service suffers from a lack of equipment and expertise, and standards of education are so poor that, according to UNESCO, about 40 percent of the adult population cannot read or write. Medical conditions requiring ongoing treatment, such as diabetes, can be financially ruinous, and cancer is more or less a death sentence. Onzardine’s uncle, who is diabetic, has twice had to board a kwassa-kwassa to Mayotte to receive care. When Onzardine and I visited the hospital in Domoni, there appeared to be only a single patient.

Perhaps because of what had happened to Bacar, or because I had heard so many other migration horror stories that week, I had assumed that Onzardine wanted to stay in Anjouan. Unlike many of his peers, he had managed to graduate from university and find a job. So I was surprised when he confessed to me before I left that he, too, was dreaming of making it to Mayotte. Onzardine explained that the school where he taught had not yet begun paying him—public-sector workers are often forced to wait years before receiving their first paycheck. Moreover, he told me, you really needed two or three jobs to be comfortable, and given his humble background and lack of connections, he couldn’t hope for much. In Mayotte, an English teacher could earn as much as a month as Onzardine could hope to save after several years of work in the Comoros—if, that is, his school ever started paying him.

Onzardine also wanted to marry. A typical grand mariage—the extravagant celebration that dictates a man’s status in Comorian society—costs tens of thousands of dollars and lasts for two weeks. (Onzardine and I attended one in Domoni that had cost over 35,000 euros. It included a public bullfight, held in the main square in front of the sultan’s palace, which was not even included on the official schedule.) Onzardine had been with his fiancée, Halima, for five years, but still lacked the five or six thousand euros he estimated he would need for an appropriately lavish ceremony.

At week’s end, before flying out of the Comoros, I asked Onzardine if he was nervous. “It’s a big risk,” he admitted, “but it’s better to take a risk than to do nothing.” He promised he would try to avoid bad weather. As the plane shot smoothly over the jagged, volcanic coastline and climbed over the sea beyond, I imagined Onzardine huddled in an overcrowded kwassa-kwassa, crashing through the waves, his eyes squinting against the spray.

One year after my first meeting with Onzardine, I returned to Anjouan. My plan was to take the migrant route to Mayotte via kwassa-
kwassa, and I set about finding a smuggler. They were not hard to find—every village along the coast had at least one, and everyone knew who and where they were. I stayed in the capital, Murzamud, a decrepit port whose defining feature is a large whitewashed fort built in the eighteenth century to guard against marauding Malagasy pirates.

Men wearing long white robes and cadmium-yellow kofias wandered the warren of the old medina, and teenagers chatted by the waterfront, the gray sand of the beach obscured by an ankle-deep layer of trash. Just offshore, fishermen guided their boats past the rusting wreck of a trawler.

The situation on Anjouan had grown even bleaker. The previous summer, the president of the Comoros, Azali Assoumani, had cracked down on opposition parties and amended the constitution to enable himself to stay in power through 2030. A few months later, rebels had fought fierce gun battles against government troops in Murzamud’s medina, resulting in a handful of deaths. The uprising had been put down by the time I arrived, but mysterious explosions were still going off by night throughout the town and the surrounding villages.

My translator on this visit was an unemployed plumber named Anzize Soilahi. We took a taxi to the village of Ouani, north of the capital, where I hoped to find a ride to Mayotte. We walked down to the wharf, where colorfully painted kwassa-kwassa bobbed offshore. A mural on a nearby wall depicts migrants being devoured by sharks in a rough sea and reads: the balladur visa kills comorians. A stick figure in a boat with French police written across the hull was firing at the figures in the water, and a crudely drawn helicopter circled above.

I asked an old man resting in the shade of a tree where I might find a smuggler. “You must talk to the commandant,” he replied, gesturing to a young man in a baseball cap sitting on the hull of an overturned boat. The “commandant”—he identified himself as “Boss”—said that he would be happy to take me to Mayotte for the sum of 1,500 euros, an offer that was quickly reduced to 500 and a bottle of whiskey after he saw my expression of disbelief. He added, apologetically, that it would not be possible to give me a receipt, but assured me that the voyage would be safe. We would travel by night, he explained, and wait off the coast of Mayotte until his contacts onshore gave him the all clear. Boss boasted that he could fit thirty passengers on his boat, and then asked again for whiskey. I decided to check out his competitors before making a decision.

In the neighboring village of Mirontsi, I waited out of sight while Anzize negotiated terms with another smuggler who said he’d bring me to Mayotte for 400 euros. He took a maximum of twelve people in his kwassa-kwassa, which would leave before dawn the next day. He also offered a guarantee: if the French patrol boats intercepted us before making landfall, once we had been deported back to Anjouan he would take us again for free. That afternoon I walked through the cool streets of the medina and found a shop where I bought a life jacket, along with a crate of water and some biscuits in case our engine cut out and left us adrift. Then I retired to my hotel,
opened a can of warm, unpleasant beer, and waited.

I woke to the sound of my alarm at two-thirty in the morning. I packed my life jacket, water, and supplies, wrapped my bag in several watertight trash bags, and set off to Mirontsi. Anzize phoned and confirmed that he was on his way, but he sounded worried—it was too quiet, he thought. When I reached the wharf, it was deserted.

I called Anzize back several times, but his phone seemed to be off. After forty minutes, I gave up and trudged the mile and a half back to Mutsamudu. Back in my hotel, I tried him again, with the same result. The sun came up, and by the time my phone rang, it was almost midday. Anzize told me he had been arrested. The police had accused him of being behind a spate of explosions that had gone off over the previous days, and only after searching him thoroughly and interrogating him for several hours did they conclude that he was not an insurgent.

That night, I soon learned, the police had raided smugglers all over the island, confiscating their motors and taking them in for questioning. Fishermen who witnessed the arrests told me that the police had claimed the boat captains were transporting mercenaries and weapons in an effort to overthrow the government on Grande Comore. For many Anjouanais, the crackdown had not only become another obstacle to leaving—it had become a further reason for doing so.

I decided to wait for another opportunity to cross, but the arrests continued, and the smugglers stayed in hiding. Stories emerged of brutal beatings inside police stations. Drivers and fixers grew too afraid to work with me. One fixer told me he suspected the staff and guests at my hotel were spies, and that a friend of his, a teacher whose brother-in-law was a smuggler, had just been released by the police with bruises all over his body and two broken fingers. I decided I should leave before I got anyone hurt.

In the end, a journey that would have taken many dangerous, uncomfortable hours and cost 400 euros took exactly twenty minutes at less than half the price. I looked out the window of the twin-propeller Embraer feeling the full weight of the privilege bestowed upon me by my British passport. I searched for kwassa-kwassa amid the featureless ocean, but saw nothing. At the immigration counter in Mayotte, a border official glanced at my documents and welcomed me to France.

On Mayotte, the women peddling grilled meat at the side of the road sold plump, aromatic chicken breasts and legs, instead of the scrawny imported wings on offer on Anjouan. Instead of kwassa-kwassa moored in the harbor there were sailboats and a handful of police patrol vessels, instantly recognizable from the graffiti in Anjouan. Trinkets and souvenirs filled the shelves of boutiques by the ferry terminal, and behind them stood shops, hotels, and office blocks that looked almost space-age after the dilapidated, weatherworn townscapes of the Comoros.

The area around the ferry terminal formed the heart of the island’s capi-
tal, Mamoudzou. It was also the scene of a daily struggle between the French security forces and vendors from Mayotte’s rapidly growing foreign population, which now constitutes 48 percent of the island’s inhabitants. The past few years have seen a growing influx of migrants from as far afield as Central Africa and the Middle East, but the vast majority, some 95 percent, are Comorians. Of these, around half are on Mayotte illegally, sans papiers.

Each morning migrants assembled outside the terminal to sell printed fabric, bags of onions, and knockoff shoes to the traffic coming and going from the ferry. Their merchandise was laid out on sarongs, so that it might be quickly bundled away. Every hour or so, police patrols swept through the square, the migrants parting before them like baitfish pursued by a predator. Those who weren’t quick enough were herded into police vans, sirens blaring, and carted away to be processed. If they lacked residency papers, they were sent to a detention center to await deportation. Those who weren’t enrolled in school, despite a French law that makes schooling obligatory for anyone on French soil irrespective of their legal status. She said the school staff needed an address for each student, but they had no address in the bangas.

Outside the shack, children played with toy cars made from sardine tins and bottle caps, and beside us one of Saltoun’s grandchildren, two-year-old Najma, slept on an old couch cushion in the dirt. Flies covered her face, crawling inside her nostrils and feeding on the deposits around her eyes. She looked sick. Najma was a French citizen, but this had done little to improve her circumstances. Saltoun sold cassava roots and bananas that she and her family farmed to try to make a living, but they were still often left with no food at all, and water had to be lugged up the hill in jerricans from a roadside tap. When Najma or the other children fell ill, Saltoun told me, she could not take them to the hospital without running the risk of deportation, so the family made do with over-the-counter medicine from a local pharmacy.

Our conversation was punctuated by periodic shouts of “PAF!” from over a corrugated metal fence, sending a reflexive wave of tension through the family. PAF is the French acronym for the hated border police who patrol these areas—the Police aux Frontières. They’re not legally allowed to enter private property without a warrant, but several of Saltoun’s family members told me that they regularly did so anyway. Saltoun said it made the children cry.

Above us loomed a series of gleaming white apartment blocks with views over both the bangas and the broad sweep of the ocean. “If we had papers, maybe we could live like that,” said Saltoun. “It’s painful. We’re always jealous.” She looked down at Najma, sleeping on her cushion. “What kind of government allows this? Can you imagine a French child suffering like this?”

I asked whether she ever thought about moving back to Anjouan, but she said that prospects would be equally hopeless in the Comoros. Anyway, after decades on Mayotte, the island had become home—for many of her children, the only one they’d ever known. But though she had been filing residency applications for more than two decades, Saltoun had yet to receive a single reply. It wasn’t helping matters that she was illiterate and spoke no French, leaving her unable to fill out the required paperwork without assistance from family or friends.

Since 2014, France has enacted a series of laws that have...
left migrants in Mayotte with fewer protections than their counterparts in the rest of the nation. Changes to the process through which children born in French territory can gain citizenship have tightened the requirements for Comorians born on the island. Similarly, while migrants to mainland France in possession of a carte de séjour, a residency permit, are typically free to travel throughout the country, those permits issued in Mayotte do not generally grant the same privileges. Foreigners in Mayotte are also denied the right to request a delay of twenty-four hours before being deported, a privilege granted to migrants on the mainland. Consequently, the majority of those sent back to Anjouan do not manage to see a lawyer, let alone a judge. Rights groups say that what protections do exist for the migrants are often disregarded given the pace and scale of the island’s deportation machine, with tragic results—children separated from their parents, and people being deported to a country in which they’ve never before set foot.

In the eyes of many Mahorans, however, the government should have been doing even more. Hedja Ben, a twenty-eight-year-old delivery driver, told me that Mayotte was “suffocating” and described feeling “submerged by a wave of foreigners.” Like almost all the legal residents I spoke to, he drew a familiar connection between the increase in undocumented migrants on the island and what he saw as a rising crime rate. (Crime rates had actually fallen for two consecutive years.) “All the illegal people here get deported, but the kids stay and they’re left in a situation where they have nobody to look after them. That’s why there’s so much crime,” he said. I asked how things had changed since he was a child. “We live in fear of criminals,” he replied. “Before, there was community. Now there’s individualism. Everyone has closed up… They’re not bad people, and I understand why they’re coming here, but I just want to live like we used to.”

Walking through Mamoudzou one day, I saw an orange two-story house flying the tricolor flag of France alongside two posters of Marine Le Pen, the firebrand of the French far right. Le Pen has made a name for herself as a vocal critic of immigration and is widely reviled by ethnic and religious minority groups in France. In Mayotte, however, despite its overwhelmingly black and Muslim population, her anti-immigration rhetoric has struck a chord. The owner of the house, a pudgy, middle-aged man who smelled strongly of alcohol, said he was about to drive to the store for more beer and invited me to join him. I climbed in. “The other parties are incompetent,” he slurred as we negotiated the narrow streets. Like everything in Mayotte, though, his position was complicated. He bemoaned the migrants arriving daily on the island, but he admitted that his own wife was born on Anjouan.

The préfet of Mayotte, Dominique Sorain, arrived here in 2018 to find the island paralyzed by protests. Amid a general strike, citizens had set up roadblocks and were marching in the streets to demand action against illegal immi-
Letters from the Comoro Islands

The graves of migrants drowned at sea, Mamoudzou, Mayotte

...
three months they had already deported several of the same people twice. One man’s record showed that he had been deported twenty-eight times. “This is a rich country in an ocean of poverty,” he said. “I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to stop people from coming.”

While searching for a smuggler back in Anjouan, I had reached out to Onzardine, my guide from the previous year. It turned out that three months earlier he had finally made it to Mayotte, and we decided to meet. Leaving his neighborhood was far too dangerous, however—Onzardine lacked paperwork and could be sent back to Domoni within twenty-four hours if caught—so I set out to the slums above a town called Majicavo Koropa to find him. A taxi dropped me by the side of the coastal road, and I headed up a set of concrete steps beyond which the bangas rolled into the island’s interior.

Onzardine was living in an unpainted concrete house that looked a lot like the one he had left behind in Domoni. Its owners were currently away in mainland France, and they had allowed Onzardine to live there for the time being, along with twenty-two other members of his extended family. We found a café on a rutted backstreet and ordered Cokes while Onzardine filled me in on the past few months. His decision to make the crossing had been hastened when his cousin fell sick, he explained. With no way to diagnose or treat him in Anjouan, the family had decided to send him to Mayotte, and Onzardine had accompanied him. They had rented a kwassa-kwassa to make the crossing, filling it with migrants to recoup cost. The sea was calm, the trip largely uneventful. Avoiding both the marine patrols and the perilous coral reef that rings the island, it took only three hours to reach French waters, and eleven more to safely reach the coast.

Onzardine’s movements were now restricted almost entirely to the slums around the house. Though he could not legally hold a job, he had been able to find temporary work through his aunt and cousins. One man had paid him 50 euros to unload a shipping container full of bedroom furniture. Another had paid him 150 for three weeks of construction work.

Without the security of a contract, undocumented migrants on Mayotte have little bargaining power, and Onzardine gave me an account of what usually happened when Mahoran employers refused to pay: “You collect a group, and then you go to wait somewhere he will pass, and you beat him.” So far, violence hadn’t been necessary in his case (Onzardine said he preferred to leave justice to God anyway), and the little money he was earning was more than he could have hoped for in Anjouan. He had even managed to send 50 euros back to his mother. Within the month, he planned to start a small underground English-language school for anyone who wanted classes. (The plan had been briefly delayed after his partner in the venture was deported, but he managed to make it back to Mayotte after only a week.)

A few days later, Onzardine offered to show me the neighborhood, and we spent the afternoon wandering along the dirt tracks of the slums, meeting with friends of his from Anjouan who had also made the journey. Their shacks sat clustered together on the near-vertical hillides in jumbled mosaics of tarpaulin and corrugated sheet metal. Someone had scrawled the French national motto, liberté, égalité, fraternité, in bold letters across a wall, followed by a question mark. Some of the migrants we met were recent arrivals, others had been there for over a decade, but all of them described the constant strain of knowing that their life could be upended at any moment. One woman, terrified of being deported, could count on her fingers the number of times she had left the safety of her house that year. When neighbors called out from across the fence, her husband explained that they assumed I had come to evict them.

Unlike many of his friends, Onzardine had no intention to stay on Mayotte permanently. He found the restrictions on his freedom irksome, and wondered aloud whether it would be better to be back home earning nothing than stuck in this house. He also worried about what would become of him when the owner returned. I asked him where he would like to be in ten years’ time. He wanted to open a small shop, he replied, in the medina near his mother’s house back in Anjouan. He would sell rice, palm oil, and soft drinks. With that, and with his fiancéé, Halima, he would be happy. But achieving that dream still required money, and he wouldn’t leave Mayotte until he had enough.

It was dark by the time I left the slums, and Onzardine used his cell phone to illuminate the rocky path back toward the main road. At a certain point, we reached the unmarked border beyond which Onzardine would forfeit the protections...
of the slums, and he turned back toward his home.

My departing flight was scheduled to leave from Grande Comore, and I decided to travel back to the Comoros by boat. A fleet of ferries shuttled paying passengers—mostly Mahorans, along with the lucky few Comorians who had managed to obtain visas—back and forth between the islands. Their other main cargo was deportees.

Walking past the Comorian street vendors on my way to the ferry terminal, I spotted a human-rights worker I had met earlier in the week. Solène Dia had been on the island for a year and a half, working for an organization that helped inform migrants of their legal rights, a job that had earned her hate mail and death threats. A man had been illegally arrested on private property, she explained, and she was trying to halt his deportation. If she didn’t succeed, he and I would likely be on the same boat.

An hour later, I boarded a ferry called La Citadelle and watched over the railings of the top deck as a file of some sixty deportees was ushered aboard. They took their seats in the lower deck on blue, synthetic leather chairs. Distorted music videos played on a television at the front of the room, but nobody was watching. Some of the deportees carried backpacks, and others seemed to have nothing at all. I called Dia to see whether she had managed to forestall the man’s deportation. She hadn’t. But she gave me his number, and I went down to the bottom deck to meet him.

This man, whom I’ll call Youssouf, was slender and neatly dressed in white trousers and a maroon button-up shirt. He had been in Mayotte, where he had a wife and children with residency papers, since 2011, and he was the sole breadwinner of the family. Before he was caught, he had been working for a charity dedicated to educating vulnerable children, most of them the children of deported migrants, who had ended up out of school and living on the streets. Now he too was being separated from his family members, and was terrified about what would happen to them. Anger and despair were etched onto Youssouf’s face in equal measure. He said he felt like he might explode.

“Imagine being in a country where kids are left alone on the streets and treated like dogs,” he said. “Imagine having a family here legally, a wife who’s legal, kids who are legal, and they put me on a boat.” He was apoplectic about having been seized from the private premises of the charity where he worked, and he wanted to know whether I could help overturn his deportation. Regardless, he told me, he would be returning to Mayotte as soon as he could.

Shortly after we began talking, a crew member spotted me in the section reserved for deportees. “Are you a journalist?” the man asked. “These passengers are not like the others,” he said, gesturing at the men and women around me. “You can’t talk to them.” Youssouf protested, but the man insisted, and I reluctantly went back to the top deck.

We motored along, parallel to the shoreline, the wake of the boat trailing behind us like a highway through the desert. Towns on the coast slid slowly past, each one ringed by bangas stretching up into the hills. We passed Kaweni, where Saltoun would be holed up with her family; and Majicavo Koropa, where I imagined Onzardine sweating away at a construction site or waiting impatiently for work on the porch of his new home; then Koungou, Longoni, and Bandрабoua, before we rounded the northern tip of the island and set a course for Anjouan.

Once we were beyond the reef, there was a heavy swell and the ship rocked violently from side to side. Down in the hold I could see deportees throwing up into yellow plastic bags distributed by the crew. Youssouf was slumped forward, his head in his hands. I scoured the horizon for kwassa-kwassa but saw only the tireless churning of the sea. In time, Mayotte faded away into the distance, Anjouan emerged from the haze, and a deckhand unfurled a Comorian flag, which fluttered, limply, in the breeze.
AsylumConnect uses technology to help LGBTQ asylum seekers find safe legal aid and other support.

