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# THE NEW YORKER

OCT. 23, 2023

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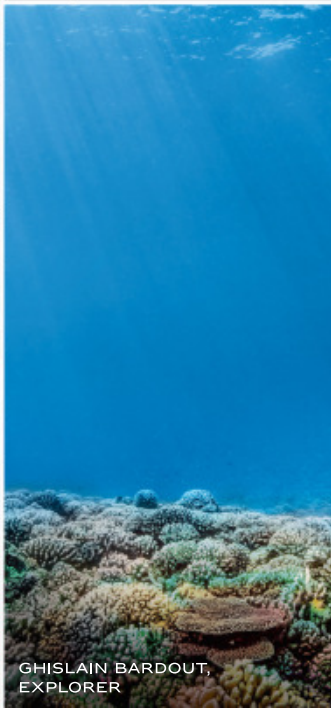

GHISLAIN BARDOUT,
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OCTOBER 23, 2023



DRAWINGS *Mick Stevens, Amy Hwang, Justin Sheen, Edward Koren, Sara Lautman, John O'Brien, Daniel Kanhai, Teresa Burns Parkhurst, Adam Sacks, Adam Douglas Thompson, Sophie Lucido Johnson, José Arroyo, Liana Finck, Patrick McKelvie, Avi Steinberg, Edward Steed, Joseph Dottino and Alex Pearson, Victoria Roberts* SPOTS *Javier Jaén*

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# CONTRIBUTORS

Heidi Blake (*"Hot Air," p. 42*) is a contributing writer for *The New Yorker*. She is the author of "From Russia with Blood" and "The Ugly Game."

Daniel Immerwahr (*"The Pitchfork of History," p. 26*) teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of "How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States."

Natalie Meade (*The Talk of the Town, p. 16*) is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

Raymond Antrobus (*Poem, p. 36*) is the author of "The Perseverance" and "All the Names Given." His forthcoming poetry collection, "Signs, Music," is due out next year.

Daniel Clowes (*Cover*), a cartoonist and an illustrator, is the author of, most recently, the graphic novel "Monica."

Patricia Marx (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 25*) is a staff writer. Her children's book "Tired Town," illustrated by Roz Chast, was published earlier this month.

Nathan Heller (*"Spectacular Fall," p. 30*), a staff writer since 2013, is at work on a book about the Bay Area.

Eli Hager (*"Fierce Attachments," p. 18*) reports on children, young people, and families in the Southwest. This article is a collaboration between *The New Yorker* and ProPublica.

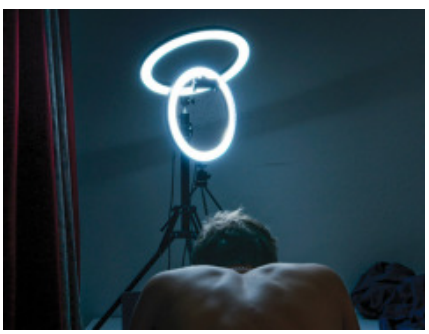
Ruth Margalit (*Comment, p. 11*), a former member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff, is a contributing writer for the New York *Times Magazine*. She is based in Tel Aviv.

Han Ong (*Fiction, p. 56*) is a playwright and the author of the novels "Fixer Chao" and "The Disinherited."

Roz Chast (*Sketchbook, p. 49*), a longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist, will publish her forthcoming book, "I Must Be Dreaming," later this month.

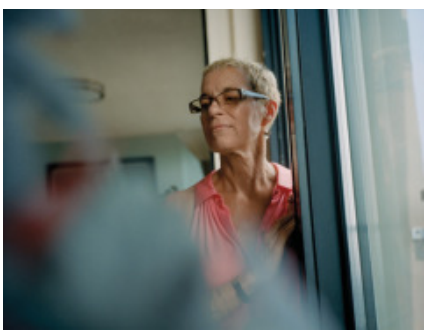
Traci Brimhall (*Poem, p. 60*) is the current poet laureate of Kansas. Her next book, "Love Prodigal," will be published in 2024.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



### VIDEO DEPT.

In Faye Tsakas and Enrique Pedraza Botero's documentary, "Alpha Kings," teen boys seek wealth on OnlyFans.



### PERSONS OF INTEREST

Eleni Schirmer on the organizer Jane McAlevey, whose radical methods power the modern labor movement.

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LEFT: FAYE TSAKAS A / ENRIQUE PEDRAZA BOTERO; RIGHT: SARA MESSINGER

# THE MAIL

## BEAUTY IN RUINS

Sam Knight's article about the architect Pavels Hedström, who prioritizes climate concerns in his design work, brought to mind a group of self-sustaining houses near Taos, New Mexico, called Earthships ("Designing the Apocalypse," September 25th). Earthships—developed by Michael Reynolds—are an example of how architecture that addresses ecological issues can still be beautiful, and of how beauty might even be inevitable when a designer thinks seriously about nature in the design process. The houses are lovely, despite having been made under demanding constraints: built largely from reclaimed materials, they gather their own water, generate their own electricity, heating, and cooling, and even grow a lot of their inhabitants' food. Knight doesn't emphasize the beauty of Hedström's designs, but it strikes me that we shouldn't forget about this quality while carrying out the important work of responding to climate change.
*Neil Dale*
*Bedford, Mass.*

## SOCIETY AND MOTHERHOOD

As a child-free woman, I took issue with some of the points that Merve Emre made in her review of "Mom Rage," Minna Dubin's memoir (Books, September 25th). Emre says that "relatively privileged" mothers like Dubin can "know" that they have "chosen" their "unfreedom." But this glosses over the extent to which our society pushes girls and women toward motherhood, in both subtle and not so subtle ways. Emre also questions Dubin's assertion that mothers are expected to "say nothing" about their frustrations. If Emre doubts the existence of what Dubin describes (admittedly vaguely) as "Motherhood's PR team," I'd be happy to introduce her to the many people I know who fit the bill: well-meaning relatives, acquaintances, and strangers who espouse to me the virtues of having children, insisting that if I don't change my mind I will regret it. As for complaining about motherhood, it is not uncommon for new mothers to be permitted to talk about how hard it is; it's also not uncommon for them to be judged if they don't then say, "It's all worth it."
*Lindsey Harrington*
*Dartmouth, Nova Scotia*

## PACKING HEAT

As an unabashed fan of pockets, I enjoyed Hua Hsu's piece about Hannah Carlson's history of them (Books, September 25th). I am a woman, and when I joined the Marine Corps, in 1972, my dress uniform had a tiny, useless shirt pocket. I was also issued a big black handbag that started to fall apart before my four years were up. I was not allowed to carry that monster in formation, and I once came back to it to find my wallet missing. (It turned up in the men's-room trash, fifty dollars lighter.) Since then, I've kept my belongings in pants or shirt pockets—as I say, never, in all the escapades of my youth, did I manage to lose my pants. But Hsu was right to point out the shockingly small proportions of the pockets on women's jeans. When I received a bunch of hand-me-downs recently, I took off the back pockets and replaced them with ones from old Levi's. I also grafted pockets onto the front, so that those extend halfway down to my knees. I add an extra pocket to shirts that have only one. Right now, the pockets on my pants hold a wallet (right back); checkbook, pen, and handkerchief (left back); keys (right front); and change, lip balm, and a little case for my hearing aids (left front). In my shirt: some thumb drives (right), and to-do and grocery lists (left). I make my own undershirts, and those have pockets, too. I don't have a cell phone, but if I ever get one I will make a pocket for it.
*Hazel Beeler*
*Newport, Va.*