The Brave House is a community space providing holistic services to immigrant girls who are survivors of gender-based violence.

College Athletes Advocacy Initiative advocates for the fair and equal treatment of college athletes.

The Power of Purpose is a solution to the violence, crime, and cycle of criminal justice involvement plaguing youth ages 14 to 18 years old.

The Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (STOP) addresses state and local officials’ growing use of surveillance technologies, especially on communities of color.
THE FORTY-YEAR REHEARSAL
The Wooster Group’s endless work in progress
By David Gordon

On the evening of May 8, just after eight o’clock, Kate Valk stepped onstage and faced the audience. The little playhouse was packed with hardcore fans, theater people and artists, but Kate was performing, most of all, for one person, hidden among them, a small, fine-boned, black-clad woman, her blond-gray hair up in a clip, who smiled, laughed, and nodded along with every word, swaying to the music and mirroring the emotions of the performers while whispering into the ear of the tall, bearded fellow who sat beside her madly scribbling notes. The woman was Elizabeth LeCompte—known to all as Liz—the director of the Wooster Group, watching the first open performance of the company’s new piece, Since I Can Remember.

It had been a tense day, full of opening-night drama. Gareth Hobbs, who would be playing a leading role, had been sick in bed for days with a 103-degree fever, and he’d only arrived at the theater, still shaky, at three-thirty that afternoon. During the final closed rehearsal, performer Suzzy Roche fell on her elbow, then felt faint and had to lie prone while her colleagues fanned her and fetched ice. At one point, Erin Mullin, the stage manager as well as a performer, shouted: “We have one hour left, and we’re on page eight of fifty!” Not to mention that the piece still had no ending.

I come from a family of Broadway fans, so I’ve always hated theater. I spent many childhood evenings squirming in my seat—bored, restless, and oddly ashamed—as folks in costumes sang or cried onstage and I pretended they didn’t know I was there. I was better suited to hiding in dark movie theaters or lurking in smoky clubs. But in the mid-Eighties, a girlfriend took me to see the Wooster Group, and I was instantly obsessed.
Here was the theater I'd been waiting for. The actors spoke directly into microphones, facing front, like singers. The technicians running the show were visible, with their equipment, though they were often in costume themselves, and even spoke lines. Video, music, lighting, dance, speech, and action went off with amazing precision, while still feeling as though it was all being freshly improvised. Seeing them was like seeing a favorite band, and over the years I went to every performance I could. I became convinced that Liz LeCompte was one of our greatest living artists.

At some point, I conceived the idea of attempting, somehow, to learn how the group operated. I wanted, if possible, to grasp the inner workings of genius by trying to understand a great artist who also happened to be living her everyday life—seeing the dentist, shopping for groceries—a short subway ride away from my own. Aside from a few post-performance thank-yous, I had never met Liz, until she visited a colleague's class at the college where I teach. At the start of the question period following her talk, the students hesitated, and my hand shot up. At the dinner that followed, I told her I wanted to watch her make a new piece. She agreed, and she gave me her email address.

A year went by. I emailed periodically, never receiving a reply, though when I encountered her off-line, she greeted me warmly, apologized, and asked me to write again. At long last, Pamela Reichen, the general manager, wrote: Liz had invited me to rehearsal. On December 14, 2018, I knocked on the door of the Performing Garage, the converted space in SoHo where the Wooster Group has been rehearsing; storing props, costumes, and sets; and performing since the mid-Seventies.

When I first walk in, nothing much seems to be happening. No one even acknowledges me. I simply take a seat in the back of the black-painted theater. The stage area is filled by two long tables on wheels, arranged diagonally, with a counter directly in front of the seats. A large flatscreen monitor sits atop a mobile totem, high in the air. Ari Fliakos is in costume, wearing a cartoonishly wide striped tie with a shirt and jacket, sitting on a pink chair that I recognize from other pieces (including, of course, A Pink Chair), occasionally checking his phone. Suzzy Roche sits perfectly still, legs straddling one of the tables, back arched, looking chic in a slinky costume and forbiddingly high heels. She remains there, almost motionless, for hours, a soldier on guard. (Wooster Group performers often seem like athletes, running in place, playing badminton, fighting, memorizing speeches in languages they don’t speak, and attempting heroic feats of discipline and endurance.) Kate Valk stands at the table, before the audience, though now it is Liz who is seated front and center, with her assistant director Matthew Dipple beside her. To the side is Erin Mullin; as well as the costumer, Enver Chakartash; and another assistant director, Michaela Murphy. All three transcribe what is said and improvised, then update the script via Google Docs, so that the text as it appears on the actors’ iPads is itself an organic, fluid form. The sound guys, Eric Sluyter and Omar Zubair; lighting designer David Sexton; and video designer Wladimiro Woyno are also present.

An old black-and-white video plays on the monitor. Ari copies—“channels” or “transmits” are the group’s preferred terms of art—the on-screen action. He carries around a record player and tries, in a sort of dance, to untangle the cord, coiling it around his body, whipping it free. Meanwhile, Kate delivers a monologue based upon the audio playing in her ear. Liz leaps down from the risers and runs out to drag the giant totem and move the tables. Various crew members twice her size and decades younger rush to help, but she waves them off. They try it again. Again. After a couple of hours of this, they decide not to double the film here after all. Ari protests wistfully, “But that means that what we’ve been doing all week…,” then drops it.

There is something strange and mysterious about the work of the Wooster Group, their performances so thrilling and yet inscrutable. Since they are often speaking lines they are hearing via earpiece, then stepping
out of character to discuss the lines, then incorporating the recordings and transcriptions of those same conversations, one quickly loses the sense of what is real and what is art, of what qualifies as performance. (Kate recounted to me how, one night during Nayatt School, a piece from 1978, the actor Ron Vawter fell off the stage and broke his arm. When Liz called for a doctor, the audience thought it was part of the show.) You leave the theater blinking at the late-afternoon noise and light with that feeling of climbing out from a dream.

At the end of my visit, Pamela pulls me aside to tell me that I am welcome back anytime. (As I found out later, it was the sound of my often embarrassingly loud laughter that won Liz over.) I say I’ll be back the next day.

The Wooster Group was founded in 1975 by Liz and her then partner, Spalding Gray, who were soon joined by Ron Vawter, Kate Valk, Willem Dafoe, Peyton Smith, and Jim Clayburgh. (Liz and Dafoe later had a long-term relationship and share a son.) Radically experimental, the group used text, performance, dance, film, music, and other elements to create original “autobiographical” work and to reinterpret classic theater (Hamlet, Three Sisters), combining a highly sophisticated, rarefied aesthetic sense and a rigorously intellectual critical practice with an intense, often subversive energy. They became notorious for things like reenacting videos of themselves tripping on acid, while also working with dedication to refine their craft and achieve their unique theatrical effects, built on virtuoso performance and flawless timing. Deconstructing texts, combining multiple sources of material, splintering representation, pioneering the use of cutting-edge video and sound technology, all kept the group constantly at the forefront of theater.

Over the past forty years, Liz has moved from obscurity to fame, winning heaps of awards, including a MacArthur “Genius Grant,” a Gish Prize, and a Guggenheim. Today, she is probably the leading experimental theater director in the United States and a tremendous influence on younger artists worldwide. She has also endured, and generated, constant scandal and upheaval: Arthur Miller pulled the rights to the group’s version of The Crucible after seeing it; more recently, the estates of Harold Pinter and Tennessee Williams withdrew permission for shows they disapproved of. In 1982, New York State ceased funding after the group re-created old Pigmeat Markham records, performing the black comic’s acts in blackface (as he did). Years later, Kate gave an astounding performance in Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones, her skin darkened and her voice a deep rumbling Louie Armstrong bass. It was widely hailed as a masterpiece.

At the next rehearsal, Liz talks about her preparations for the company Christmas party she is hosting. She had spent the morning at home hiding embarrassing personal items in case her guests, who are all present and listening as she tells me this, “start looking for things to steal.” For example, there is her set of “smarmy asshole” photos. Apparently, she once called her crew a bunch of smarmy assholes, and they responded by taking Polaroids of their butts and presenting them to her on a ring. Ari admits one was his and Liz waves it off. “I recognized yours!”

Later, practicing a scene from the new piece, Liz wants actor Scott Shepherd to “channel” Spalding’s voice and movement from a videotape while Erin bases her speech on the original recording of the play they’re using, T. S. Eliot’s The Cocktail Party, while also copying movement from a recording of Ari’s young daughter giggling, fidgeting, and biting her lip. As Scott notes: “It’s going to be a mess, but that’s where the genius comes from.”

During this rehearsal I solve one of my longstanding Wooster Group mysteries: the lip-synching. Many productions achieve astonishing,
This kind of performance requires an insane amount of rehearsal, relentless in both its duration and its microscopic focus. When developing a show, the group works five days a week, all together in the Garage. Today, group performers wear in-ear receivers, which play back their source recordings, and tiny mics that amplify and record their voices, while also watching strategically placed miniature video screens that sometimes are and sometimes are not showing the same footage the audience is seeing. Snatches of movement and speech, even individual words or sounds—a cough, a chuckle—are drilled again and again, to the point of madness, and a single scene might combine movement from one source, speech from another, and music from something else entirely. Of course, members practice and review on their own, but there is no real way to learn a Wooster Group “part” other than by doing it, over and over, refining along the way. That’s why Suzy Roche, who has been working with Liz for years—her performance as the devil in House/Lights was indelible—sat silently through hours of rehearsal when her own part was not even being performed. “You can’t really just memorize it,” she told me. “You’re steeped in it. You have to be here, even when you’re not doing anything. You have to surrender to the greater thing, which can be difficult.”

“Difficult” is putting it mildly. There are times when it is excruciating just to watch. A tape or recorded bit of sound is played, the actor starts to recite the words or mime the action, and almost immediately Liz interrupts, corrects, and the whole thing is rewound and reset. Other times she is whispering notes, or signaling David to adjust the lights, or asking Eric to add music or noises, humming what she wants while he improvises on a keyboard or searches online. Still lithe and graceful at seventy-five, she bounds up and down the risers, jumps and runs and demonstrates the dances, and fixes her performers with a fierce, intense energy that seems both utterly focused and instantly distractable.

She laughs at the same joke over and over and snaps at the slightest flaw. At one point, a character played by Erin drinks a glass of water, and Liz fidgets, tormented by having to wait for Erin to accomplish this task. She considers cutting it. She considers speeding it up. Then she realizes that the sound of Erin drinking has been inadvertently picked up by her mic and is playing at volume throughout the theater. She is entranced. This is the lucky accident she spends so much time waiting and preparing for. Despite the fixation on exactitude and the constant corrections, she is paradoxically delighted by errors, and nothing seems to make her happier than when the cast messes up; laughing and slapping her thighs, she declares, “That was a good mistake!”

Over six months, I attend about forty rehearsals. After a while, I come to feel as though I am living inside one of their shows.

This then is the method, such as it is: no plan, no theory. Liz never goes in search of a new project; they are brought to her by her actors or else by chance. She slowly develops a piece in rehearsal, building everything—sound, light, video, props, costumes—at the same time, with long detours to discuss a constantly accumulating body of source material (a late-night movie, a used book, a half-remembered song) as she intuitively finds elements that might illuminate or obscure, elucidate or complicate. This is completely unlike a conventional show, in which the actors might rehearse for a few weeks while set designers do their thing at a studio and music is added later. This is everyone together, every day, for months, maybe years. In this case, they spend a lot of time discussing books about Eliot and watching videos related to suicide and the New York underground, like the Alexander McQueen documentary or the infamous Lower East Side episode of Anthony Bourdain’s Parts Unknown. A whole video was actually made in that documentary style, focused on SoHo, then discarded. The group spent a week “transmitting” the video of a French performance of The
Cocktail Party, a “bad TV version” with a visible boom mic and a grip hiding behind a couch, but it is unclear whether it will ever be used. Fiction writing and painting have both been described as the sum of thousands of choices, as big as cutting a novel’s ending or as small as a brushstroke, and this describes what Liz is doing as well: feeling her way forward, sculpting in time and scoring in space, through an endless number of micro-adjustments and sudden, wild insights. The whole evolves toward a form that could not have been planned, only discovered, but one that feels inevitable because it is totally organic, as the elements start to connect and a “picture” or “image” of the final piece comes into focus.

I am not surprised when Liz tells me that her father played jazz. One of her filmmaker Ken Kobland decided to create a DVD of Nayatt School, one of TWG’s first productions, composed by Liz and Spalding Gray, part of a trilogy drawn from Spalding’s autobiography: his family life, his acting life, and his mother’s suicide. It included the first of the monologues for which he became famous, in which he discussed his early love of radio theater and played records, particularly one of The Cocktail Party.

Eliot’s play concerns the fate of Celia Coplestone, a young woman in love with Edward Chamberlayne, who is unhappily married to Lavinia. These three mutually and comically miserable characters consult a psychiatrist, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, who, along with Julia Shuttlethwaite and Alex Gibbs—society types who double as mystical, fates-like figures—guide them toward their destinies: Edward and Lavinia reconcile, and by accepting their own lot in life, as more or less ordinary souls who will never truly understand each other, they attain a measure of peace. But in Celia, Sir Henry (played originally, and on record, by Alec Guinness) realizes he has encountered a rare soul capable of pursuing the lonely, “terrifying” path to spiritual transcendence. She makes her choice and, after visiting his mystical, fates-like figures—guides

mottoes, repeated constantly, is “close enough for jazz.” Ari laughs at the thought of how often he hears this, but notes the paradox it contains: jazz is a loose form that requires total precision; it is improvisation by people who practice obsessively.

The new piece, the one I’m watching them create, is entitled Since I Can Remember. It was conceived when Liz and the kids in New York. Liz decided to have the current group reenact the missing parts and present it as a “teaching piece”—a performance that would itself demonstrate the group’s methods—as well as a “theatrical history” that would explore its past.

In the new work, Kate relates all this while playing the records Spalding played (including the same library copy of The Cocktail Party), in the space he first played them, and also providing the soundtrack for the gorgeously faded video running on the screen behind her, speaking Spalding’s lines, narrating her own experience, or chatting with Ari, who sits beside her now, impersonating Ron Vawter in the original show, staring down the absent audience. Ari joined the group as an intern in 1998 and went from answering phones to performing, much like Ron, who was a Catholic seminarian and National Guardsman before starting in the group’s office. Kate herself started out sewing costumes, though they didn’t call them interns then. Everyone did everything: Willem Dafoe was doing carpentry when she arrived.

Kate plays a little of an old horror record, Drop Dead, the source for several slapstick doctor skits in the video: while Kate narrates, Spalding plays a mad dentist onscreen, chasing patient Ron around the room with a drill. Then he is a doctor, and Ron a nurse who gives dancer Libby Howes an absurdist breast exam while Kate delivers both sides of the jokes in alternating male and female voices.

Kate Valk is herself an artist of legendary talent (Times critic Ben
Brantley called her “the most accomplished actress in New York”), and her decades-long collaboration with Liz is now more like a partnership, or even a creative marriage, as she has begun directing as well and helps run the company. But today, for some reason, she can’t quite connect. She needs to introduce the piece, and do so in the manner of Spalding, chatting confidentially with the audience while he’s onscreen, but she is awkward, stiff. Liz keeps interrupting as Kate grows more frustrated and upset. The others keep reminding Liz to “be kind” and pointing out possible solutions, which of course only embarrasses Kate more. Finally, stretched to the snapping point, she cries and asks for a break. Erin calls for five minutes.

“No!” Liz yells. “You can use this! I want her to do it crying.”

On the next run-through, Ari recites Spalding’s lines, and they return to Kate for the text she originated herself, about her own first days with the group. Everyone seems back to normal, the tears dried, until Kate delivers her speech about their former comrade Libby Howes.

As Kate describes it in the piece, Libby was a talented dancer and fearless performer who suffered a breakdown at the Garage, bringing in trash from the street, sleeping under the risers, letting homeless addicts use her own apartment, growing increasingly incoherent. Finally, Kate took her to Bellevue, where she was committed, though later she escaped and hitchhiked to Canada. Kate took over her role in Nayatt School: “A classic theater story,” Kate says.

At this point, Ken Kobland, who shot much of the old and new footage, interrupts. He is upset with Liz and argues that this is exploitative and not “her experience to use.” Liz is adamant: It is Kate’s story too. She is merely relating her own personal experience. And it is important, because of the theme of women suffering breakdowns. Spalding connected deeply with the character of Celia; his own mother, a Christian Scientist, was also treated by psychiatrists before taking her life.

Arguing passionately, Ken reminds Liz of all the things he knows about her that she wouldn’t want him to expose. “Go ahead,” Liz says, “I want you to. I don’t care.” Ken says that he’s worried people will focus on this alone, criticize her, and the show will be ruined. Again she says she doesn’t care: “I’m an artist and I have to do this. I don’t care what people think.” When he won’t relent, she tells him, “You can leave!” He doesn’t, but he goes quiet. The whole place is very quiet. I am holding my breath. A dozen people have been silently observing all this. “Does anyone else feel like this is offensive?” she asks the whole theater. No one speaks. “Tell me now so I can furlough you.” There is laughter; this is during the government shutdown. All this is being recorded for posterity on video, bits of which are randomly posted on the group’s website by a program Wlad designed. It is chilling, too, that this story of madness took place right here, in the same space where it is now being argued over.

Before the next rehearsal, Liz announces that she wants to apologize. “I wasn’t patient or kind,” she explains to the assembled group, then sighs: “I’m just really afraid that someone is going to call the lawyer!” “So,” Ari points out, “you’re not really apologizing.”

“No,” Liz admits, and everyone laughs merrily. Work for the day begins.

The problem, Liz decides, was trying to get Kate to reproduce Spalding, who was, she says, “uniquely uncomfortable, yet open.” So, if she tries to push Kate to be more like him, “stop me and say, Let her be uncomfortable,” she says. “It’s going to take an immense amount of will.” Kate gets frustrated and wants to cry again. “No,” Liz says, “go straight to anger.” I realize how angry Liz is, especially about the struggles of women like Celia, who is “sent off to be crucified.”

Liz cries a little, too, and everyone tries to comfort her. “Do you need someone to yell at?” Kate asks.

In the end, Kate’s long opening speech becomes a tour de force, a true monologue of her own and another testament to the strange alchemy she shares with Liz. Ken, who had been so angry about including Libby’s story in the speech, sees it in its new form and says: “It was great. It was exactly what Spalding would do, finding those connections through the language. I think it’s fantastic.”

At the next rehearsal, Kate reads from a used copy of Spalding’s novel, Impossible Vacation, in which he discusses, in fictionalized form, how he and Liz first began making theater together. Liz asks Kate what she was doing when she first read the book. Turns out she was in Florida, waiting for a death certificate so that her mother could be cremated. Kate describes how she visited a second-hand shop with her niece, after touring the funeral home where her other niece worked. (“She’s hardcore. She digs out pacemakers.”) Kate found Spalding’s book for just a few dollars. All the characters were versions of people she knew (Liz is Meg, Ken is Barney, Spalding himself is Brewster North, named after his local train station). “It was like I had a
friend there.” She says the book ends happily. “He's going to be okay,” she thought about Spalding's character when she finished, though she knew that, in reality, he would eventually take his own life.

Spalding went on to attain great fame, more or less inventing the stand-up (or in his case sit-down) performance-art monologue (Swimming to Cambodia, Sex and Death to Age 14), as well as acting in movies (The Killing Fields) and straight theater (Our Town) and writing books. His last performance with the group was in 1984, but he continued to be a supporter of it and was Liz’s loft neighbor until, after a long battle with depression and trauma related to an injury, he leaped from the Staten Island Ferry in 2004.

Liz talks about the impulse behind their early pieces: “He had made recordings of his father and grandmother discussing his mother, and in the back of his mind he knew he wanted to do something with them.” In his novel, Spalding describes his performance as “a giant, scandalous, gossipy audition for the audience.”

As Kate says in her monologue, their attitude back then was, “Why not put a transcript of a 9-1-1 call next to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?” The two elements were set beside each other “without too much interpretation or analysis.” Now Liz feels that they need to research, debate, build up layers. Something once like collage, with discrete elements on the same plane, has become more, she says, of a “palimpsest.”

“It was so easy in ancient Greece to make a pot, but now to get that pot out of the ground and put it together and clean it takes twenty times as long,” she says, reflecting, it seems, both on her own development—sharing the sense many great artists have that the work gets more difficult, not easier, the further you go—as well as on the decline of culture. As the actors try to separate and connect two tables that roll on casters along tracks, a wheel snaps off and she groans tragicomically: “This feels like the end of an empire!”

The new piece is also a personal excavation of private history lived in this very space (“I feel ghosts here all the time,” Liz says) and as well as acting in movies (The Killing Fields) and straight theater (Our Town) and writing books. His last performance with the group was in 1984, but he continued to be a supporter of it and was Liz’s loft neighbor until, after a long battle with depression and trauma related to an injury, he leaped from the Staten Island Ferry in 2004.

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As Kate says in her monologue, their attitude back then was, “Why not put a transcript of a 9-1-1 call next to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?” The two elements were set beside each other “without too much interpretation or analysis.” Now Liz feels that they need to research, debate, build up layers. Something once like collage, with discrete elements on the same plane, has become more, she says, of a “palimpsest.”

“It was so easy in ancient Greece to make a pot, but now to get that pot out of the ground and put it together and clean it takes twenty times as long," she says, reflecting, it seems, both on her own development—sharing the sense many great artists have that the work gets more difficult, not easier, the further you go—as well as on the decline of culture. As the actors try to separate and connect two tables that roll on casters along tracks, a wheel snaps off and she groans tragicomically: “This feels like the end of an empire!”

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limelight. It’s the group.” His only acting experience was a grade-school production of You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown, but one day Liz just asked him, and he said yes, basically because of his belief in her and in her belief in him: if Liz thinks you can do it, then you can.

Children were first used in Nayatt School, because, Liz says, “Spalding saw kids performing Shakespeare in Washington Square Park and got a flash of insight.” He cast actors from the local public school. Some of the children were natural performers, but the kid who played Peter Quilpe was so awkward, he was unable to find a stage, so Spalding would pick him up and place him there. Now Liz has cast a first-time actor to play that awkward kid playing Peter Quilpe. After five days, she has Omar go off script: “You’ve gotten too good.” The combination of amateurism and virtuosity is emblematic of the group’s aesthetic.

Costumes and props are recycled and patched together, with the feeling of a rainy day spent rummaging in the attic, but at times achieve a striking aesthetic complexity, like the lawn chair worn by Dafoe in The Emperor Jones, which he would occasionally unfold to sit down on. Most of Liz’s actors were, essentially, trained by her. (One day, I watch her and Kate spend an hour working through a speech with Erin, word by word, breath by breath. It’s like a master class.) As Kate says, “Liz’s company is built by attraction, not solicitation.” The people who belong here find their way. Some stay for one piece, some for decades. Almost all of them see it as a defining experience in their artistic evolution.

Forgetting the names of longtime collaborators, whom Liz might call “the redhead” or “that guy,” barking at people for unwrapping candy while she is listening, noting happily that Scott’s bald spot matches Spalding’s, complaining repeatedly that Gareth is “too tall” for her stage design: much of this is the price of doing all your thinking out loud, in real time, with people watching. Part of it is simply her nature. One day, we discussed the Howard Hawks film Twentieth Century, a screwball comedy about a crazed, scheming director trying to manipulate his former lover and star (Carole Lombard) into working for him. Liz is a huge fan of slapstick and screwball, quoting Groucho Marx (whom she calls Macho Grouch) and pratfalling down the stairs, but now she tells me, “I have never related so much to a film character.” On the one hand, she is casting herself as the monomaniacal, down-and-out director. On the other, he is played gloriously by John Barrymore, one of the titans of theatrical history. Both sides are true. And this is why I believe her company stick around, laboring on with a fierce loyalty and total devotion: they know this is where great art is being made, that they themselves will be better than ever under her direction, and that they will never be bored.

R ehearsing a scene from The Cocktail Party, Eric accidentally plays Julia’s voice on the record fast and high, weirdly distorted, and Kate goes along with it, imperceptibly speaking each word in a crazed, cartoon blur. Liz loves it, but all three agree it could never really happen again. It is a one-time performance made just for Liz. And for me, I suppose.

In a sense, Liz has created a kind of private theater, in which a company chosen and trained by her endeavor to please her. And since, unlike most directors, she attends every performance, at home and on tour, continuing to adjust and rehearse along the way, she is the group’s most important audience member. Both harshest critic and biggest fan, she will happily watch them improvise or dance around, like kids competing for the attention of a doting but moody parent. Ari and Scott goof and gag, fooling with props and silly accents, until Liz pleads, “Stop entertaining me!”

S cott is out of town, so first Gareth and then a young actor named Niall Cunningham stand in for him, playing the part of Spalding, playing Sir Henry, originally played by Alec Guinness. This is a practical reality for a troupe like TWG, but despite the huge inconvenience of working around these absences, their technique actually lends itself to having actors “stand in” for one another. That’s what acting is, after all, standing in the place of a character, filling a role that another actor could or already has filled. As Liz points out, even Shakespeare wrote his roles with particular actors in mind; he was running a company, like her. At the same time, of course,
any number of players can step in and be Hamlet. The difference is that, while most directors labor to make us forget the awkward fact that someone who might have been beside us on the subway that morning is now in makeup and costume onstage, Liz insists that we remember it. “Film acting is all about trying to convince yourself it’s real,” Ari told me. “Theater, or Liz’s theater anyway, is about remaining committed to the unreality of the situation.” In this piece, as I said, Ari stands in for Ron, a mesmerizing performer and one of Liz’s great collaborators until his death, from AIDS-related complications, in 1994. At one point, Ari opens a bottle of glycerin drops and dabs some in each eye. Immediately he begins weeping. I actually saw Vawter do this live and it was a formative aesthetic experience: openly dripping “fake” tears, he composed his face into a striking mask of sadness, then gave a speech, so beautifully that I was somehow even more moved than had the tears been real. It was akin to the magician telling you he is going to trick you and then doing it so skillfully that it still seems like a miracle. Liz recalls being upbraided on a panel by the other directors (all of them male) for using the drops instead of getting her actors to recall past feelings, Method-style. But Ari tells how, when he tried the glycerin, it burned: actual physical pain, not metaphorical sense memories. It is “real.”

Godard noted that every film, even a Hollywood feature, is also a documentary of its actors. We see them live and age, just as we see clothes and cars and interiors from a period, and eventually we are seeing ghosts in a world that has passed. Similarly, onstage, the primary truth is the existence of the performers, who are there, alive, before us, something that became profoundly moving in shows such as Frank Dell’s The Temptation of St. Antony, performed as Vawter’s death approached. Part of what the Wooster Group activates is this sense that, first and foremost, we are seeing them live their lives onstage, inhabit their breaths, movements, and glances. The show—play, text, character—seems to hover like a mirage between us. One has the sense of multiple layers of reality present all at once, alive in the air.

Ken, Liz, Wlad, and others have completed the video of the martyred Erin. She looks like a lovely Pre-Raphaelite image—until they superimpose a photo of a rotting corpse from a body farm on her. The effect is creepy and beautiful at once. Liz says Ken is going to crack open an ant farm and film it to add ants crawling on Erin/Celia.

Liz thanks Michaela for her work on the script and she replies: “I’m so happy you remember my name!” Unfortunately, later in the day, she calls her Monique. Liz is notorious for forgetting names. Enver has been Emerald; Gareth, Garth; the intern Hunter, Plumber and Hammer. While arranging the now seemingly pregnant Suzy (Enver sewed a half basketball under her skirt) at the base of Erin’s crucifixion, Liz pushes at the effect. “You look so Elizabeth.” Suzy is confused. “Wait,” Liz asks, “who was Jesus’s mother again?” “Mary!” Suzy exclaims. “Then who’s Elizabeth?” “You are!”

Old records have been brought in for Ari to break during the big line Edward delivers at the news of Celia’s death (“It’s the waste that I resent!”), but he plays one instead and Liz loves it. “We need to use this!” Everyone dances to the old-time jazz. This will become a running joke and finally an inspiration, as Liz keeps wanting to save the junk-shop records.

Now Niall raises the screen and we see the full video of Erin for the first time, fading from the taped performance into the image of her feet, then traveling up her body to her face as the screen is hoisted on the totem. The picture looks great, but timing the raising becomes an elaborate task—Niall has to match the camera movement so that the screen lifts as the image itself moves up Erin’s body, but he can’t see the screen, since he’s behind it. Again and again Liz interrupts; everyone is counting the beats and coaching at once. Frustrated, she yells: “Can someone count for him?” Kate laughs hard and tells him: “Now you’re really working for the Wooster Group.”
Niall finally gets it, and the image of Erin imposed on the rotting corpse thrills everyone. Liz: “Wait till we get the ants on there.” She also tells Ari, “You might have to darken your hair for this, or maybe we can just stencil a hairline.” He deadpans it. Erin, regarding her now rotting corpse, says, “I’m glad I got my toenails done.”

Meanwhile, since the lack of deodorizing spray in the restrooms was one of the hot topics at a recent company meeting, Liz has presented the group with two possible solutions: a large scented candle and a spray bottle of deodorizer. One option has been placed in each bathroom. Then, throughout the day, she keeps asking if anyone “took a shit” so she can test whether her odor-relief plan worked. No one volunteers.

Big discovery: more tape of the Amsterdam performance has been found. Completely blown out and unwatchable in places, it nevertheless shows the original, outrageous ending of Nayatt School, the section that followed the last scene from The Cocktail Party.

In the chaos of the final party, Ron had mimed shooting all the kids with a toy gun while they staggered around elaborately. Liz told them to play dead and keep their eyes shut. “The last part was not for them,” she said, though one later admitted peeking from behind his mirrored glasses. Then Ron, Spalding, and Libby return to the front table. Spalding pulls his pants down, squats over the turntable, his bare bottom to the audience, mere inches away, and drills holes in a record, using the drill from the crazy-dentist skit. Libby scratches a record while sticking a record player into a little house in the rear of the stage and plays a Bach partita. When she and Ron worked on that dance together, she would shout with joy each time.

“I don’t know what this piece is yet. I’m lost. There are like four different ways to go.” Eric unwraps a snack. Matthew blows his nose. Liz snaps, “What is that sound?” Watching the wild ending again, Liz thinks back to Ron miming shooting all the kids, who gleefully play dead. Ron also dances with a young girl. Years later, at eighteen, she died of a brain tumor, and Liz notes that the child’s parents are coming to the show and might be upset by the foot-
age. In the film, though, she is having a ball. When she and Ron worked on that dance together, she would shout with joy each time.

“Maybe I come down and say I’m sorry,” Liz suggests. “I’m the only one here left. Is that what the teaching piece is about? I wouldn’t do this now! I just thought the lid was off civilization and they should do something outrageous, but you could never do that today. And the piece is called Nayatt School—it’s a school shooting. If we’re being honest and trying to show how things evolve and how we work.”

Kate says, “You didn’t know you were invoking the later atrocities, school shootings, brain tumors.”

“That’s when you weren’t afraid of your own mind,” Liz says. “Now I’m afraid of my mind.” Then, looking at the screen, which now shows ants crawling over the fruit heaped at Erin’s feet, she addresses Wlad: “Can’t you have one ant eating her toe?”

Suzy brings up Eliot’s Four Quarts, which Spalding referenced in the original Nayatt School. They read the last section, which Eliot said is about his own failure as a poet. Failure as an artist? A late masterpiece that looks back not in glory but in despair and then, finally, acceptance? Next, Ari reads from Prometheus Unbound, the lyric drama by Shelley that Eliot’s Harcourt-Reilly quotes in The Cocktail Party, and a long discussion ensues: What is a magi? Whose dead child? Who’s speaking? The earth, addressing Prometheus, as dead child. Liz seems re-energized.
After lunch, she thanks them all for their help. I’m not sure what was resolved really, but “for the first time,” she says, “it feels handleable.” As Eliot has Harcourt-Reilly say, following this recitation: “A sudden intuition in certain minds may tend to express itself at once in a picture.” Or, a scene onstage.

I hate when writers or documentary filmmakers try to make their own style an imitation of their subject’s, but out of sheer necessity, the composition of this article has reflected the group’s own process. I began reporting with only the vaguest sense of what they were working on, and as I watched rehearsal after rehearsal, I was constantly thwarted in my attempt to impose structure or design: long, complex discussions I faithfully transcribed would never be mentioned again; speeches would be labored over for a week, then suddenly dropped. “First we have to get it right,” Kate joked, “then we cut it.” It could be a motto.

In late April, with the beginning of open rehearsals now less than two weeks away, Liz continues to reconsider everything, to happily spend precious time on a phrasing, a gesture. All she needs to discover, she says, is how to get to the “picture,” the central image of Celia crucified, what she now considers the heart of the piece. The actual ending can be worked out later, that is to say, after the show is already on and she’s seen an audience reaction. Maybe, she jokes (jokes!), they will ask the audience how it should end.

In fact, I begin to realize, there will be no end, there is never an end, just more rehearsals, some of which an audience is invited in to see. Matthew, who sits beside Liz at every performance, says it is like seeing a painter finish a canvas, again and again. Indeed, this theater is her mind, as much as any painting is for another artist. Erin says she has come to realize that Liz is the one true audience. The cast and crew all see their opening nights as beginnings, not endings: it is the first time that the piece has ever been played straight through. There are no run-throughs in the traditional sense, since Liz can never resist interrupting. I imagine her in front of the live audiences, conducting.

Perhaps this is why, however anxious or stressed she might be, one thing she does not seem at all worried about is whether the piece will be ready in time: it is in fact unclear what this would mean. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly. The rest of her group don’t take it so lightly.

Rehearsing the Shelley lines, Liz decides that they feel too stilted and dry—unless they are sung. That morning, once again, she has become distracted by the pile of junk records Matthew bought (five for a dollar). The one Ari was about to smash was of Enrico Caruso singing Donizetti’s “Una Furtiva Lagrima.” Liz has someone play it, then, hours later, has the idea of setting the poem to this tune. They revise the text to fit the melody while different people try singing it and argue intensely over the changes. Scott is bugged by the elision of the word “till,” which alters the syntax. Gareth, a musician, gets pushed past the point of patience by Liz’s interruptions. Suzzy, a singer with the Roches in her non-Wooster life, renders it beautifully, and for a while, she, Kate, and Liz harmonize. “Come up here, asshole,” Suzzy tells Scott, who is lurking under the table. Next, with a rough melody fleshed out, Eric drops the recording and starts to play the tune on an electric piano, adapting it to fit their new song. The whole group sings it, thrillingly. (“Idiotic yet moving,” is Liz’s judgment.) Then she has the three men in the scene—Scott, Ari, and Gareth—sing together. It is added to the show, where it is powerfully affecting: a dazzling example of how her seemingly impulsive moves, her digressions and associations, are somehow exactly right.

I began this project with two aims in mind: to learn how the Wooster Group make their work, and to learn about the mystery of talent itself by studying, at close range, an artist I considered to be a genius. Now, after...
six months of class, as it were, I feel I have come a long way in achieving the first goal. But what of the second, to understand something about genius? Here I must admit total failure. That’s not to say I haven’t come to know Liz better. She is warm, eccentric, hilarious, wise, brave, shy, generous, and stubborn. She loves to argue but loves to laugh most of all. I think this might be why she hires whom she does—they are fun to argue with and they make her laugh. I like her very much indeed. But what, if anything, all this has to do with her unique body of work is beyond me.

I’ve noticed a few traits that she has in common with other artists I admire: First of all, she has an incredible work ethic—pretty much every day, with few vacations, year after year. (Wlad, young enough to be her grandson, describes her energy as “electric.” She has been known to go in on Sunday to clean or repaint the theater.) She is relentless, both patient and impatient, and always ready to rip up what she’s done, to destroy in the name of creation. She is tough in the way good artists are tough, with a hard core that leaves her, despite the fretting, ultimately unswayed by what others think. But this is far from an explanation, and frankly, I knew most of it already.

In her theater, Liz is the indisputable boss, the dictator of this anarchic ministate—as Kate says, “a master.” Yet, as Freud reminds us, when speaking of the human mind, we are not even master in our own house. In the end, I realize, I cannot understand Liz’s gift because she does not understand it herself. She merely serves it, following her own impulses like a trail of clues, getting lost until she finds her way again. Even for an outside observer, it is thrilling when a piece suddenly begins to come together. There is almost an audible click. In the final moments of the (for now) final version of Since I Can Remember, Kate describes the wild ending of Nayatt School: “I never asked Liz why it ended that way. She just said it was a picture that appeared in her head.”

The destination cannot be described; You will know very little until you get there; You will journey blind. But the way leads towards possession Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

At five-fifteen on opening night, Liz arrives at a provisional ending:

The company gathers at the long table and reenacts Eliot’s final cocktail party as performed in the original Nayatt School. While the actors onscreen cavort wildly, grown-ups swirling the kids around in their homemade Halloween-style costumes, props flying, the present company re-creates the scene as a stylized, hypnotic dance, speaking the lines as the kids did forty years before. At the news that Celia, who joined a nursing order, has been crucified by natives while caring for plague victims, an image of Erin as Celia appears onscreen, transforming from a beatific saint on the cross into a rotting corpse. As the characters plunge into rapturous mourning, we see the past company in black and white, and we see them reanimated, embodied by the present company; we see the dead and the living. The ghosts are present in the room with us. The séance has been a success. Kate removes her wig and outer costume, puts on a sweater, and comes back up to the mic. “That’s all we have for tonight.”

January Index Sources
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ELECTION BIAS
The new playbook for voter suppression
By Andrew Cockburn

In the spring of 2018, Tequila Johnson, an African-American administrator at Tennessee State University, led a mass voter-registration drive organized by a coalition of activist groups called the Tennessee Black Voter Project. Turnout in Tennessee regularly ranks near the bottom among U.S. states, just ahead of Texas. At the time, only 65 percent of the state’s voting-age population was registered to vote, the shortfall largely among black and low-income citizens. “The African-American community has been shut out of the process, and voter suppression has really widened that gap,” Johnson told me. “I felt I had to do something.”

The drive generated ninety thousand applications. Though large numbers of the forms were promptly rejected by election officials, allegedly because they were incomplete or contained errors, turnout surged in that year’s elections, especially in the areas around Memphis and Nashville, two of the cities specifically targeted by the registration drive. Progressive candidates and causes achieved notable successes, capturing the mayor’s office in heavily populated Shelby County as well as several seats on the county commission. In Nashville, a local measure was passed introducing a police-accountability board.