•

*Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.*

# GOINGS ON

OCTOBER 18 – 24, 2023

*What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.*

Most of the shiniest offerings on this year's fall dance calendar come courtesy of Dance Reflections, a sprawling new two-month festival sponsored by Van Cleef & Arpels. The tilt is French and experimental, as exemplified by the **Ballet National de Marseille,** directed by the upstart collective (La)Horde. Their "Room with a View," at N.Y.U. Skirball (Oct. 20-21), made with the composer Rone, is a club dance of despair that pushes through to hope. But, first, **Lyon Opera Ballet** kicks off the festival, at New York City Center (Oct. 19-21), with a gem of American postmodernism: Lucinda Childs's "Dance." That 1979 work is, like its Philip Glass score, both minimal and maximal, tracing insistent patterns. A re-creation of Sol LeWitt's original film, magnified on a scrim, mounts the current performance in a vintage setting.—*Brian Seibert*

AGATHE POUPENEY

## ABOUT TOWN

**THE THEATRE** | The director Maria Friedman's ravishingly sweet revival of **"Merrily We Roll Along,"** Stephen Sondheim and the book writer George Furth's famously flopped 1981 musical (which moves to Broadway from New York Theatre Workshop), gives the bitter text the spoonful of sugar it desperately needed. In "Merrily," time reverses, so we see three doomed friends progress from a final, irreparable fracture to their first, innocent pledge on a rooftop, swearing to be dear to one another forever. The world's most lovable trio—Daniel Radcliffe (funny when furious, funnier in love), Jonathan Groff (seraphic, incandescent), and Lindsay Mendez (her voice flashing like a sabre)—play Charley, Frank, and Mary, but also, somehow, the tenderness we feel for our younger selves. Surely here is "Merrily" 's definitive version; at the least, it's how we'll measure the musical's promises, past and future.—*Helen Shaw (Hudson Theatre; through March 24.)*

**OPERA** | In 2014 and 2015, R. B. Schlather staged a Handel series for a Lower East Side gallery space, far from the classical-music locus of Lincoln Center. Now he's inaugurating a series of the composer's work even farther afield, in upstate New York. A director known for his spare style and intentional process (the public was invited to attend rehearsals of those gallery performances), Schlather stages Handel's beautifully crafted **"Rodelinda"** in a nineteenth-century building, with sets by the same construction company that restored it. Ruckus, a Baroque ensemble that plays without a conductor, accompanies a cast led by Keely Futterer, Sun-Ly Pierce, and Karim Sulayman.—*Oussama Zahr (Hudson Hall, Hudson, New York; select dates Oct. 20-29.)*

**FOLK** | **Faye Webster** established an eye-rolling ethos for her music on the 2019 song "Jonny": "This wasn't 'posed to be a love song / But I guess it is now," she mutters, the words barely creeping out of her mouth. Since 2013, the Atlanta-born artist has written about love as if embarrassed by its monotony and predictability, threading quiet, quirky narratives that have spun off into their own awkward, droll romantic microverse. She performs as if she's sulking, with lyrics that reflect an insulated overthinker swept up in her own imagination. A folk sound with muted R. & B. flourishes lends Webster's "sad songs"—a distinction given by her mother, on "Hurts Me Too"—a bittersweet tinge, as she tries to appease the longings of an achy, breaky heart.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Steel; Oct. 23-25.)*

**MOVIES** | With **"The Pigeon Tunnel,"** a feature-length interview of the octogenarian David Cornwell, a.k.a. John le Carré (who died in 2020), the philosophical documentarian Errol Morris happily descends with the supreme novelist of espionage into rabbit holes of duplicity and fabulation. The film is centered on two key aspects of Cornwell's life: his childhood and youth under the reckless influence of his father, Ronald, a gambler and a con man, and his adult activities as an agent in the British Secret Service. In both these spheres, Cornwell was initiated in deceptions and betrayals high and low, and he adorns his suspenseful and colorful stories with acute analyses of the psychology of liars and traitors. Morris's signature dramatic reënactments, though skillfully rendered, are more superfluous than ever: Cornwell conjures alluring images with the literary power of his voice alone.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Apple TV+ starting Oct. 20.)*