The Republican response to the Black Voter Project’s accomplishments was swift. The official charged with overseeing elections, secretary of state Tre Hargett—who, the previous year, had won a fight to retain the bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, in the state capitol—spearheaded a bill to place mass registration drives under state control and to criminalize mistakes made on applications. The bill imposed heavy fines for any group that turned in multiple incomplete applications, mandated severe penalties for failing to submit registration forms to election officials within ten days of being signed by the applicant, and required any person registering voters to receive official certification and government-administered training. (A Freedom of Information Act request filed by Johnson revealed that the proportion of incorrect forms submitted by her group was in line with previous registration drives in the state.)

Speedily passed by the Republican-controlled legislature, HB 1079 was signed by Governor Bill Lee on May 2, 2019. “We want to provide for fair, for genuine . . . for elections with integrity,” Lee declared. Civil-rights groups quickly filed suit in federal court to block the new measure. In a withering ruling against the state, a district court judge, Aleta Trauger, described the law as a “complex and punitive regulatory scheme.”

Nevertheless, it remains enormously difficult to register voters in Tennessee. “We don’t know how many people we registered are actually on the rolls,” Johnson told me, citing the applications that were summarily dismissed. As Cliff Albright, cofounder of the national group Black Voters...
Matter, pointed out, voter-suppression legislation serves its purpose even when struck down in court: “It intimidates people. It says, ‘Anytime you try something like this, we’re going to come after you.’ It’s not just that this particular act got squashed, it’s the message that they send.”

Outrageous as it might seem, the response of Tennessee Republican was by no means exceptional. Across the country, the G.O.P. has maneuvered tirelessly to restrict, impede, dilute, and otherwise frustrate democratic threats to their control. To cite just a few examples: In Florida, successful litigation to prevent a ban on “pop-up” early polling stations on college campuses has been countered with a measure requiring any college hosting such sites to ensure extra parking. In Arizona, a measure passed last year restricting the use of mail-in ballots, a form of voting particularly popular among Native Americans. In Ohio, almost 200,000 voters, most of them black and poor, were purged from the rolls last year. In January 2019, Texas secretary of state David Whitley issued an Election Advisory stating that almost one hundred thousand noncitizens were registered to vote—a claim that was proved to be wholly false, and was only rescinded after Texas taxpayers spent $450,000 in its defense, settling a legal challenge from a Latino civil-rights organization.

When publicized, such cases elicit disapproving comments in the press. But whereas the violent suppression of the black vote in the 1960s turned civil rights into a dominant national issue, twenty-first-century voter suppression is all too often framed as a regrettable “anomaly,” as Albright’s fellow Black Voters Matter cofounder LaTosha Brown correctly calls the Democratic Party.

The press and Democratic establishment would generally have us believe that malign foreign meddling is the greatest threat to the integrity of our elections. Yes, Russian trolls helped elect Trump blared one New York Times headline in December 2018. A recent CNN report highlighted an ominous warning from the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security that “Russia may focus on voter suppression as a means to interfere in the 2020 presidential election.”

But Vladimir Putin played no role in George W. Bush’s election victory in 2000, the result of a dominant Republican apparatus eliminating 20,000 mostly poor, black, and Hispanic Florida voters from the rolls and guaranteeing through its Supreme Court appointees that all attempts at an accurate vote count would be struck down. (Al Gore lost the state by 537 votes.) Nor was there a foreign power behind the documented examples of voter purges in Ohio in 2004, where John Kerry lost by a narrow margin of 2.1 percent; in Wisconsin in 2016, where a voter-ID law appears to have played a part in dissuading up to 200,000 people, most of them minorities, from voting, in a state that Trump carried by just 23,000 votes; or in Michigan that same year, which Trump won by 10,000 votes while 70,000 presidential votes from the largely black city of Detroit mysteriously disappeared.

Undoubtedly, the most powerful enabler of U.S. voter suppression in recent years has not been foreign intervention but the conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court. Its 2013 Shelby County v. Holder decision gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act, nullifying a provision that required states and localities with a history of discrimination to get “preclearance” from the Justice Department or the D.C. district court before changing their election rules. (Chief Justice John Roberts has been venting his opposition to the Voting Rights Act since the early 1980s, when as a junior DOJ official he ghostwrote op-eds for his superiors denouncing the law.) The results of the Shelby decision were felt immediately. The Brennan Center for Justice reported that states previously covered by the 1965 act began purging voters, mostly minorities, at record rates as soon as the justices had spoken. Although the Roberts court’s (admittedly outrageous) decision in Citizens United has received far more attention and protest with regard to its effect on fair elections, Shelby’s assault on democracy has been at least as drastic and far-reaching.

Why is the systematic disenfranchisement of large numbers of citizens—what LaTosha Brown correctly calls “the dominant issue in American politics today”—so often ignored, as it has been in the ongoing Democratic presidential debates, rather than foregrounded and denounced? For an explanation, I turned to Armand Derfner, a legendary civil-rights attorney.

Brought to the United States in 1940 at the age of two by Jewish parents fleeing Nazi Europe, Derfner abandoned a career with a white-shoe D.C. law firm to work on civil rights in 1960s Jim Crow Mississippi, where, for his efforts, he and his wife were shot at and his dog was poisoned. At the age of thirty, he argued (and won) his first voting-rights case before the Supreme Court; he has subsequently argued and won four more, as well as a host of landmark judgments in lower courts. After moving to Charleston, South Carolina, he suggested in a letter to the Post and Courier that the Confederate flag should keep flying over the state Capitol. It is a useful reminder about the people inside, like a warning label on a hazardous product or a sign at the zoo saying, “Beware of the Animals.”

Currently, he is involved in a suit to invalidate a provision of Mississippi’s 1890 constitution expressly designed to prevent black former prisoners from voting, a rule that is still rigorously enforced today.
 Whereas LaTosha Brown and other activists view voter suppression as all of a piece since the days of the Founding Fathers, Derfner believes that it attracts less attention now because its very nature has changed. “It used to be that the intent, at least in the South, was to stop black people voting, period,” he explained. “They didn’t want different factions of the Democratic Party competing for black voters.” Today, however, he says, “the aim is to win an election. The reason there isn’t greater awareness of the severity of the problem is because of the way it works. It’s bureaucratic, not blatant like it used to be.”

In the 1960s, a former client of Derfner’s, the civil-rights campaigner Fannie Lou Hamer, was fired, evicted, and brutally beaten by police officers as she tried to register herself and others to vote. Now, instead of clubs—and bullets—suppression tactics take the form of what Derfner calls “hindrances”—restrictive I.D. requirements, truncated voting hours, limited numbers of polling sites, and earlier registration deadlines. These individually minor impediments collectively amount to voter suppression. “If your goal is not to stop a whole bunch of people from voting, but simply to stop enough people so you can win the election,” Derfner explained, “you don’t need to stop a lot of people.”

The turn toward a more bureaucratic mode of voter suppression is not an unprecedented development. In terms of incremental impediments to black votes, Derfner told me, “What we see in the 1870s and 1880s was very like what’s going on now.” In the late nineteenth century, there were still large numbers of black voters in the South. Whites seeking to regain control after Reconstruction could not simply ban black people from voting, so they crafted hindrances. South Carolina passed the “eight box” law in 1882, requiring voters to put their ballots in the correct box for any given office—governor, lieutenant governor, state senator, and so on. Any mistake meant the vote was disallowed. While illiterate white voters were directed to the correct boxes, illiterate blacks were offered no such help. Virginia adopted the gerrymander approach, redistricting five times in ten years. “After 1890,” the Southern states “were able to get to complete disenfranchise-ment, and the Supreme Court upheld them every time,” Derfner explained. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act, black Americans again began voting in large numbers, and the tactics of suppression reverted to the earlier piecemeal approach. “I feel I’m watching a movie going backward,” Derfner told me, sadly.

As an example of the return of nineteenth-century tactics, Derfner cited a previously blocked Texas law, put into effect by the then attorney general, Republican Greg Abbott, within hours of the Shelby decision, that requires Texans to have a photo I.D. to vote, so long as they signed an affidavit attesting to one of seven permissible reasons as to why they don’t have one. A number of voters are likely to be intimidated by the legalese, a fine example of a seemingly small impediment that nevertheless contributes to collective disenfranchisement.

Artfully contrived suppression strategies tend to be invisible to the casual media observer. Election Day reporting, for example, almost invariably includes accounts of long lines faced by voters in many locations themed as a welcome sign of “enthusiasm” for the democratic process. But the lines—particularly if those waiting in them are black or brown—are more often than not a sure sign of voter suppression at work. An exhaustive report by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights revealed that 1,688 polling sites were shut down across the country between 2012 and 2018. The vast majority of these were in states such as Texas, Arizona, and Georgia, which, prior to Shelby, were obliged to clear such closures with the Justice Department. “Quite often, people don’t realize what is going on at the local level, and we needed to document that,” Vanita Gupta, the president and CEO of the Leadership Conference, told me. “The sheer scale of the closures after Shelby in states with a long history of discrimination points to a real crisis.”

Arizona’s Maricopa County, for example, which is almost one-third Latino, has lost no fewer than 171 voting sites since 2012, guaranteeing long waits and transportation difficulties. A recent nationwide study led by M. Keith Chen, an economist at
U.C.L.A., demonstrated with precision that black voters must wait in line longer than white voters. Using geolocation data from 93,000 polling places across the country, researchers on the project found that voters in black neighborhoods waited 29 percent longer on average than those in white areas, and that they were also 74 percent more likely to wait for longer than half an hour.

Standing in line for extended stretches would be a deterrent for anyone, but the deterrent gets progressively stronger for those lower down the income scale. Since all attempts to make Election Day a national holiday have been resolutely beaten back—Mitch McConnell called a recent effort by Democrats a “power grab”—any hourly worker taking time off work to vote is losing money, as is someone who has to worry about the cost of childcare; the longer he or she waits, the costlier it gets. As the minutes stretch into hours, the number of poorer people who can afford to vote that day ticks lower and lower.

Republican Brian Kemp’s route to victory in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial race was lined with closed polling sites. As secretary of state, Kemp was responsible for overseeing elections during his own campaign for governor, and he brazenly refused to resign despite the blindingly obvious conflict of interest. When local officials in Randolph County—a poor, rural community two and a half hours south of Atlanta that is 60 percent black—asked the secretary of state’s office for help in organizing the election, Kemp was happy to recommend a consultant who advised the officials to close seven polling sites. As it happened, the number of would-be voters Kemp’s office flagged for mistakes—53,000—almost exactly matched his 55,000-vote margin of victory.

“Voter suppression, along with gerrymandering, is a core investment strategy at the highest levels of the G.O.P.”

But if you look at the way provisional ballots are overused, misused, in states controlled by Republicans, it’s absolutely voter suppression.”

The predictable problems caused by “exact match” regulations and sweeping voter purges, not to mention faulty voting machines, have ensured that provisional ballots are overused, misused, not the registration list or their eligibility were somehow in doubt, the notion being that, after further review confirmed a person’s eligibility, the vote would be counted. “On the face of it, requiring someone to fill out a provisional ballot if their registration is in question is not voter suppression,” Groh-Wargo explained. “But if you look at the way provisional ballots are overused, misused, in states controlled by Republicans, it’s absolutely voter suppression.”

Similar examples of the misuse of this seemingly benign initiative were reported elsewhere. A study performed by the group All Voting is Local found that at Ohio’s Central State and Wilberforce universities, two historically black colleges, student voters cast a disproportionate number of provisional ballots in 2018 and were twice as likely to have their ballots rejected than were voters in the rest of the county.

Once installed as Georgia’s governor, Kemp duly resigned as secretary of state, his work well done. But his spirit lives on. His successor, Brad Raffensperger, has pledged to

law-enforcement officers at the polls in minority neighborhoods and sending mailers to black neighborhoods threatening penalties for violating election laws, a practice known as “voter caging.” But in January 2018, a federal judge in New Jersey had allowed the decree to expire, arguing that the Democrats, “by a preponderance of the evidence,” had failed to demonstrate that it had ever been violated.

As an example of the subtle, bureaucratic approach to modern voter suppression highlighted by Derfner, Groh-Wargo cited provisional ballots. The 2002 Help America Vote Act gave voters the right to cast provisional ballots if their names were not on the registration list or their eligibility were somehow in doubt, the notion being that, after further review confirmed a person’s eligibility, the vote would be counted. “On the face of it, requiring someone to fill out a provisional ballot if their registration is in question is not voter suppression,” Groh-Wargo explained. “But if you look at the way provisional ballots are overused, misused, in states controlled by Republicans, it’s absolutely voter suppression.”

The predictable problems caused by “exact match” regulations and sweeping voter purges, not to mention faulty voting machines, have ensured that provisional ballots are high demand, particularly in black precincts, but in the 2018 Georgia election, according to a lawsuit filed by Fair Fight Action, many polling sites ran out of the ballots. In other cases, officials failed to inform voters about how to use them or simply refused to supply them.
continue Kemp’s agenda, with a particular emphasis on combating (nonexistent) voter fraud. The state campaign-finance commission has launched probes into the actions of Abrams and her supporters, an effort that has been costly to its targets in both time and legal bills. “Make no mistake,” Groh-Wargo warned, “the Kemp election model will be the template for the Republicans nation-wide in 2020.”

Naturally, those working to suppress unwelcome votes do not advertise their work as such, preferring to justify their maneuvers as a defense of voting rights. “Voter-I.D. requirements remain in place going forward to prevent fraud and ensure that election results accurately reflect the will of Texas voters,” declared Texas’s attorney general, Ken Paxton, hauling a court ruling that upheld the state’s voter-I.D. law. “Safeguarding the integrity of our elections is a primary function of state government and is essential to preserving our democratic process.”

But every so often the real agenda is laid out in plain sight. The Trump Administration’s determined efforts to add citizenship status to the 2020 census questionnaire were upended by the discovery that the move was the brainchild of the late Republican redistricting strategist Thomas Hofeller. The Supreme Court was reported on the verge of approving the census question, accepting the administration’s claim that it sought only to enable better enforcement of the Voting Rights Act, when Hofeller’s daughter found several hard drives detailing his plans and handed them over to the watchdog organization Common Cause. In the files, Hofeller stated outright that the census question was aimed at giving electoral advantage to “Republicans and Non-Hispanic Whites.” This revelation apparently made it too embarrassing for the chief justice to endorse the administration’s disingenuous argument. (One close observer of the proceedings told me he heard that Roberts changed his opinion at the last minute.)

A similarly opportune revelation last year provided insight into the thinking and personalities behind gerrymandering. In August, fourteen hundred Republican legislators, party officials, and lobbyists gathered in Austin, Texas, for the annual meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a corporate-funded nonprofit that guides state-level Republicans on legislation favorable to big business. While much of the proceedings were closed-door, at least one of these panels—titled “How to Survive Redistricting”—was recorded and a transcript was subsequently published on Slate by David Daley. “Your notes from this conference,” said moderator Cleta Mitchell, “will probably be part of a discovery demand. My advice to you is: if you don’t want it turned over in discovery, you probably ought to get rid of it before you go home.”

Gerrymandering has been a hallmark political tactic since the dawn of the republic—Patrick Henry tried to gerrymander James Madison out of winning a congressional seat—and it currently underpins Republican (and Democratic) control in many localities despite popular disfavor. A study from the Schwarzenegger Institute at the University of Southern California found that fifty-nine million Americans lived in states where Republicans had designed the districts and thereby controlled at least one chamber of the state legislature even though more people in sum had voted for Democrats in the 2018 elections.

The more enlightened Supreme Court of the 1960s did bequeath some limited constraints on gerrymandering, still irksome to its practitioners. As Hans von Spakovsky of the Heritage Foundation derisively reminded the ALEC conclave, the court “established the one person, one vote rule. That’s the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. And they created it out of whole cloth.” Von Spakovsky brought to the gathering the expertise from his days in the George W. Bush Justice Department, as a vigorous exponent of both voter-I.D. laws and the widely debunked theory of voter fraud. At the Austin conference, he lamented the constitutional provision mandating congressional apportionment based on total population as “fundamentally unfair” because “states with large numbers of aliens, particularly illegal aliens, are getting more political power.”

Along with the incendiary comments about undocumented immigrants and the unfairness of the Fourteenth Amendment, the conference speakers had plenty of concrete advice for their audience. Former Georgia representative Lynn Westmoreland—another tireless advocate for voter-I.D. laws, though he is possibly best known for his efforts to post the Ten Commandments in the House and Senate—gave detailed, practical advice on creating partisan voting districts that exclude black residents. Thomas Farr, known for defending a North Carolina voter-I.D. law deemed by an appeals court to have singled out black voters “with almost surgical precision,” expounded on techniques for defending gerrymanders against the inevitable court challenges.

Texas, a prize of supreme political importance, was a suitable venue for such a gathering. As Tory Gavito, president of the progressive donor group Way to Win, reminded me, “If you add Texas to Colorado, New Mexico, Minnesota, and Virginia, Democrats could lose Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Florida, Georgia, and Arizona and still win the White House.” Given the electoral stakes and the fact that the white population has lagged significantly behind minorities in population growth, Texas Republicans have defended their rule with desperate intensity. It is now literally impossible to run a statewide registration drive: a worker must be a “deputized” registration agent in the county where they live, and can only register voters from that county. Other Republican approaches have been open exercises in cruelty. When the current governor, Greg Abbott, was attorney general, in 2008, he prosecuted a group of seniors for helping homebound, elderly neighbors vote by mail. By not including their own names, addresses, and signatures on the backs of the mailed ballots, they earned six months of probation and a lifelong criminal
record. In 2017, Crystal Mason, an African-American mother of three, was handed a five-year prison term for violating a law that made former inmates on supervised release ineligible to vote—a law of which she was unaware. Rosa Maria Ortega, a Mexican immigrant with a green card, also voted mistakenly and is serving an eight-year sentence, after which she will be deported. When it comes to conceiving new means of hindering undesirable voters, Zenén Jaimes Pérez of the Texas Civil Rights Project told me, “They’re pretty cutting-edge down here.”

Pérez added that the state’s 2018 Senate race, in which Beto O’Rourke came within two hundred thousand votes of beating Ted Cruz, has spurred a fresh backlash of vote-suppressing creativity among the state’s Republicans. Texas Senate Bill 9 was introduced in March of last year; the House version contained a provision reallocating voting districts in a way that would have granted more polling places to majority-white districts than those populated by people of color. Among other novelties, the bill required volunteers driving people in need of assistance to the polls to fill out burdensome paperwork, and instituted penalties for the improper use of a provisional ballot.

“This was a voter-suppression bill on steroids,” Mimi Marziani told me. Marziani is president of the Texas Civil Rights Project, which led the fight against the bill, and she cited her organization’s campaign as an example of how opposition to voter suppression can attract a wide variety of activists: “We were able to call on groups advocating for people with disabilities, people who had never thought about election mechanisms and voting rights. We said, ‘This bill is going to make it harder to drive somebody with disabilities to the polls.’” In response, advocates for the disabled drove from all corners of the state to testify against the measure. “My child is going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life,” said one woman in a committee hearing. “Are you telling me he is less of a citizen?” Thanks to such powerful appeals, the bill never made it to a House vote.

There are some signs that Democrats are endeavoring to halt this repressive wave at the national level. The Democratic-controlled House has passed the For the People Act of 2019, a bill containing a number of obvious and necessary reforms, including the automatic registration of all eligible citizens. Democrats have also introduced the Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would restore and expand the original Voting Rights Act by extending its application nationwide. Unfortunately, neither has the slightest chance of passage in the Republican-led Senate. It will be left to national civil-rights groups such as the A.C.L.U., the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and Stacey Abrams’s Fair Fight Action, along with state-level organizations such as the Tennessee Black Voter Project, to undertake the slog of registration drives, court challenges, and turnout mobilizations.

One especially potent initiative has been the fight to allow former inmates to vote. In 2018, Floridians voted by a 65 percent majority to restore voting rights to 1.4 million fellow citizens with felony convictions, though the Republican legislature was quick to respond with measures restricting the number of people thus re-enfranchised. Former Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe overcame determined Republican resistance to restore voting rights to approximately 173,000 former felons, but only managed to do so by signing off on each individual case. In Kentucky, Andy Beshear made restoring the voting rights of 140,000 citizens a central plank of his successful 2019 campaign for governor. These initiatives are still timid in comparison with Bernie Sanders’s call to allow everyone—including prisoners—to vote: “This is not a radical idea,” he has said. “If we are serious about calling ourselves a democracy, we must firmly establish that the right to vote is an inalienable and universal principle.”

Unfortunately, such clarity finds few echoes in the Democratic Party establishment, not least because election manipulation is by no means unique to Republicans. Democratic-dominated Maryland is one of the most heavily gerrymandered states in the country. (Former governor Martin O’Malley admitted in 2017 that he had intended to “create a map that, all things being legal and equal, would, nonetheless, be more likely to elect more Democrats rather than less.”) A 2010 redistricting plan in Illinois, drawn by Democratic house speaker Mike Madigan, prompted one Republican consultant to remark, “It’s kind of a work of art—in the wrong direction.” In Democratic-controlled New York State, the rules discourage challenges to incumbent officials through a requirement that primary voters must be registered members of the relevant party in advance of the election. In order to run against the Democratic establishment candidate Joe Crowley, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez had to persuade thousands of voters to register as Democrats eight months before the vote. (The requirement has since been cut to two months.) She has said this was the hardest part of her entire campaign. Now, in the aftermath of her victory, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has introduced a rule aimed at preventing challengers from hiring professional campaign consultants, thus potentially further depriving voters of the possibility of choice.

Elsewhere, while the party is often generous with rhetorical support for voting rights, it’s less than forceful when it comes to actually funding efforts toward reform. LaTosha Brown noted that, while the Democrats were ultimately victorious, the mobilization of black voters in the historic 2017 Alabama Senate special election was “under-resourced” by the party. Similarly, it is usually difficult to raise money for secretary of state races in the thirty-five states where the office is elective, despite the importance of the post in terms of determining fairness in elections. “I have never heard of the national Democrats putting money into those races,” Jim Duffy, a longtime Democratic consultant, told me, “and the state parties usually have no money.” The party probably regrets having given almost no money to Karen Gierves in her failed 1998 race for Florida secretary of state. Republicans poured in $140,000 at the last minute for Katherine Harris, who would go on to make the state safe for George W. Bush’s presidential victory just two years later.
“A lot of people have been able to run under the radar for that job,” DeJuana Thompson told me. Thompson is the founder of Woke Vote, an organization that played a key role in organizing the black voters who made possible the Democratic upset in the Alabama special election. “It’s not the most glamorous position, but Georgia 2018 let everyone know there’s a lot of power in that role. We need to be giving a lot of thought about who is in the pipeline for those positions.”

Since Thompson is working to overcome obstacles erected by Republicans against Democratic candidates, one might expect the party to embrace and support her work, but that hasn’t been the case, at least not in Alabama, where, she said, “A lot of the people that we turned out have historically been disenfranchised, or at least under-engaged by the party.” As a result, many voters are uninformed or ignorant as to the rules preventing them from casting a ballot.

Given that today’s suppression often takes the form of bureaucratic traps, Thompson emphasized that defeating it requires relentless, long-term attention around the time of the election. “Obviously they can’t do the bubble test anymore—asking someone to count the bubbles in a bar of soap,” Thompson continued, referring to a notorious Jim Crow-era ploy to disqualify black voters. “But when someone with a college I.D. is asked for a home I.D. at the polls, when they’ve been living on campus for three years—that’s just another form of a poll tax or an unfair test. There’s a lot of different things that have been instituted that inhibit a person from being able to participate, and that’s really what the goal is.”

Armand Derfner summed up his frustration with the current state of affairs more pithily: “Why are we sending observers around to check other countries’ elections, when they should be coming here?” he asked. “These things ought to be crimes. In fact, they are crimes.”
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As promised in the email she’d received, the shuttle was waiting at the curb outside baggage claim. It was just a mini-van, it turned out, not the wheeled and finned amphibious contraption she’d been vaguely expecting from its mysterious name, SeaTac–Whidbey Island Shuttle. The shuttle’s doors were open; a driver was checking names off a clipboard. A frowsy older couple in matching rain jackets; a likely student plugged into her earbuds; and a very tall man, who was busily befriending the others with an eye, he told them cheerfully, to getting the seat with the most legroom. This turned out to be in the first row, while Leila wound up in the second, but the tall man, who had begun talking to

Leila the instant his eyes lit on her, continued once they were seated, twisting his long torso to half-face her over his shoulder. “Coming home?” he asked, and his abrupt address paired with his singular physical presence surprised her into something like alacrity, a state she’d been so far exiled from for so long she hadn’t even remembered its name. “No,” she replied. “Are you?” And when he said yes, in fact he’d lived on the island at one point for more than ten years, the conversation went from there, simply bloomed and sent tendrils all over the mini-van’s grimy interior as if there weren’t ultimately nine people crammed inside, including themselves and the driver. They’d had to interrupt themselves to listen with impatient politeness when the driver gave his spiel about schedule and safety.

Perhaps she hadn’t quite reclaimed alacrity. Information tumbled from the tall man, place names and business concerns and waterways; at one point he broke eye contact with her to look down at his phone, but before she could seize the opportunity to muster her focus he handed the phone to her, its screen displaying a three-masted boat. How beautiful, she said automatically. Just the previous week she’d brought her sons home from Martha’s Vineyard

Susan Choi is the author of five novels, most recently Trust Exercise, which received the 2019 National Book Award. Last year she also published her first book for children, Camp Tiger.

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on that island's ferry, their first time visiting as a trio (she'd made mistakes there, also, forgetting to reserve parking in Hyannis, ending up paying three times the usual rate to a sailorsuit-wearing cabal of criminal Moldovans, as she called them, to the distress of her sons, who felt, rightly, she knew, that this was an insensitive stereotype), and when the van halted again, here, just as there, were the painted lines on the asphalt where the soon-to-be-passenger cars formed their columns to wait, and here just as there was a concession stand offering seafood standards, even New England clam chowder. Leila stood in line for a bottle of water and then rejoined the tall man, who had seated himself on the back of a bench. How long had it been since she'd had this sensation of instant camaraderie with a man? But in fact, she reminded herself, she'd once made friends with men all the time, when in her right mind, to which this trip had been meant to return her.

The tall man took from his backpack a very good-looking sandwich. Leila took in its toothsome-appearing whole-grain bread, its crisp lettuce, its fat slice of tomato, its strata of cheeses and meats, as the tall man with somehow fastidious wolfishness dispatched the sandwich in a very few bites, without dirtying his fingers, his clothes, or his face. It hadn't crossed Leila's mind to buy food while she stood in the line, and now she realized she hadn't eaten since around eight the previous night—Eastern time—and it was now almost one on this coast, which meant it had been twenty hours since her last meal. “You're prepared,” she remarked, of the sandwich, and the man replied, “My wife is,” with an appreciative nod at the now-empty Ziploc that he folded up neatly and returned to his backpack. So that was that, Leila thought, for the first time aware that the long-unused apparatus had begun to unfurl. Better fold that back up, like the Ziploc.

When the ferry came in, the tall man led her up its two metal staircases with their metal walls and diamond-plate treads, which still somehow conveyed the excitement of going to sea. Though he seemed to know he towed her in his wake he didn't hesitate to use his long legs, and he didn't glance over his shoulder—she had to hurry to keep up with him. Then they came out into the enormous indoor passenger area with its superfluous seating for hundreds and beautiful wraparound windows in the forgotten modernism of the late 1950s. Leila's pulse quickened with pleasure. This was the kind of erstwhile sophisticated interior she and her husband had always sought out. The decades of their accord had lulled her into thinking theirs was everyone's preference; but the tall man was making straight for the doors to the outer deck, and Leila didn't even have time for a photo. Then they were standing together on a wide balcony spanning the bow, with the heavy green water spread around in an arc and the dark green landmasses crouched regarding the boat from their various distances. Leila couldn't guess which landmass was which. She wished she'd studied a map. Around the port side she could see a pretty lighthouse she would have liked to go look at, but the tall man's easy cooptation of her company somehow ruled out all such tourist's behaviors. He was explaining his reason for coming, and just as, curbside back at the airport, his question to her had shocked her into alacrity, now the superior solitude of the ferry deck and the surrounding dark water shocked her into greater attention, as if her consciousness were being awakened by increments. From the corner of her eye she could see the couple in their matching raincoats gazing out through one of the rhomboid windows from the passenger area, but they didn't venture onto the deck. No one did, despite the mildness of the wind. Leila asked the tall man a series of questions, and though his replies let her know that he'd explained much of this already, still she felt the satisfying tightness of the grip of her mind on the interesting problem, this stranger whose world didn't overlap with hers in the least. It didn't seem to bother him to tell her things twice. Suddenly she laughed—the laughter shook free of her without warning and only once it had did she fathom her reason for laughing, which she tried to explain as he smiled with surprise, not the least offended by the interruption.

“I didn't realize we were moving!” she cried. The barely wrinkled green
water lay around them like pavement over which the ferry rolled with imperturbable tires; it was only when she noticed that behind the tall man's back, where he leaned against the rail facing her, the featureless crouching landmass had grown tall and sprouted houses whose individual features she could easily see that she was even aware they'd cast off. But how could she explain to him that it wasn't just the smoothness of the ride but the feeling of herself magically transposed—as if lifted by a giant's hand and smoothly set down again? "I mean, I didn't even realize we'd started!"

"It's not always like this," he said. "We're lucky to have a calm day."

As Leila and the tall man headed back down he said, "What's your heritage, if you don't mind me asking?" It was the question she would have asked him if such questions weren't, now, a minefield. Leila welcomed the question when it came from another brown person but would not have assumed other brown people felt the same way. She explained herself and, when he replied, "It worked out very well. Nice results," Leila's stop. Now her feeling was even aware they'd cast off. But when the time arrived in fact no part of her catastrophe had been resolved. She could barely pack, not from reluctance to go but from the sense she was running toward refuge from a fire or a flood, and packing was a superfluous nicety. Why bother to bring anything?

Now, though, the reality of the colony began to take form like so many bands circling her chest, one for each rule her greeter explained. There was no internet as this disrupted solitary meditation. Cell coverage was very poor throughout the island and nonexistent at the colony, but should she miraculously find herself with service, it was asked that she desist from making or receiving calls on the property, as this disrupted solitary meditation. There was no meat served on the property, or man, was allowed, period. There was no music between those times. The cabins might be widely separated but in these quiet woods noises carry. We ask that you take the time to read the reflective words of the residents who have preceded you, which are recorded in these notebooks, and that you record your own reflections for the women who follow; you'll want to do that in the most recent volume, which is number fifteen. Please don't write in any of the other ones even if you find a blank page. We ask that you try not to leave a blank page between the end of your predecessor's reflections and the beginning of yours, the way some of the women have done. It wastes space in the notebooks. We ask that you arrive promptly to meals, read the fireplace instructions with great care, move no items of furniture. We ask that in the garden you feel free to pick flowers but not vegetables—if you want to have dinner." Above all, no guest was allowed without the prior permission of all the other colonists—dinner was a good time to seek this—and no overnight guest, or man, was allowed, period.

"So only women can visit?" Leila sought to clarify.

"It's a women's retreat," said her greeter, as if the implications should be obvious.

It was, of course, a sort of monastery—nunnery? perhaps "cloister" was the less religious term—and once alone in her cabin Leila understood that it had not been the rules themselves but the presence of the greeter that had felt like bands circling her chest. Something about that greeter reciting the rules had reminded Leila, yes, of her husband, regardless of the fact that the greeter had been a seventy-year-old woman with her silver hair piled in a bun. With the greeter gone, the rules shifted the
nature of their encirclement. Now Leila regarded the flawlessly ordered interior of her cabin with such abject gratitude that her eyes overflowed; interestingly, an open box of Kleenex sat on every surface: one on the desk, one on the side table next to the armchair, one on the bedside table, and one beside the bathroom sink; four boxes of Kleenex for a cabin no more than two hundred square feet, a higher concentration than even in Leila’s therapist’s office. Leila sat down in the window seat, within reach of the armchair side table, and cried, luxuriantly ripping tissues from the mouth of the Kleenex box without regard for how many she used. We ask that. When had Leila, a popular teenager, a brilliant college student, a successful young woman, lost the ability to ask that her own existence be ordered in the way that pleased her?

Her hard cry lasted so long she became bored with it; she felt enormously better. She lugged her suitcase into the sleeping loft, where the chest of drawers was, and stood for a time wishing there were rules about how to unpack. In a monastery surely the monks had a place for each cowl or whatever it was. With some difficulty she unpacked her few, poorly chosen clothes with extreme care, as if each drawer were laid open for judgment by God. She descended again, facing the stairs with both hands on the railings, and then went for a walk in the woods. The woods were exquisitely beautiful. Leila wished for more rules to protect them—We ask that you not tread on moss, We ask that you pluck no wildflower—but perhaps it was the colony’s rules for itself that enabled the woods to remain so pristine. Once awoken to the need for such rules, everyone made her own.

The first thing she’d wondered about the tall man, Lance, was his age; she’d wondered about that even perhaps before she’d wondered about his heritage or ancestry or whatever was the currently palatable word. No, she’d wondered about the two at the same time. She had to admit it: she’d gazed on his brown skin, adjusted. Taut at the jaw, the slightest loosening under the ears. Dark hair barely dusted and perhaps that was only the light. He’d confounded her. When in doubt, she dialed down. No more than forty-five, she decided, then reminded herself this made him younger than her. As if he’d observed her internal debate he had told her, “My wife’s fifteen years older than me. She had the two oldest kids when we met. Then together we had Julia. I’m sixty-one; my wife’s seventy-six.” They had been climbing back into the shuttle to get aboard the ferry when he’d made this revelation, in front of all their fellow passengers, as if she’d asked him to provide credentials.

For the rest of their time together she’d tried to press his age onto him like a hat. It was cheering how poorly it fit. Everything about him seemed youthful: his bright eyes, his hawk’s nose, his plentiful dark untrimmed hair, his leather jacket, the wrought-iron pendant he wore on a thong around his neck. Yet at the same time he was reassuringly adult: the jacket’s leather was supple and unstained, and the reading glasses he’d briefly put on while searching his phone for the photo of the boat were far more stylish and expensive-looking than Leila’s own readers, which she had bought at the grocery store. Strongest evidence of all, his teeth were the faint yellow of aged ivory: they lent the rest of the illusion authenticity. Like the ferry Leila had not felt transporting her over the water, Lance perhaps moved through the world without friction, aging at a fraction of the usual rate. Transplanted into fiction his appearance would be as implausible as his name.

“Ancestry.com,” he’d been telling her as they clambered back onto the shuttle and for the third time took their seats, for the final and shortest leg of the trip. The website had been how he’d found out that his maternal ancestors weren’t Native American at all, as his mother had always said, but African-American Creoles from Louisiana. Whether that information had been inadvertently lost or someone had covered it up wasn’t clear; Lance was still in the throes of his research. And not only that, but he’d found a whole branch of relations, descended from an illegitimate child of his grandmother’s sister. That pregnancy was a secret that no one had known until now, but they had all found one
another, and they were having reunions. His own mother, aged ninety, who remembered her aunt, had been able to share stories of their ancestress with the grandchildren who'd had no idea, before now, what their background might be.

It had been this tale, frankly thrilling to Leila, that the shuttle driver had interrupted with his harsh cry of “Freeland!” and his violent yanking open of the minivan’s door. All that had welled up in Leila to say in response had tumbled back down her throat.

The reasons Leila’s marriage had failed seemed to multiply with every day since its extinction. Early on, despite the mental disarray of grief, Leila had felt she was able to describe the trouble fairly concisely. In retrospect, her concise description came to seem spurious. It might have been a product of self-delusion, or of false consciousness instilled by her husband, or even, paradoxical as this seemed, both. Every aspect of the marital reality now seemed the product of her feeble subjectivity: perhaps she and her husband had not even liked midcentury modern interiors. Perhaps only her husband had liked them and she had pretended she did, to please him. Perhaps she had liked them and he'd humored her. Perhaps no one had liked them and it had all been a misunderstanding. Perhaps their experience of love—if they had even experienced it—had been a misunderstanding as well.

At the women’s retreat, Leila floundered. She couldn’t seem to break through the skin of the place. It was a perfectly translucent skin through which she could see the stately trees, the charming cottages, the dewy flowers, the serenely smiling other women, but she could not pierce that skin, could not seem to get on the right side of it. She found more and more pretexts to loiter in the retreat’s library, where one afternoon, on her fourth or fifth day, her non-reading was disturbed by the sudden entrance of a woman—a visitor from nearby, it turned out—who said, “Look at you, so serene! At least there’s one place around here that’s not crawling with wooden-boat tourists.”

It took Leila a moment to grasp why this sounded familiar. It had been a wooden-boat festival, on the next island over, to which Lance had said he was going. Until now it had not crossed her mind that this event might be real. It had not crossed her mind that a mere call to a cab company, such as she made the next morning, then a mere ferry ride, would bring the festival under her nose before she’d entirely decided to go.

She still hadn’t entirely decided to go when the festival greeted the ferry far ahead of the shoreline; of course, it was a boat festival—it would be taking place largely out on the water. Up and down the ferry railing under the early morning sun Leila’s fellow passengers crowded to see the small boats on the mirrorlike water. Then the boat Lance had shown her on his phone appeared alongside a pier. Leila recognized it so easily that she doubted herself. What had she remembered from that photo? It seemed unlikely she would have recalled that it was a three-masted boat with a midnight-blue hull, but as if to remove any lingering doubt, a strikingly tall dark-haired man strode down the pier toward the boat; then the angle of the ferry’s approach made this view disappear. Leila found herself alone at the railing. The ferry was docking; the other passengers had already gone down. Leila reminded herself that nothing she was doing was wrong, that her husband had left her eighteen months ago and, though he was still living in the guest room, he had hired a lawyer. She had hired a lawyer, too, and her lawyer, a woman, had said to her, Go forth and date. Even that had been six, eight, or ten months ago. Leila couldn’t remember.