**ART** | The XXL MOMA retrospective **"Ed Ruscha / Now Then,"** comprising some two hundred works produced between the Eisenhower years and the present, includes countless burning things, as lowbrow as a diner and as la-di-da as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The strangest aspect of these fires, other than their quantity, is their calm. Ruscha's work—preoccupied with mass media and using a tool kit of bright colors, logos recognizable even when fragmented, and language that could mean any number of things but is also a thing itself—is universal yet cozily regional. Language and, indeed, the entire national order seem perpetually on the verge of collapse, yet never actually collapse. We might as well enjoy them, glitches and all.—*Jackson Arn (Reviewed in our issue of 10/9/23.) (MOMA; through Jan. 13.)*

**DANCE** | For **American Ballet Theatre's** fall season, the company rolls out several one-act works, paired in interesting ways. A single program might include a sparkling display of virtuosity and grandeur, such as Balanchine's 1941 "Ballet Imperial" alongside Frederick Ashton's 1964 "The Dream," a mischievous and touching précis of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Or it may put the newly relevant "On the Dnipro" (2009), by Alexei Ratmansky—about a Ukrainian soldier who returns home after the First World War—together with the meditative, fluid "Single Eye" (2022), by Alonzo King, set to a score by the jazz pianist Jason Moran.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; Oct. 18-29.)*


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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Fong On
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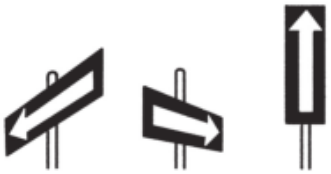
For lovers of bean curd—this is true love we're talking about—silken tofu is one of the happiest things to eat. Made from soaked soybeans ground with water into soy milk, then allowed to coagulate and pressed into the desired consistency, soft tofu mimics dairy in appearance, texture, and richness while delivering a clean, impartial flavor that evokes freshness itself. Served alone, stewed in a fiery Sichuan mapo tofu or Korean *sundubu-jjigae,* or as the centerpiece of Japanese *agedashidōfu* (deep-fried and coddled in dashi and bonito flakes), silken tofu is a vegan underdog hero in the pantheon of proteins. Delightfully, there's even more pleasure to be found, in an even softer, silkier iteration, a traditional Chinese preparation called *daufu fa,* or tofu pudding—which can be found extremely fresh at Paul Eng's shop, Fong On, in Manhattan's Chinatown.

Fong On has been in Eng's family since the original opened on Mott Street, in 1933; for decades, it sold tofu up and down the Eastern Seaboard, "because there weren't many manufacturers," Eng told me. "Even Philadelphia didn't have their own tofu." But Asian communities—Chinese in particular—as they grew, started making their own, and business slowed; by 2017, Eng's brother closed the shop's doors. Eng, the fifth son, had cycled through many artistic pursuits—from rock guitarist to photographer living in Moscow for a decade—and in 2019 he reopened the store, with a savvy spin: go small.

Beneath the rumbling train on the Manhattan Bridge, Eng's Chinatown store is a beacon in gleaming white subway tile and small-batch *daufu fa*. Eng, who had originally intended to serve the pudding as he had grown up eating it—warm and drizzled with nothing more than brown-sugar syrup, in the custom of his ancestral province of Guangdong—discovered a new style, with toppings, on a trip to Taiwan. And so, alongside bottled soy milk and chewy, sweet rice cakes (in matcha, ginger, coconut), Eng offers sweet and savory tofu puddings with an array of toppings. The Savory Tofu Pudding is topped with tart pickled radish, crunchy fried shallots, scallions, sesame oil, mild chili sauce, and the only non-vegan item in the store, funky dried shrimp. For a sweet treat, try the Can't Go Wrong! (dense taro balls, lightly herbaceous grass jelly, and sweet red beans) or the addictive Snap, Crackle, and Pop, with crystalline *aiyu* jelly, fruity rainbow jelly ("kind of like Swedish fish," Eng explained), and tapioca boba.