Onshore she drifted among the tables and stalls as if she’d never seen the boat and Lance at the end of the pier. It was a painfully charming Victorian seaside town; everything Leila laid her eyes on was like the life-size version of a toy of an aristocratic child of times past, as if she’d stepped into the nursery of, who was it, perhaps those moody jerks from Brideshead Revisited. As if to twist the knife of nostalgia for a past never lived, a brass band performed on a bunting-draped stage, whistles whirled, displays on behalf of endangered orcas or opportunities to buy vegan food, but these only increased Leila’s sense of dispossession. She would rather have lived long ago. At least then the world wasn’t so obviously ending. Thank God, here was exactly what she needed: a very esoteric guide to tying knots (Aidan) and a fold-your-own-fleet paper kit (Dashiell); they would even fit into her suitcase. Clear as a dream, she saw her suitcase flying over the railing while she stood on the ferry with Lance; saw its blunt corner dent the dark water, the water recoil and spring back, the suitcase regrettable jetsam rapidly shrinking and then lost in the wake. That hadn’t happened. Extremely carefully Leila stowed her purchased souvenirs for her two unforgotten children in the most sheltering part of her backpack and suddenly knew Lance had strode rapidly down the pier because he was departing.

Yesterday, out the window of her cottage, she had seen a chickadee bouncing around the branches of a fir like a freshly whacked pinball. Now her heart was behaving this way. Leila quickly walked toward the water, seeming to bump into something—a table, a person, a trash can—at every step. A premonition of old age—her poor parents were like this, they drove to the Y every morning to slow-motion walk in the pool to maintain their balance. But how ironic it was that they drove there—they must have paid bribes to renew their licenses; one of these days they'd wind up in a ditch. Or worse. Leila flying to visit them monthly, unable to talk them into moving closer to her and now, with her impending pennilessness, having to consider moving back in with them—but her husband would never allow it. Shared custody; his job was in New York. It was already a foregone conclusion that they would have to sell the old house they had worked so hard on, side by side, stripping the paint from the doorframes.

Halted on the waterfront walkway, buffeted on all sides by festivalgoers,
Leila could not see Lance's boat but knew it had to be off along the water to her left, as the ferry was off along the water to her right. She would turn right. It was not even lunchtime. She'd forgotten, disembarking, to check the return schedule, but it didn't matter; she would go back to the ferry and wait. "So you decided to check it out," said a friendly and unsurprised voice. "Great timing. Julia's all rigged and ready to go."

In memory she'd smoothed out some of the minor irregularities of his face, slightly diminished the true dimensions of the beaklike nose, but he was otherwise exactly as he'd been however many days before. It must be some trick of the brain, perhaps particularly on its guard against abrupt variations, that made this man with whom Leila had only ever spent ninety minutes less than one week before seem so hyperintensely familiar when the face of Leila's own estranged husband was mush in her mind. Though it was less how Lance looked that was familiar than his affect—his affect, in fact, of finding Leila so familiar. As before he seemed to feel entirely assured of her company. Hurrying again to follow him, she wondered if in fact during their prior conversation they'd made a date she'd forgotten for her to come and see his boat? But he strode not with impatience, just that same unrestrained, unconscious speed of a long-legged person. "So we've had a loooot of work to do," he was telling her as if resuming a complicated conversation in which she'd been a fully educated participant. Was it men who were mostly like this? Valuable rivers of action and thought? No, that was ridiculous. Leila knew plenty of women who were rivers of action and thought, carving paths with their waterweight and not caring a twig if the flotsam flowed with them or not; and as well she knew plenty of men who were inactive pourings had not paused while she pondered their nature, was handing her onto the boat—Mind the cleat—she wouldn't believe this but the people he'd entrusted this boat to had neglected or misunderstood but in a way it had all turned out better because of these people his usual kismet particularly the thing with his wife and the whale. So what did she think? Of the boat. Maybe improved for her misadventure?

"What about your wife and the whale?" Leila asked, struggling to follow.

"That dream she had that I told you about on the shuttle—the mother whale with two calves? In the dream the mother whale tells my wife, The whales need you! My wife says, I'm headed to Haiti, where the poor people need me, are these whales in Haiti? Should I cancel my trip? My wife has a history of visions and premonitions. I could tell you some stories. Anyway, after lots of debating she goes through with her trip to Haiti, I come here, Julia's a fucking mess, the people I left her with didn't know what they were doing, but luckily the best riggers in the world are all hanging around here all week, I get busy but these things can't be rushed, I'd originally planned to leave Tuesday but I'm still here Wednesday, yesterday, when the orca-watch people came into the bar where I'm having my lunch. It turns out, their whalespottning boat has been rammed by these right-wing assholes and they can't do their annual count. There I was, on the brink of being done with outfitting Julia to sail her down to Big Sur, where I happen to not have a berth. I didn't really know what I was going to do with her, and then here came the orca-watch people. I said, Here's your boat. When I called my wife, she just couldn't stop laughing. She said, Why didn't the goddamn whale mother appear in your dream? And I said, Remember how I never remember my dreams? That whale mother had to leave me a message with you. So I'm off to Orcas tomorrow," he concluded. "Want to come?"

"Me?" Leila exclaimed when it was clear, from his expectant silence, that he was not only finished telling his story but had actually asked her this question.

"Yes, you. Aren't you looking for something like this?"

"What would make you say that?"

"People find their way to us, my wife and me, all the time. People who are looking for something, or who just need to be somewhere. I thought that
might be your situation. To be honest, I thought that you might be the whale mother. You have two sons, right? In my wife’s dream, the whale mother had two calves. Sometimes my wife’s dreams are symbolic, not literal.”

The boat—Julia—was shifting subtly and rhythmically beneath them; even still water can never be still if it’s part of the ocean. Leila unprecedentedly perceived that the ocean was truly one body, lying beneath the eyes of her children as they rode the Q train over the Manhattan Bridge to school in the morning no less than it lay against the hull of Julia, atop which she now sat. Connecting Leila to her children and to whale mothers and calves and all the other millions and billions of creatures suspended in ocean trans-lucence like the raisins and grapes Leila’s mother suspended in quivering rings of grape Jell-O, which had been, in her ignorant girlhood, Leila’s favorite dessert. She’d liked the way light passed into the Jell-O and picked out the resident fruits. Running away on a boat with a man to save whales wasn’t anything any actual person, certainly not any middle-aged woman with two children and an estranged husband, did. Running away on a boat with a man to save whales was the sort of thing a highly privileged, self-indulgent, insufferably youthful sort of person did. Anyone who did something like this was a person Leila envied and loathed. “Did you ask your wife if she thought I was the whale mother?” she asked challengingly. He couldn’t possibly be here, tall, lean, brown, ludicrously capable, standing on a storybook boat on the mirrorlike sea on a paradisal day in an island chain just offshore of the sunset, offering to transform her existence. “I did, the day I met you. Actually, I texted her, because her service is so shitty in Haiti. My text said, ‘I texted her, because her service is so bad, I’m ordering all over Dashiell’s math, I’m ordering all kids’ lunches tomorrow, I’m going into her silence he added, ‘You’re having an episode.’”

“Talking about it how?” Leila said, with the sense that she was driving him into a corner. “I told her about our connection.” After a moment he added, “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean.”

“You told your wife about our connection?” Just like that, she had acknowledged it. “My wife and I opened our marriage a long time ago. It works well for us.”

“Was this something people did? Had Leila, running the rat race in New York for the past twenty years, entirely missed a revolution in social arrangements? “And did she—did she think I was the whale mother, or not?” This was cowardly and evasive; now it was Leila who was cornered.

“She thought you’d come to me for a reason. Whether or not you were the whale mother, we were taking a wait-and-see attitude. We’ll know when we need to.”

She hadn’t meant for her laughter to sound so derisive. “I’ve never known when I need to. I’m not sure I believe people can.”

Lance turned away from her for so long she thought he might be receiving Morse code from the shore. He was apparently thinking. His profile was extremely unusual, like shale roughly hacked with a hatchet. Despite the severity of the outline there was something boyish about his face in profile that was maybe the absence of judgment. He seemed genuinely puzzled by what she had said. “Most people are at a total loss when there’s nothing important to do,” he said finally. “We’re not supposed to be totally idle and cared for—even kids shouldn’t be totally idle and cared for. It makes them depressed. I think your problem is that you’re punishing yourself for the completely normal feeling of wanting something important to do.”

Before she left, they exchanged numbers, and then—as had so many of the women at the retreat upon first meeting her, as if there were no more mundane salutation—he embraced her. But he was so much taller—so much larger overall—than those women. His body blotted the sun. Her cheek, pressed to his ribs, was indented by the mallet of his heart. She wondered if this was his resting pulse or if his heart was agitated. She couldn’t tell. “There’s no obligation,” he clarified as he released her. “Only come if you want to.” “I’ll text either way.”

“You don’t even have to do that. If you’re here tomorrow, you’re here.” It was all up to her, then, as she knew it must be.

At dinner that night the other women were delighted with her fraudulent story of having gone to the wooden-boat festival just because it had piqued her interest. So celebratory were they of her little excursion that she understood how obvious her floundering had been to them, yet she wasn’t embarrassed. Something had changed in her on the trip back. Their praise bounced against her like blows off a drum—she felt taut and resonant and dominating.

After dinner she slipped off to the field where she’d found she could get a clear signal. It was past ten at home—the boys would be in bed, but it would be better to have his entire attention. He said, irrelevantly, “Where are all those women you’re supposed to be retreating with?” “You think they’d take your side? Is that really how smug you are?”

“Leila, if you run off on a boat with some man, you will lose custody of your kids. Do you hear what I’m saying?” She couldn’t even listen to him, his knee-jerk condescension. Into her silence he added, “You’re having an episode.” “You’re having an episode,” Leila replied automatically. It was such a mistake to have called. “I’m not having an episode,” he said with the same infuriating composure. “I’m making tuna salad for the kids’ lunches tomorrow, I’m going over Dashiell’s math, I’m ordering all the shit Aidan needs for his science-fair project, and I’m waiting to switch laundry into the dryer.” “As if you’re a hero for doing it! Who did it for the ten years before you left me?” “Go to sleep, please. Enjoy your retreat. Try to make use of it.”

Screaming Fuck you! into the phone would only bring the retreat women fluttering into the field. Lost would be her brief moment of triumph at dinner. Lost would be that sensation, so novel, that she knew what she wanted, that there was nothing more simple to know.
ONLY 1% OF COLLEGE STUDENTS ARE AMERICAN INDIAN.

BUT MANY MORE ARE READY FOR THE CHALLENGE. BRING EDUCATION TO NATIVE STUDENTS.
NEW BOOKS
By Julian Lucas

There’s a lot of crying and cumming in Garth Greenwell’s *CLEANNESS* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $26), an arresting novel that revolves, title notwithstanding, around the upheaval and mess of desire. Set in Bulgaria, where an expatriate teacher finds himself caught between a strained relationship and the lure of one-off S-and-M hookups, it’s an electrifying portrait of sex’s power to lacerate and liberate, to make and unmake our deepest selves. The book arrives amid a wave of mainstream interest in the erotic lives of gay men, but its frank exploration of kink, loneliness, shame, and dark pleasures hearkens back to a less carefree period—as though to restore a charge of risk and consequence to queer sex in the era of corporate pride and *Call Me by Your Name*.

What Belongs to You, Greenwell’s 2016 debut, locates that charge in the relationship between an American teacher and a young hustler he meets under Sofia’s National Palace of Culture. A quick suck in the stall leads to an obsessive, manipulative attachment, which begins to erode the boundaries between the narrator’s privileged life and his lover’s desperate circumstances. *Cleanness* is a variation on the same pattern—both books’ narrators teach English in Sofia, as did Greenwell—but is more self-reflexive in outlook, as concerned with the purpose of passion as with its fulfillment.

The narrator of *Cleanness*, older and more restless, drifts among irreconcilable roles: mentor to local students; on-and-off boyfriend of R., a closeted man from Portugal; and compulsive if ambivalent partner to fetishists he meets online. The novel itself is divided into three acts. In the center lies the narrator’s relationship with R., which flourishes during an idyllic vacation to Italy but founders back in Bulgaria, where R., struggling with childhood trauma and still tethered to his life in Lisbon, hesitates to put down roots. On either side stand trials of desire in the wilderness, from trysts with strangers to shame-inducing flirtations with attractive male students.

The anchoring tension is between sex’s transformative possibility and the ever-present danger of harm, whether psychic, social, or even that of violence and infection. R. temporarily delivers the narrator from his free-floating lust, as though he “poured a kind of cleanliness over everything,” but it’s only a partial reprieve: “even as I lay with R., flooded with love … a part [of me] longed to be back here.” In one instance, “back here” means on his knees in the drab apartment of an older Bulgarian he calls gospodar, or “lord,” who derides him as “fat” before whipping him with a cat-o’-nine-tails. The dynamic gives the narrator pleasure before it tips, imperceptibly, into harrowing abuse. He weeps in an alley after making a narrow escape: “I felt with a new fear how little sense of myself I have, how there was no end to what I could want or to the punishment I would seek.”

The book’s sex scenes unfold like revelations, effortlessly braiding inner drama with precisely choreographed intimacy. Greenwell’s long, luxuriously becomma’d sentences, always on the edge of ending, create a tension receptive to the lightest touch: a shift in rhythm, or one clause’s tiny revision of its predecessor, can entirely alter the chemistry of a scene. He melds an incantatory cadence with the catechistic language of porn, which is ridiculous until you’re “lit up with a longing that makes it the most beautiful language in the world.”

When the narrator barebacks a submissive Bulgarian partner, relinquishing his fear of disease and first experiencing the thrill of domination, Greenwell writes:

I slapped him then, hard on his ass, and he groaned. Please, he said, his voice electric with need, please, fuck me like your whore, I want to be your faggot whore, and at the sound of it I
felt something move in me, like a shifting of gears.

Bulgaria itself provides a less stimulating backdrop. Too often, Greenwell challenges the narrator’s angst with its vaguely sketched political maîlaise, as though the nation, too, feels trapped between a repressive status quo and libidinal chaos. His relationship with R. flickers out at a kitschy light show near a castle beloved by nationalists, while the assault by gospodar immediately precedes a chapter detailing a 2013 antigovernment demonstration. Like the sex, it begins as a thrilling experiment and ends in tears: a friend of the narrator is beaten by fellow protesters for his sexual orientation. Though this is a wrenching moment, the character and the politics subsequently drop out of the book. Despite his seven years in Bulgaria, the narrator remains a self-conscious interloper, and the scene a perfunctory engagement with circumstances that might have added dimension to Greenwell’s otherwise intimately powerful work.

The expatriate novel may set local politics at a distance, but some foreigners profoundly challenge the societies in which they find themselves. In TACKY’S REVOLT (Harvard University Press, $35), historian Vincent Brown tells the story of the African soldiers responsible for the eighteenth-century British Empire’s largest slave rebellion. It began in Jamaica in April 1760, when a man named Tacky led a three-week uprising in a rugged northeastern parish. Tacky was a former military leader from the Gold Coast, and Brown argues that his revolt was one phase of a larger plot that spanned the island and reverberated across the region. The roughly one thousand men and women who participated were veterans of West African battlefields and British imperial campaigns, bringing strategic knowledge from the Old World to the New. From their particular strife, Brown derives not only a story of the insurrection, but “a martial geography of Atlantic slavery,” vividly demonstrating how warfare shaped every aspect of bondage.

Slavery itself was war all the way down. Captives lost their freedom to invaders, labored in fortified settlements on turbulent frontiers, and served masters who viewed them as adversaries. Nowhere was this pattern more pronounced than in 1760s Jamaica, “a fabulous commercial entrepôt and a potent military garrison” where slaveholder-officers split their time between plantation management and expeditions to annex French Senegal or sack Spanish Cartagena. Maroons—runaway slaves who established villages in the mountainous interior—patrolled the wilderness, their autonomy secured through a devil’s bargain to enforce their former masters’ rule. The largest ethnic group on the island, the so-called Coromantee, from the Gold Coast, were both coveted and feared by the planter class as natural leaders.

In some cases, military men owned military men. Another rebel commander, Wager, belonged to a British naval captain who named him after—and employed him aboard—the H.M.S Wager. Like Tacky, Wager was a Coromantee warrior. We know this, incredibly, because a slave agent who had retired to Jamaica recognized Wager as a former business contact from the other side of the Atlantic. There, Brown determines, he might have been a dignitary from one of several warring kingdoms such as Dahomey or Asante, where nearly every man was trained for battle, and hit-and-run fighting in forested terrain was common. Prepared for asymmetric war by their experiences in Africa, soldiers from any of these states would have been “dangerous people to own.”

Brown uses this African background, and his intimate knowledge of Jamaica’s geography, to interpret the rebels’ aims. Reading their maneuvers, he concludes that Tacky’s revolt was a serious attempt to establish “territorial and political control” over Jamaica—a project the book’s transatlantic context makes legible for the first time. The rebellion’s first target was a coastal fort, where Tacky’s forces shot a sentinel and seized a store of armaments. Rather than heading for the safety of the mountains, they marched from plantation to plantation, burning, looting, and recruiting—even pausing to roast an ox on the second night. After a British counterattack, they retreated seaward and occupied a rocky coastal inlet, a “defensible dominion [that] held the promise of communication with the world beyond Jamaica.” Cuba, and Britain’s Spanish enemies, were just across the water.

A maroon mercenary killed Tacky, whose forces subsequently dispersed or died in grizzly executions. But aftershocks across the colony suggest that the uprising was intended to have a wider scope. There was another uprising at the naval yard in Port Royal, while Wager’s rebellion struck the western parishes in May. His faction briefly defended a barricaded village against the British, and after its fall, survived nearly a year of guerrilla combat.
Meanwhile, authorities discovered strange conspiracies among the enslaved: a black woman enthroned at secret meetings as the Queen of Kingston, a “sword of state” more than a meter long with a velvet hilt, mourners smuggling firearms in a coffin.

For Brown, the reluctance among military historians to “acknowledge slave revolt as an act of war” is part of a long tradition of erasing resistance from below. Opposing this tendency, Brown finds “fugitive territories” and “counter-mappings” that didn’t move borders but profoundly altered the Jamaican and imperial landscapes. Tacky’s revolt might have been brief, but it did help scare the British into abolishing the slave trade. It also illuminates an archipelago of uprisings that struck Suriname, St. John, Antigua, and New York in the same period, all led by Coromantee. Most of all, the revolt lived on as a model of resistance in Jamaica. Forty years after Tacky’s defeat, new arrivals from Africa were still hearing about the daring rebels who upended the island and—according to the eighteenth-century slaveholding historian Bryan B...
SALKA THE SALONNIÈRE
On the queen of old Hollywood’s émigrés
By Ruth Franklin

Discussed in this essay:

In May 1941, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, along with several dozen other members of the European intelligentsia in exile, gathered in a Santa Monica living room for a belated celebration of Heinrich’s seventieth birthday. As Nazism consumed their native Germany, the brothers had fled to Hollywood, where, during the war years, an astonishingly distinguished group of European artists and intellectuals found refuge and employment. In a speech he delivered that night—
nominally a birthday toast to his brother—Thomas Mann denounced what had become of Germany’s great humanist tradition, suggesting that even Goethe and Nietzsche, were they still alive, would have joined the émigrés in America rather than suffer the depredations of the Third Reich. “When the homeland becomes foreign,” he concluded, “the foreign becomes the homeland.”

The host of the birthday gathering, Salka Viertel, was the living embodiment of that idea. A former stage actress who had the luck and the pre-science to get out of Europe in the late 1920s, she reinvented herself in America as a screenwriter and created a replica of a Continental salon in her beachside home: “Arpège and cigar smoke, a tumult of piano chords, the confidential lilt of German, and, through the open terrace doors, the ionized breath of the sea,” in the description of Donna Rifkind, a book critic and the author of The Sun and Her Stars, the first English-language biography of Viertel. The house quickly became a headquarters for the luminaries of Hollywood’s “German colony.” “You might find yourself sharing brilliant conversation or a Sachertorte with [Bertolt] Brecht,” recalled the producer and actor John Houseman (born Jacques Haussmann in Romania). There, Greta Garbo discussed how to play Hamlet with producer Max Reinhardt; Charlie Chaplin discovered his musical ghostwriter; and Arnold Schoenberg made small talk with Arthur Rubinstein.

At first, Salka—as Rifkind always refers to her—primarily played the role of social connector, helping new émigrés create friendships and find employment opportunities. As the political situation grew more dire, she used her wide-ranging list of contacts to help secure visas and affidavits for friends, family members, and strangers seeking a lifeline out of Europe. Once scolded by her childhood governess for being too extroverted, Salka put that very quality to work in saving countless lives.

Salka chronicled her fascinating life in The Kindness of Strangers, a stylishly written, stirring memoir originally published in 1969, when she was seventy-nine, and recently restored to print. Now complementing it is The Sun and Her Stars, in which Rifkind makes a passionate case for rescuing her subject from anonymity. The refugees—“a group of traumatized artists who were lucky enough to escape Hitler’s death trains and extermination camps”—were “Hitler’s gift to America . . . prodigious individuals who enriched the film culture and the intellectual life of our nation, and whose influence continues to resonate,” Rifkind writes. The story of their contributions to Hollywood’s golden age has been told. But, as Rifkind argues, the accomplishments of those who worked behind the scenes—many of whom were women—have been unjustly forgotten.

Illustration by Joan Wong. Source images: photographs of Salka Viertel © Private Collection; filmstrip © imageBROKER/Alamy; map of the German Empire © World History Archive/Alamy
Rifkind focuses her book on Salka Viertel’s years in Hollywood, skipping her subject’s early life almost entirely. It’s a defensible choice—many biographers chafe at the de rigueur recitation of grade-school accomplishments. Still, knowing where a person comes from, especially an exile, is important. As she writes in her memoir, Salka—born Salomea Steuermann; she used her nickname almost exclusively—grew up happily on an estate called Wychylowka, just outside the town of Sambor, in what was then Polish Galicia and is now Ukraine. She, her sister, and their two brothers spent summer days swimming in the Dniester River or collecting mushrooms and berries; in the evening, the family gathered around the piano to sing Mozart, Verdi, or Schubert. Her father was the town’s first Jewish mayor; from her mother, Auguste, the young Salka learned the importance of hospitality. The house had two kitchens, one featuring a French chef, the other kept strictly kosher for observant guests.

Like many assimilated European families, the Steuermanns were only nominally Jewish—though even so, Salka’s father would express disapproval when her first suitor proposed on Yom Kippur. They celebrated Christmas twice each year: once as a family, then again two weeks later with their Ukrainian servants. But Salka was fascinated by an Orthodox family in the village and would peer in the windows as they lit their Sabbath candles. “I knew that we were Jewish,” she wrote in her memoir, but we certainly did not belong to those strange people in long black kaftans, with beards and sidelocks, and we did not understand their harsh idiom. Still, we were not Christians either.

Even as a child, she lived between two worlds.

Salka’s parents brought their theater-obsessed teenage daughter to visit a famous director, hoping he would discourage her. “The girl has talent,” he pronounced instead. She spent the early years of her career bouncing from one company to another in Zurich, Berlin, Vienna. In Berlin, she and her brother Edward, a pianist whom Schoenberg had tapped as his designated interpreter, created their “own small Wychylowka” in a two-room apartment. Every morning, a new page from Schoenberg’s opera Pierrot Lunaire would arrive in the mail, and Edward would immediately sit down to practice it. The first performance was greeted with boos and hisses, but his admiration for the composer did not diminish. Salka would remember Schoenberg’s “huge, dark, burning eyes, the eyes of a genius.”

Salka was vacationing with her family in Zakopane, a Polish mountain resort, when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot. By the time they got home, Wychylowka had become an army headquarters and was filled with soldiers. She and her sister volunteered as nurse’s aides at the hospital up the road:

What we desperately wanted to convey to those dazed, maimed men, was that we were personally concerned, and we tried to draw them out from the horrible anonymity into which they had been thrown.

Meanwhile, the railway station in Sambor filled with trains from the east, “crowded with starved, parched, ill-smelling people, mostly Jews… with memories of pogroms still in their bones.” The Steuermanns fled ahead of the Russian advance, rolling up their precious Persian rugs for safekeeping in the vaults of the local Catholic church. The train journey to the Carpathians, usually two hours, took six days. It was Salka’s first taste of refugee life.

By the time she returned home, the following summer, the house had been looted; even the rugs in the church had been eaten by rats. The Germans were running a P.O.W. camp next door. They invited the Steuermann women to join them in their bowling alley, but “the presence of the two skeletons [P.O.W.s] putting up the pins prevented us from appreciating our hosts’ humor and indubitable politeness,” she wrote. Back in Vienna, an acquaintance introduced her to Berthold Viertel, a young director who listened with interest to her stories about her home-town. “You know that I am going to marry you?” he asked at the end of the night.

The Viertels spent the next decade moving from one set of furnished rooms to another, following job opportunities from Prague to Zurich to Dresden and back again. Their financial condition was so precarious that Salka often feared to remove the dust covers from their borrowed furniture. Nonetheless, they seem to have encountered all the greatest artists of the era. Rifkind laments in her biography that researchers have mined Salka’s book for anecdotes about her more famous acquaintances while ignoring the memoirist herself, but it’s easy to see why—the anecdotes are wonderful. In Prague, the Viertels dined occasionally with Max Brod and Franz Kafka, but Salka was “too awed and too shy” to speak to the great writer. Later, when Berthold was working in Dresden (she commuted via overnight train from Munich to visit him), they had tea with Rilke and lunch with Oskar Kokoschka:

Entering his studio I noticed a blond woman reclining on the couch, which in my short-sightedness I believed to be another guest, but which was a life-sized doll, the replica of a lady he had been in love with… We ignored her presence.

Meeting Brecht for the first time in Berlin, she writes: “He could have been painted on a silk scroll as an Oriental sage, had it not been for his eternal leather coat and cap, which made him seem dressed for an automobile race.”

The life of a working actress was especially difficult in those politically unsettled, economically unstable years. After the birth of Hans, her first child, Salka went back to performing almost immediately, nursing the baby in her dressing room. (One of the parts she played, a longtime role, was Medea.) She had no money for baby clothes, but a fan who heard about her pregnancy sent a layette, a gesture that moved her to tears. After the arrival of her second son, Peter, Salka returned to work “after six weeks of exercise and dieting.”
took jobs in Hamburg, Leipzig, and wherever else they were offered, while Berthold directed in Dresden and the children spent much of their time with a nanny. Meanwhile, the conditions around the family deteriorated. Returning to Germany with the children after a summer in Wychyłowka, Salka had to buy new train tickets at each transfer point, the prices changing constantly with inflation. In Kraków, she spent all her Polish złoty on milk for the children; at the Czech border, as the customs officer poked through her bag of dirty diapers, she learned that her devalued currency was insufficient to get her even as far as Prague. A theatergoer recognized her and bought her a third-class ticket to Dresden, where she left the children with Berthold before continuing on to the job that awaited her in Hamburg. A peasant family on the train offered the children thick slices of bread slathered with raspberry jam, but pride prevented her from asking for one for herself.

In the summer of 1928, at Wychyłowka again with the children—who now included a third son, Tommy—Salka received a cable from Berthold telling her he had been offered a job in the United States. “They say Hollywood is a paradise! We will have a bungalow,” he wrote. The couple’s recent years had been marked by the failure of an experimental theater troupe they had founded together in Berlin; later, Salka had come down with a near-fatal case of pneumonia. It is no surprise they were both ready to leave a disintegrating Europe. Still, Salka regretted giving up an offer of a theater company in Berlin; she must have suspected that moving to Hollywood meant that she would never work in theater again. But she could not let her own desires get in the way of her husband’s ambition.

"Why don’t you write?" Garbo suggested to Salka. The two women had met at a party not long after Salka’s arrival in Hollywood, striking up a lifelong friendship. “I am not a writer,” Salka replied. “I am an actress, temporarily unemployed.” She managed to get cast in a few small film roles, including opposite Garbo as the prostitute Martha in the German-language version of Anna Christie. But—at age thirty-nine when she emigrated—she soon realized she was “neither beautiful nor young enough” for film. And after working in the theater, she was frustrated by the pace: “Acting in fragments is like drinking from an eyedropper.”

Salka was a writer, as her memoir makes beautifully clear. Here is her first impression of California, influenced by her European perspective but instantly recognizable:

We found Los Angeles cold and overcast, with the sun, against which we had been so emphatically warned, invisible. While we were driving along Sunset Boulevard I noticed that there were no sidewalks in front of the uniform, clapboard houses and bungalows. An extraordinary fantasy was displayed in roof styling: some roofs were like mushrooms, many imitated Irish thatch and the shape of others was inspired by Hansel and Gretel’s gingerbread house. Ice cream was sold in the gaping mouth of a huge frog, or inside a rabbit; a restaurant was called “The Brown Derby” and looked like one. The buses we passed offered service with a smile…

But she would soon chafe at the frustrations of life in Hollywood. After she spent months working on a treatment for a film about Queen Christina of Sweden—a vehicle for Garbo—the producer Irving Thalberg insulted her with a lowball offer, which she defiantly rejected. They eventually agreed on a number, and Salka was proud of the final product, but the film was not commercially successful. A story about Napoleon’s affair with Marie Walewska, another potential role for Garbo, spurred the studio to send Salka on a research trip to France, allowing her to reunite briefly with her mother, her sister, and Edward, in Switzerland. Though anti-Semitism in Poland was on the rise, Jews continued to be accepted in cultural life; Edward was still able to perform, even if his students were beginning to leave Vienna. At a dinner party in Paris, the person seated next to Salka remarked, “I don’t see any reason why one should not work in Germany. The Jewish question concerns only the Jews.” She got up and left.

In August 1939, now naturalized as an American citizen, Salka was in Europe again—this time laying the groundwork for a biopic about Marie Curie. Just two days before she intended to meet her mother in Warsaw, the Non-Aggression Pact was announced:

My telephone kept ringing; people had heard that I was in Paris and desperate voices besieged me for help. I had heartbreaking visits from total strangers and I promised everyone to do whatever I could to get them affidavits.

The problem was the American quota system for immigration, which, as Rifkind writes, “was designed to accept more ‘racially desirable’ people from northern Europe … and fewer undesirable emigrants,” and which actually inspired, in part, Nazi policies. (The Nazis were also impressed by our Jim Crow laws, although they found the “one drop” standard too high.) After Kristallnacht, the U.S. Consulate in Berlin alone received 160,000 applications for visas, but 77 percent of Americans opposed increasing the quotas. The official government position toward the refugees was “sympathy without hospitality.”

Salka offered sympathy with hospitality. Liesl Frank and Charlotte Dieterle, two other émigrés in Hollywood’s German community, had established the European Film Fund, which asked all Europeans employed by studios to donate 1 percent of their salaries to refugee relief. (Among those who complied were the Casablanca cast and crew, which was made up almost entirely of émigrés.) Together with them and others, Salka marshaled her powerful friends to offer affidavits guaranteeing financial support to new emigrants; among those who contributed were Dorothy Parker and Herman Mankiewicz. Sometimes the matches she made were fateful. The director James Whale had heard the music of Franz Waxman, a Jewish composer from Germany, and wanted to commission him to write a score for The Bride of Frankenstein, but didn’t
know how to contact him until the two men encountered each other at Salka’s salon. After that commission launched Waxman on a successful career, he used his newfound wealth to provide affidavits for just about anyone who asked, including an entire family in Vienna who shared his last name but to whom he was not related. “Their school-age daughter had written to him out of the blue after seeing his name on the credits at the cinema,” Rifkind reports. “He saved them all.”

Meanwhile, Salka cabled ever-increasing sums to “unknown people with Jewish names” on behalf of her mother, who was now at the mercy of the Soviets occupying eastern Poland. Garbo, too, pleaded with the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, whom she had met in Sweden, to expedite Auguste Steuermann’s visa. In September 1941, as the Nazis advanced eastward, Salka’s mother was finally allowed to board a ship for the United States. It is only too clear what happened to all the people who could not take advantage of such well-placed connections, including Salka’s younger brother, Dusko, whom she was unable to get out of Poland. When Salka confided to Brecht about her survivor’s guilt, he wrote a poem for her about it that began: “I know, of course, that only through luck / Have I outlived so many friends.”

Hollywood, in the words of screenwriter S. N. Behrman, was “as crowded with artists as Renaissance Florence…. It had never happened before. It will never happen again.” Rifkind argues strenuously for Salka’s significance in shaping the motion-picture industry, noting that the aspirations and concerns of émigré filmmakers such as Salka—themes of isolation and belonging, of home and away—were now so fused into the language of Hollywood pictures as to be indistinguishable from it.

But it’s a stretch to call Salka a filmmaker: she seems to have been mainly a screenwriter and consultant, although it’s hard to tell, since some of her work was uncredited. Her ultimate gift was in creating links between people, although even she could not always bridge the chasm between brash Hollywood and genteel Central Europe. Rifkind cites her skill as a “cultural broker” at a meeting between Thalberg and Schoenberg—the producer, preposterously, wanted the avant-garde composer to provide music for one of his films—and scorns those who have credited Salka only with introducing the two men, calling her “a destroyer of walls, a builder of bridges, a welcome among strangers.” But here Salka was unsuccessful: Schoenberg, a consummate artist, insisted on complete control of all the sound in the film, including the actors’ dialogue, and naturally Thalberg declined. Nothing, not even Salka’s emotional intelligence, could have made Schoenberg a composer of movie music. Still, she told the story of the encounter unforgettably, describing Schoenberg as so anxious about forgetting his umbrella that he clutched it throughout the meeting. (Things didn’t go much better when Brecht decided he wanted to write a “commercial” screen treatment with Salka as his coauthor: “What the producers want is an original but familiar, unusual but popular, moralistic but sexy, true but improbable, tender but violent, slick but highbrow masterpiece,” she told him with all the jadedness of her years in Hollywood.)

It is a distinct challenge to write the life story of someone who has already written it so well herself. Rifkind’s main contribution is providing historical context, filling in details that Salka herself didn’t know, such as the fate of Dusko, who was likely murdered by the Germans during an Ak- tion in 1943, when all the Jews remaining in Sambor were rounded up and shot. Rifkind’s wide-angle view is also useful in examining what happened to Salka during the years immediately following the war, when she was “pink-listed” owing to what some people misinterpreted as her sympathy for the Soviet Union. One night at a dinner party, the head of Warner Brothers asked how her mother had escaped from the Soviet Union, and Salka volunteered her opinion that the Soviets had largely behaved decently to the Jews under their control. She would later qualify it:

It was no news to anyone that I abhorred nationalism, militarism, fascism, torture, concentration camps, genocide, starvation and the unspeakable sufferings of mankind, inflicted to create a superior race or a classless society. But I never equated Stalin with Hitler, nor communism with Nazism, and I optimistically believed

Greta Garbo (left) and Salka Viertel (right) in Anna Christie, 1930 © MGM/Photofest
in the victory of reason, which would ultimately defeat white, red or black global bestiality.

Though some of her friends spoke up in her defense, Salka’s work dried up as McCarthyism took hold. Owing to her FBI file—“a briefcase containing the list of my sins . . . as thick as the New York telephone book”—she was initially forbidden to renew her passport; only through the intercession of a lawyer was she finally allowed to leave the country again.

In both the memoir and the biography, Salka’s most striking quality is her uncompromising moral code, which she expressed unconventionally in her marriage to Berthold. Both of the Viertels seem to have accepted that their affairs with others—some serious, some not—did not interfere with their deep love for each other. When Salka was ill with pneumonia in Düsseldorf, her doctors, searching for Berthold one night, discovered him in a restaurant “having a late supper with a pretty actress.” A close friend of Salka’s couldn’t forgive him, but Salka was untroubled. “Only death can cure my addiction to you,” Berthold insisted later, during their decade-long affair with Gottfried Reinhardt, son of the producer Max Reinhardt and twenty-two years her junior. (Berthold was largely absent from Hollywood during this period, working on plays in New York and Europe.) They stayed married for thirty years, divorcing only when, for the sake of convenience, Berthold needed to marry his own longtime mistress. “When I married you, I was convinced that our relationship would be exceptional in our absolute truthfulness toward each other. I loved you and I shall always do so,” Salka wrote to him afterward. Her unmitigated honesty—personal, professional, and political—is perhaps her most unusual quality.

“Whoever touches your heart does not foresee that he is unleashing an avalanche!” Berthold told her after witnessing her distress over her breakup with Reinhardt. If something is missing in Rifkind’s book, it’s a sense of Salka as avalanche. While others have written of her sharp tongue and her eccentricities, in Rifkind’s telling she comes across as nearly saintly. Her charm was obviously legendary; even a Western Union operator, after taking down a morose telegram from her, called back the next day to make sure she was all right (“All night I worried about you, honey”). But there was another side to her too. “There are people of such harmonious, Apollonian disposition, of such well-balanced desires and temperament, that they never abandon the prudent domain of self-control,” Salka wrote in a moment of self-reflection. “I belonged to a more reckless race.” More of that recklessness would have given a better sense of her as a human being.

But Rifkind has done an enormous service in spotlighting the life of Salka Viertel: not only by telling a story that deserves to be better known, but also by implicitly making the case for more such books. As a genre, biography has traditionally been dominated by the stories of “great men”; only in the relatively recent past, starting with the groundbreaking biographies of Zelda Fitzgerald by Nancy Mitford (1970) and of Alice James by Jean Strouse (1980), has the circle of possible subjects opened wider. Even now, when women’s stories are told, it’s often because of their positions as wives or mothers of the famous (as the enduring popularity of first-lady biographies demonstrates) rather than for the inherent value of their own lives.

In its Overlooked series of obituaries, the New York Times has recently made a project of bringing attention to the lives of people not deemed worthy of coverage when they died. As its subjects make clear—they include people such as Mihr Rassim, an artist who fought for women’s rights in Ottoman Turkey, and Georgia Gilmore, a cook who organized meals to help fund the Montgomery bus boycott—it’s often the people behind the scenes who make things happen. Biography, at its best, is a way of telling history through the lens of a single person’s life. Focusing on those whose stories haven’t yet been told will do more than reveal the specifics of their individual existence. It will open up new paths of historical inquiry.
EXISTENTIAL NOIR
On the fiction of Juan Carlos Onetti
By Edmund White

Discussed in this essay:

As a kid growing up in the 1940s, I can remember my father instructing me to remove my hat when entering someone’s house—but not a public building, except in the elevator, where one unbonneted out of deference to the women present (the hat stayed on in an all-male car). Holding the brim between the thumb and the ring and middle fingers, one tipped one’s hat to acquaintances, male and female, encountered on the street. Embarrassment was dramatized by twirling the hat nervously in both hands at stomach level. The shadows obscuring the face under a hat made it abstract and emblematic, partially disguised, mature but of no specific age.