Eng sells his soy milk and tofu wholesale, but only to a handful of restaurants, some of which have Michelin stars (Eleven Madison Park, Contra). When asked what distinguishes his tofu, Eng demurred. "It's not like I do anything special. It's just that I care about what things taste like, for myself and to other people." *(Tofu pudding starts at $5.50.)*

*—Shauna Lyon*



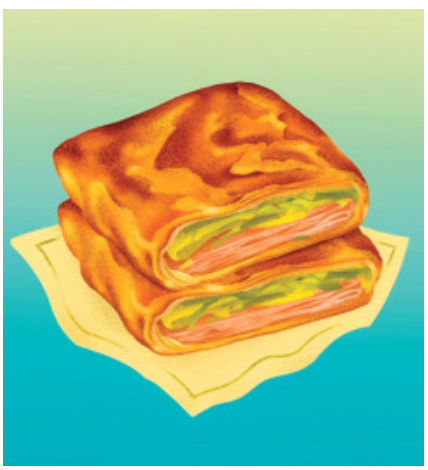
## PICK THREE

*The staff writer Helen Rosner picks three perfect breakfast sandwiches.*

**1. The Breakfast Sandwich at Court Street Grocers:** To my surprise, and delight, the best of several breakfast sandwiches here (at any of four locations) is the version without meat. It's the eggs that make it such a joy: they're fluffy, melty, buttery, tender without being runny. I'd frost a cake with them, if I could. Heaped onto a ciabatta roll and enrobed in melted white Cheddar, they attain a multidimensional richness that genuinely changed my relationship to scrambled eggs.

**2. NEO on a Bialy at Barney Greengrass:** At this century-old Upper West Side appetizing shop, you'll find the NEO, which mixes eggs and onion with Nova salmon, instead of the much saltier, much more face-punchy belly lox used in the perhaps more famous LEO. Nova is sweeter, more subtle, an elegant counterpart to sautéed onion, and its gentler texture is far more lovely against the eggs. Get a toasted bialy on the side, and pile on as much of the scramble as the bread will hold.

**3. The Mortadella Pancake at Win Son Bakery:** The honest truth is that the best breakfast meat is mortadella. Velvety and savory, a stylish gentleman's pink, the rich emulsion of pork and spices is unmatched as a complement to the similarly voluptuous flavors of egg and cheese. At this Taiwanese American spot in East Williamsburg, silk-thin slices of mortadella join a crêpe-like scrambled egg, melty raclette, and pickly hot peperoncini. It's all wrapped in an enormous flaky scallion pancake, a perfect contrapunto to the unctuousness of its contents.



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THE NEW YORKER

# THE TALK OF THE TOWN

## COMMENT
### WAR TORN

In 1956, a group of armed Palestinian and Egyptian men ambushed a young Israeli officer in the wheat fields of Nahal Oz, a kibbutz in southern Israel, near the border with the Gaza Strip. They shot him, dragged his body into Gaza, then returned it, mutilated, to the kibbutz. The next day, Moshe Dayan, the Israeli military's chief of staff, delivered a short but searing eulogy, standing over the officer's grave. "The quiet of a spring morning blinded him, and he did not see the stalkers of his soul," Dayan said. Alluding to the Biblical story of Samson, he added, "Have we forgotten that this group of young people dwelling at Nahal Oz is bearing the heavy gates of Gaza on its shoulders?"