I suppose the hats worn by male characters in Onetti’s made-up port of Santa María lend them a sort of tattered dignity. We see that tattered dignity in the Uruguayan writer’s best-known novel, A Brief Life (1950), in which a journalist is unsuccessfully trying to put together enough money to have his wife’s breast cancer treated, and in The Shipyard (1961), when an enigmatic pimp, Larsen, back in Santa María after a five-year exile, accepts the position of directing a bankrupt shipyard. A contemptuous boy says to him: “What are you hoping for from here? It’s been a long time, and nothing you wanted has happened. Or so it seems to me.” ‘Ah!’ Larsen said, rubbing his hands together.” That almost could be a passage out of Beckett, though there is too much narrative and too little humor. The last lines of The Shipyard—part of a page-long parenthetical that concludes the book—are like Malone Dies seen through the lens of realism:

(... He sniffed at the air, licking his split lip as the speeding boat made its way up-river. He died of pneumonia in Rosario before the week was out. His real name appears in full on the hospital register.)

Silence and solitude are recurring elements in the work of Onetti (1909–94), who developed, over the course of the twentieth century, an increasingly innovative and idiosyncratic literary style often described as some combination of Dashiell Hammett, William Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. His fiction has been called a forerunner of the magical realism of the Latin-American Boom of the 1960s and 1970s, and a great inspiration for writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. After many years of neglect in the English-speaking world, most of Onetti’s novels have since been translated, but until now there has been no complete edition of his stories in English. These have recently been assembled, in chronological order, by Archipelago Books and translated by Katherine Silver, who has managed admirably to preserve the oddness of the original.

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In Onetti’s stories, we listen to the sound of moss growing; the color of the air is charged with quiet; a revoler is placed on the table, “quite still, incomprehensible, perhaps trying to communicate by a quivering of its wings that was out of the range of human hearing.” Someone on the edge of old age tries
to understand that moment in his life and in the world: the dark, twisted
trees with their fresh leaves; the light glinting off the horse’s bronze
haunches; the stillness, the patient secrecy of a provincial afternoon.

Most writers, encouraged to be “vivid” or “precise,” tend to punch up anything they describe, but Onetti does the opposite. People are often bored; the usual weather is cold rain; the buildings are shabby; faced with a moral choice, characters usually take the wrong path; women are fat; men are weak; people run out of things to say; priests are manipulative; everyone is horny but never romantic. His characters are conscious of living in a backwater, far from glamorous Buenos Aires, which is very far from a far more glamorous Paris or Madrid. Some people are rich but miserly; most people are lazy and in debt. Neighborhoods are derelict. Drunks are unfriendly, friendships lukewarm. If Balzac unrealistically lent all his characters his own dynamism, Onetti’s seem as gloomy and torpid—or ornery—as he himself was. When in a short story from 1970 a Uruguayan sailor places the first transatlantic phone call between Hamburg and his village in South America, his fiancée, on the other end, says, quite simply, “Why don’t you go fuck your mother, you shitfaced asshole?”

Every once in a while a character is seized by the sheer ecstasy of being. Not by the beauty of the world or the thrill of intimacy, not by a moment of understanding or a sweet memory, but simply by knowing that one is present, that one exists. One character thinks that the only thing that matters is to be alive. Another realizes “how happy he was to be sweating, a little drunk and in a trance, how happy he was to be watched and awaited.” A man smiles to reassure a woman that living is the only happiness possible. There’s the doctor Díaz Grey, who “was left listening only to the sea, his eyes closed, tenaciously repeating to himself that he was alive in a month in autumn.” A woman, studying herself in a mirror, smiles and thinks, “It’s me, it’s me. The person there with white, naked arms, it’s me, with my breasts cupped and my body drenched in perfume.”

It’s become a commonplace to characterize Onetti’s stories and novels as dreams. They are, of course, dreamlike, one intense episode melting into another, the atmosphere highly charged with inexplicable emotion, the events terrifying and somehow symbolic. In A Dog’s Night (1943), for instance, a man who is certain he is about to die is led by a familiar voice out of a ballroom into a private dining room. There he discovers someone he knows, dead and laid out on the floor, accompanied by two prostitutes—one short and one tall—who are chattering inconsequently. In the distance is the muffled sound of artillery.

In a novel about a pimp, Body Snatcher (1964), a young woman, Julita, has been driven mad by the death of her husband. The scene of her bedroom-cage is served up instantly and indelibly. She has sex late at night with a handsome teenage boy; we see her fat thighs, her tanged hair, her vacant, sweating face. Eventually, the pimp takes the teenage boy to live in a blue bordello by the sea. Characters dissolve from one setting into another. They are seen weeping in bed or standing in the moonlight by a door or walking slowly from the train station through town. The connective tissue between scenes is missing and the reader must reconstruct the narrative.

In that way, Onetti reads a bit like Faulkner, his hero. Both writers invented a place and, in novel after novel, peopled it with the same characters. Both wrote novels that the reader is meant to have already read: that is, the books don’t gradually unfold in a clear, rational way, but rather the plot elements must be reassembled retrospectively. Both Faulkner and Onetti get the metaphysical chills; they are equally astonished by the mere habit of being alive. Similarly, both writers’ characters are almost caricatures, woodcuts rather than watercolors.

Onetti may have been a pessimist, but the very beauty and startling unpredictability of his prose attest to his devotion to something—possibly art alone. In an interview he said, “Literature is an end in itself, not a means for anything.” Earlier in that same interview he had said, “When I write I don’t have a specific purpose in mind. Writing means tackling the theme that has occurred to me.” His joy in writing is obvious from his painterly eye: “I reconstructed the solitude of the street lamps in the plaza and along the promenade, the perpendicular threads of rain without wind.” Proust once said that writers always reveal their favorite moment; if Stendhal’s is viewing a sunstruck plain from a very high place, then Onetti’s, we might say, is looking at a bleak provincial town in the cold rain. Onetti, who refused to indulge in Nobel Prize–worthy platitudes about fiction, said that he almost always started with a room. He admitted he had no discipline and wrote only when he was inspired—in that way writing for him was like making love. And, like Faulkner, he was a drinker.

Onetti had a strange if mostly uneventful life. He was born in Uruguay, his father of Irish descent (O’Nerty), his mother from the Brazilian aristocracy. After a happy childhood, he held a number of odd jobs—eventually working as a journalist for Reuters in Buenos Aires—and married four times (the first two times to sisters, who were his cousins). Though he published his first novel, The Pit, in 1939—a bleak affair in which a man, on the eve of his fortieth birthday, sequesters himself in his room to write his life story—Onetti’s first critical success didn’t come until 1950 with the publication of A Brief Life, which made his reputation. In a sad irony, Onetti—whose fiction was largely apolitical—was jailed for three months by the Uruguayan dictator Juan María Bordaberry for serving on a jury that awarded a literary prize to the wrong author, and he fled to Spain the following year. By 1980, Onetti had won Spain’s highest literary
award, the Cervantes Prize, and for the last years of his life he lived in bed (according to one interview, he preferred to lie on a big white bedspread with a black cat), drinking heavily, surrounded by the books he was reading and writing.

Though he is often called the father of the Latin-American Boom, in many ways Onetti more closely resembled his Latin-American contemporaries, such as José Agustín Cajar Escala, except that they, unlike him, usually had a left-wing political message. They also lacked his oneiric tone. But the early twentieth-century Latin-American novel was often a multigenerational saga, as many of Onetti's books are, and it frequently indulged in pleonasm, which appear often in Onetti's fiction. His work is also closely related to the Cuban neo-Baroque writers José Letama Lima and Alejo Carpentier, both of whom are mindful of the continent's strange, even surreal, landscape and its mysterious history. While Borges is often credited with cleaning up Spanish diction in Latin-American fiction (a later book such as One Hundred Years of Solitude can be seen as a condensed saga written in the chastened style of a Borges), Onetti, by contrast, is addicted, like more traditional Spanish-language novelists, to Góngorismo. Luis de Góngora was a Spanish Baroque poet of the seventeenth century known for the complexities and indirectness of his diction; “spun snow” was his way of describing linen tablecloths. Onetti's way, especially in his later stories, is to indicate something such as a girl's first menstrual period by writing, “You say the child was twelve! And unable to foresee the horror that awaits her of blood in her panties as she's serving water tea and biscuits to her dolls.”

Onetti's style, which can create such lovely scenes of phantasmagoria, can be obscure in other ways. A logical list can degenerate into absurdity: “others who tolerated without difficulty the inheritance taxes, the taxes on the unconscious use of air, on the right to walk through the streets.” In another instance, there's a Gogolian simile run amok that provokes the reader but fails to illuminate: “He loved money, as long as there was plenty of it, the way other men feel attracted to tall and fat women and put up with their age without caring.” In still another instance, there's a poetically correct but literally false description: “she continued walking until she was able to plunge into the extravagant moon that continued to grow.” Or we read a highly detailed but surreal sentence:

I left the car at the top of the hill and saw them almost immediately, like in a small painting, the kind with wide gilded frames, motionless and surprising as I walked down toward them.

The stories collected in this volume are sometimes slight but more often long and strikingly original, especially in the way time contracts and dilates and the plot veers off in unexpected directions. They are also more daring than the novels. In one story, a Danish woman in Uruguay keeps imagining her native country so vividly in bedtime conversations with her husband that he finally steals money to buy her a ticket home. In perhaps my favorite story, “The Album,” a man encounters a woman on the street and, as they grow closer, is gradually mesmerized by her descriptions of the far-flung exotic places she has visited. The story shares the exoticism of Calvino's Invisible Cities, and the writing throughout is mysterious and exquisite: “... night on the prairie that spreads, punctual and indomitable, only allows us to encounter ourselves, lucid and in the present tense.” In another story, a female dwarf and her handsome fellow adventurer, having finally run out of options, befriend the richest woman in town; after they attend to her every need for years, she dies and they discover she's left her fortune to her dog. In yet another unforgettable story, a man—a good Catholic—is passionately attracted to his own wife, who, if she becomes pregnant again, will surely die.

These stories indicate the broad trajectory of Onetti's career. He was a clear-cut fabulist who turned into a cloudy mythmaker, but who stayed true to his primary vision of a provincial town in the winter rain. He is too difficult ever to be popular, but every writer will admire his distinctive tone and originality of invention.
LETTERS
Continued from page 3
represents perhaps the most direct challenge to the industrialization of the Columbia. But the fight takes place on many fronts. Visitors to the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute on the Umatilla Indian Reservation are likely to be reminded that Celilo Falls—the most significant fishing site on the Plateau—remains intact, hidden underneath the reservoir created by the Dalles Dam, ready to return in the event that the dam is removed. The Yakama—the tribe’s preferred spelling, as opposed to “Yakima,” which was used in the article—continue to practice dip-net fishing at those few traditional sites that have not been flooded by dams.
Symmes entertains the fantasy that to “ban all fishing” might solve things, but fishing is not the problem. Plateau people have fished the Columbia for thousands of years without endangering the survival of the salmon. Meanwhile, Symmes’s decision to limit the appearance of Native people to those “experimenting with a pneumatic ‘fish cannon’” is cartoonish. In a nuanced piece addressing how Native people are combating salmon decline, this detail might be worthwhile. As the sole detail about Native people, it is absurd.

Blake Slonecker
Toppenish, Wash.

Patrick Symmes responds:
John Harrison argues that the large electric capacity created by Co- lumbia River dams—in accordance with the Northwest Power and Conservation Council’s plan—is essential to the region. This would be more convincing if the area’s power administration did not devote itself to blocking the transmission of wind-turbine energy, a move that protects its own market share. Like the improvement in “mitigation” hatcheries Harrison cites, these sorts of practices merely sustain the very cause of the problem. As for the $68,000 figure, one wonders how we could determine whether it’s out of date so long as the council has not produced or commissioned a more recent estimate.

Blake Slonecker rightly points to the complex role of treaties and tribal involvement in the Columbia. I regret that, for reasons of space, I left out the important work of the Nez Perce tribe, among others.

Correction

“Where We Live Now” [Reviews, November], by Stephanie Burt, incorrectly quoted lines from Jana Pri kryl’s collection of poems No Matter. We regret the error. The correct lines are as follows:

1. who doesn’t love a winter heat wave though its period aroma
2. its settled questions
3. smell so accurate the warm blast
carries something more, antiquity of future time, the matter settled

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THEME AND VARI-VARIATIONS

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

Three related Theme Words, A, B, and C, are the entry at 16A. Each Theme Word then has two "variations." The variations are different in each case. For example, if the Theme Words were HIGH and LOW, the variations might be FIDELITY and TENSION (phrases beginning with HIGH), and ALLOWANCE and FLOWN (words containing LOW). In this puzzle, however, Theme Word B has two preliminary hints that then lead to its variations.

Clue answers include nine proper nouns and two foreign words. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month’s puzzle appears on page 73.

ACROSS

1. Loathe cruelty in exercising, in fact (15)
2. Variation on Theme Word B (6,11)
3. Took strides to do right, being upstanding (4)
4. T-Man pursuing lairs having no time for bad appearance (11)
5. Variation on Theme Word A (5)
6. Settle on sculpted torso (5)
7. Outraced illegally? It’s academic (8)
8. Denied being inappropriate unequivocally (6)
9. Hint to variation on Theme Word C (9)
10. Stopper when you go to commercial on radio? (8)
11. Clean off a weapon (5)
12. Having a family circle up front is coming back (6)
13. Somewhat brooding presence in mythology (4)
14. Tips from Heloise I just adore, but it goes over some heads (5)
15. Falling flat fishing? (11)
16. Theme Words A, B, C (5,6,4)
17. Variation on Theme Word C (8,9)
18. Variation on Theme Word B (3,5,4)
19. Train driver in golf to be one of the Blues Brothers (6)
20. No ailment can produce a hormone (9)
21. Hint to variation on Theme Word B (8,4)
22. Wrestles someone that’s a bit disturbed (8)
23. Early Accord models, green, are met with soft opening (12)
24. Slay troops, then, er, retreat (6)
25. Ex-TV host shows scowl when speaking (5)
26. It’s key to Italians but is nothing to Latin America (5)
27. Rails all about purveyors of fake news! (5)
28. Settles return of sculpted torso (5)
29. "Blackout" is a name for disorientation (7)
30. Presents returned, like musical instruments (7)
31. Islander in South America (Oy!) (6)
32. Something from the underground can, when turned over (3)
33. Diamond notoriously left, for example, by Soviet leader (4)
34. Announced what Don did when tight (4)
35. Be up against a bar (4)
36. Can you get a little buggy going north? (3)
37. The opposite of talk (8)
38. Plot in which star receives a letter of recommendation? (4)
39. Slips belonging to a cockney woman? (4)
40. It’s concerning that the old car needs a front end (7)
41. Variation on Theme Word C (1,5,4)
42. Cuisine so hot they say it might ______ fire! (8)
43. Audibly incorporated publicity (3)
44. Hotshot iconographer! He has some nerve! (4)
45. "D") I’m through! (3)
46. Exclamation from Homer heading off dispute over Helen (3)
47. Concerning little Margaret—in fix again? (5)
48. Massage after eliminating middle of floor exercises (4)
49. One “L” less spells out Harper Lee’s first name (5)
50. One calling out "Leap! Off with your head!" (3)
51. Massage after eliminating middle of floor exercises (4)
52. There’s no reason for hiding noise in bed (5)
53. Win a dance (4)
54. Unreliable flirt? (7)
55. Set in an office includes this: one corral after another (9)
56. One “L” less spells out Harper Lee’s first name (5)
57. Flew, but at first someone was sick (6)
58. Variation on Theme Word B (9)
59. One “L” less spells out Harper Lee’s first name (5)

DOWN

1. Cure agues, in a manner of speaking (5)
2. Variation on Theme Word C (9)
3. Denied being inappropriate unequivocally (6)
4. Audibly incorporated publicity (3)
5. Massage after eliminating middle of floor exercises (4)
6. Exclamation from Homer heads off dispute over Helen (3)
7. Set in an office includes this: one corral after another (9)
8. Massage after eliminating middle of floor exercises (4)
9. Set in an office includes this: one corral after another (9)
10. Stopper when you go to commercial on radio? (8)
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50. One calling out "Leap! Off with your head!" (3)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to “Theme and Vari-variations,” Harper’s Magazine, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to Harper’s, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by January 10. The winner of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to Harper’s Magazine (limit one winner per household per year). The winner’s name will be printed in the March issue. The winner of the November puzzle, “Sixes and Sevens (and Twelves),” is Frank Fighera, Newark, N.J.
FINDINGS

Knees in Asia are the most likely to have a fabella, and knees in Africa are the least. The humerus can be used to determine the sex of a Thai skeleton. A French courtship researcher retracted his paper titled “High Heels Increase Women’s Attractiveness,” and female Instagram influencers were found to face criticism for seeming both too real and too fake. Male green-veined white butterflies use volatile flower compounds to create the anti-aphrodisiac pheromone they transfer to females during mating to make them unattractive to other males. The loudest known avian vocalization was observed among male white bellbirds of the northern Amazon, who scream their crescendo directly at females perched next to them; the study’s authors expressed uncertainty as to why the females put up with the risk of hearing damage. Researchers denominated three essential categories of arrogance and found that narcissists are less prone to depression. Escapism predicts problematic online gaming. Scientists offered a path to freedom for an all-male colony of wood ants who were trapped for years in an abandoned Polish nuclear bunker but had continued to thrive because of cannibalism. Doctors expressed concern that men might unnecessarily second-guess medical advice by soliciting opinions from Reddit users about photos of their diseased penises. Itchiness makes Europeans about twice as likely to contemplate suicide.

Children find bearded men strong but unattractive and apply the attribute of “brilliance” preferentially to men, but not if they are black. Reward-based laboratory experiments for assessing animal cognition may not test animals’ actual intelligence. Online cat-food recipes are often nutritionally inadequate or dangerous, and Canadians are bad at measuring portions of dog food. Korean researchers investigated the cognitive effects of pet bugs on the elderly and warned against pointlessly delaying bedtime. European eels retain magnetic memories of their juvenile estuaries’ tidal currents. A cold decorative vase is experienced as more luxurious than a warm one.

Eleven thousand scientists suggested that the human population needed to be curtailed to combat global warming, and archaic mammals may have been nocturnal because they lacked scrota with which to maintain cool sperm. Mice who travel into space do not experience a drop in sperm quality, and rats can lower their stress levels by driving tiny cars. Migrating steppe eagles fitted with cellular trackers by Russian zoologists incurred massive international roaming charges. Welsh marine biologists trained shore crabs to navigate mazes and sampled the parasites of shore crabs at Mumbles Pier. Mussel cancer had crossed the equator, chytrid fungus had spread to frogs in the Peruvian Amazon, half of China’s pigs died or were culled in 2019 as a result of African swine fever, and a newly discovered virus was contributing to stumbling and seizures among bald eagles. The Wizard Rock, a boulder that had vanished from the Prescott National Forest, reappeared. Red deer on the Isle of Rum have been giving birth four days earlier each decade since the Nixon Administration. Five miles off the coast of Maine, lobstermen caught a white-tailed deer, fishermen in Montana caught a bobcat, and three North Carolina cows who had been swept away in a hurricane were found grazing on an island in the Outer Banks. A Scottish tourist was presumed dead after a tiger shark near Réunion was caught in possession of a hand wearing a wedding ring.
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