At 6:31 A.M. last Saturday, the heavy gates of Gaza tore open again. Some fifteen hundred Gazan fighters led by Hamas bulldozed the border fence, stormed into Israel, and perpetrated some of the worst atrocities in the country's short but bloodied history. In Nahal Oz, a thirteen-year-old boy who had gone on an early-morning run returned home to find his parents and his two sisters slaughtered. Many neighboring families were murdered with similar brutality. Others were abducted and taken into Gaza, the injured displayed like spoils of war. At the nearby kibbutz Kfar Aza, the bodies of residents, including children, were recovered on Tuesday; there were "cribs overturned," an eyewitness said. A scorched smell still hung in the air. "It's something I never saw in my life, something more like a pogrom from our grandparents' time," an Israeli commander told reporters.

Within days, that trauma and outrage had come to coexist with a bombing of Gaza and an enormous civilian effort to provide survivors from the border communities with food and shelter. The Israel Defense Forces summoned roughly three hundred and sixty thousand reservists, and many more have volunteered for service—laying aside, for now, the deep divisions that have roiled the country since January, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's extremist government introduced controversial steps to curb judicial oversight of its powers.

As Israel struck Gaza from the air in full force—and cut off all food, water, and electricity to the coastal strip—and as the fate of an estimated hundred and fifty hostages remained unknown, there were growing calls in Israel to "pulverize" Hamas, as one security analyst put it. The rage is understandable; the implications of such statements, less so. The newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* reported on Wednesday that Israel has been mobilizing for a possible ground invasion, under the command of a former head of its Gaza Division. Sixteen members of Netanyahu's coalition signed a letter this week calling for "total Israeli control of the Gaza Strip."

In 2005, after years of repeated attacks and violence, Israel withdrew its military from Gaza and uprooted Jewish settlements there. A military reoccupation now would only incur further mass casualties at a time when Israel is still counting its dead. It would also play directly into the hands of Israel's archenemy—Iran—by taking an unimaginable toll on Palestinian lives. This could force Iran's proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah, to enter the conflict, potentially dragging the wider region into war.

Israel faces an impossible dilemma: how to restore a measure of security and deterrence while also insuring the safe return of the hostages. But it risks falling victim to the optics of war by sending troops to reinvade Gaza, thereby creating an illusion of victory. As Israel's former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett—hardly a dovish figure—put it on Tuesday, "We shouldn't dance to the tune of Hamas, of Iran. We shouldn't do the obvious."

The problem is that, in Netanyahu, Israel has a leader who has repeatedly placed his own political survival above

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

the good of his country. As Hamas launched its devastating assault on Saturday, it reportedly took him less than an hour to scuttle an offer from the opposition to form an emergency unity government. The Prime Minister did not visit the sites of the atrocities. He does not appear to have gone to the hospitals to comfort the grieving families, and he did not take responsibility for his part in the colossal intelligence failure. He did not mention that in the days leading up to the attack three military battalions had been diverted away from the southern communities and into the occupied West Bank, to guard Jewish settlers there.

Instead, Netanyahu sent an emissary to speak to the media—Yossi Shelley, the director-general of the Prime Minister's office, a man few Israelis had heard of before. Asked to explain the government's slow response to the attack, Shelley said that the attendees of a music festival in the desert—two hundred and sixty of whom were slain—had "contributed in a significant way to the chaos."

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden spoke out forcefully against the atrocities. "Infants in their mothers' arms, grandparents in wheelchairs, Holocaust survivors abducted and held hostage—hostages whom Hamas has now threatened to execute in violation of every code of human morality," he said. The Pentagon ordered a Navy carrier strike group to the eastern Mediterranean, to protect Israel. Nadav Eyal, a columnist for *Yediot*, praised Biden's speech for projecting what had been missing from Netanyahu's response—empathy. The next day, Netanyahu finally agreed to the terms of a unity government with the centrist leader Benny Gantz. Those terms leave Netanyahu's far-right partners in the government but create a war cabinet that includes only Netanyahu, Gantz, and Israel's relatively moderate defense minister, Yoav Gallant. By day five, the Israeli military had retaken control of the last of twenty-two sites to have come under attack. Some communities had been entirely vacated, with surviving inhabitants saying that they're not sure they will ever go back. In Kfar Aza, the scenes of massacre inside homes were belied by the picture of an idyll that somehow still prevailed outdoors: tidy lawns, strollers, picnic tables.

When Dayan delivered his eulogy in 1956, he warned kibbutz residents on the Gaza border against a false sense of complacency. "Beyond the furrow of the border, a sea of hatred and desire for revenge is swelling, awaiting the day when serenity will dull our path," he said. It's hard to imagine serenity ever returning to the area. But the desire for revenge should not overflow.

*—Ruth Margalit*

## ON THE *STREETS*
## GUERRILLA GRAFTERS

It's harvest season, but the branches of the more than eight hundred and sixty-one thousand trees that line the streets of New York City aren't bearing much fruit. Like plumbing and public libraries, the city's London plane trees, paperbark maples, and purple-leaf plums are an urban innovation—engineered to maximize shade and minimize mess. "The city doesn't like fruit trees," Marisa Prefer, a self-described "street-tree steward," said recently, looking up at a plumless plum tree in Brooklyn. Prefer is part of an anonymous collective known as the Guerrilla Grafters, which hopes to change the city's canopy. Their mission: "We aim to turn city streets into food forests, and unravel capitalist civilization one branch at a time."

Flash back to the springtime, when Prefer, who is nonbinary and wore double-kneed work pants and mud-caked trail runners, brandished a pair of pruning shears at a plum tree. They said, "What if everyone had an apple tree in front of their house instead of having to go buy apples at the store?" Prefer snipped a low branch, then used black electrical tape to graft a gnarly twig of rosy-gage scionwood in its place. (Scionwood is a twig cutting used to propagate trees.) It had been cut from a fruit tree near Ithaca, New York, and had arrived via mail in a cardboard box. In a few years, the twig might grow into a branch drooping with plums. "I don't want to compare it to human organ donors, but it's like getting a new appendage," they said. "I'm hoping that it takes!"

Prefer went on, " 'Guerrilla' is not just a chic term we use. It's supposed to be a little bit secret." There haven't been any arrests, they said, but, technically, grafting on city property is illegal.

A couple of novices had tagged along on an expedition to turn a Brooklyn neighborhood into an orchard. Prefer's friend Morgan Dewey wore a red beanie, L. L. Bean boots, and tan overalls; the other novice took notes. The group had two pairs of shears, several rubber bands, a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, a roll of electrical tape, and a bundle of scionwood. Prefer had brought along a homemade instruction manual. (Tips: "Move fast," "have one person on the lookout," "care for the tree," "have some lines prepared for when people ask what you're doing.")

"Is this legal?" Dewey asked.

Prefer grinned and said, "I'm a citizen pruner, so I can prune street trees with my license. This is, technically, pruning, *and* also adding a little something."

The group walked past a few plane, maple, and honey-locust trees and stopped at a Japanese cherry. There was dog shit beneath it. "Watch your step," Dewey said.

"We shoulda brought a ladder," Prefer said, climbing into the canopy to show the novices how to use a whip-and-tongue graft cut and a rubber band to fasten scionwood to a branch. Next up, a Callery pear tree. Someone kept a lookout; Dewey used an X-Acto knife to make a notch in the scionwood and attached it to a branch. In a few years, Prefer hoped, it would produce small-necked Seckel pears.

Dewey had some ambivalence about grafting. "You're, like, playing God," she said. "I mean, I don't believe in God, but it's this whole idea that we're gonna fuck with something and create something else. I feel a little *eeeeugch*." She added, "I feel like I'm meddling."

"Yep, and we are no matter what we do," Prefer said. "Just walking down the street, we're meddling. There's been so much meddling over the years since

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this land was taken from the people who lived here." They added that the Lenape weren't only hunter-gatherers, as some had once thought, but farmers, who cultivated plants.

A few blocks away, the group found another cherry tree. Its branches were full of garbage: a wadded plastic bag, a padlock, a half-full Starbucks cup.

"This looks like a macchiato," Prefer said, inspecting the cup. "Oh, it's actually an iced mocha quad. For Damien?"

Dewey said, "Fuck Damien. It's disgusting. Seven pumps of white mocha. I don't even know what that means—"

"That's a lot of white mocha," Prefer said.

Dewey threw the cup in a trash bin, and Prefer grafted some Empress-plum scionwood to the tree. Then they called a hotline—1-888-GRRRAFT—that had been set up by a guerrilla grafter for collaborators to leave voice mails about their recent efforts. "Greetings, grafters," the recorded message said. "What sort of tree antics are you up to?" After the beep, Prefer said, "We put some plum on some Japanese flowering cherries. We put some apple on some hawthorn. We did some experimenting!" Across the street, a cherryless cherry tree's branches swayed in the breeze.

*—Adam Iscoe*

## THE MUSICAL LIFE

### DISBANDING

It was Sunday lunchtime in the Bois de Boulogne, and two members of the Emerson String Quartet were taking a break from their farewell tour. "It's nice to walk somewhere without a cello on your back," Paul Watkins, the cellist, said, in a sunlit grove of horse-chestnut trees. The night before, at the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the quartet had played its final concert in France—Schoenberg, Hindemith, Ravel—and Watkins and Eugene Drucker, one of the violinists, were going back to take another look.

"This is an unusually leisurely pace for us," Drucker said. "We're playing in Milan on Tuesday, Turin on Wednesday, then back to the U.S. on Thursday."

"But then it's really sort of a sprint to the finish," Watkins, who was sweating slightly in a blue checked shirt and claret-colored trousers, said. "After we get back, we've got—oh, my God, the glamour never stops. We're going to Cleveland!"

"There's a lot of nostalgia in some places, knowing that it's the last time," Drucker, who wore a faded black T-shirt tucked into jeans, said. "I've never believed that I'm addicted to being onstage, to needing my fix. Yet I'm afraid that might actually be the case."

This weekend, the quartet will play its last concerts ever, at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. The group, which formed in 1976, has recorded more than forty albums, including all sixteen Beethoven quartets. (Its swan song, "Infinite Voyage," came out in September.) In a field accustomed to half-full auditoriums, their concerts sell out. It's like when One Direction broke up—except that One Direction never won a Grammy, and the Emersons have nine.

At the Fondation, Drucker and Watkins walked into the auditorium, a large, bright space with windows looking out on a sleekly grandiose fountain. Random bursts of classical music played from hidden speakers. "I remember when we started out, we wanted to have an American name, but not one that was associated with government," Drucker said. He was raised in Washington Heights by an American mother and a German Jewish violinist father, who had been concertmaster of a Frankfurt orchestra and escaped just before Kristallnacht. In the seventies, Drucker was an English major at Columbia and a student at Juilliard, where he met the violinist Philip Setzer. Lawrence Dutton, a viola player, later joined them. "Emerson seemed like the right choice, even though the only thing I'd read was 'Self-Reliance,' in high school," Drucker said.

Watkins, who is fifty-three and grew up in Wales, was tapped to join the quartet in 2013, after its longtime cellist David Finckel left. He moved his family from London to take the gig. "Someone gave me a collection of Emerson after you asked me to join," he told Drucker. "I glanced through it and found a chapter where he was talking about music. It started something like 'The English, of course, have long been an unmusical nation,' and I thought, Fuck you, Emerson!, and put it back on the shelf."

For decades, the Emersons have played dozens of concerts a year. They've done private parties, including one for Paul Newman's eightieth birthday. They spend a lot of time together. "There are moments when I'm supposed to be enjoying playing a great masterpiece, and I'd actually like to be on the couch watching TV with my daughters," Watkins said. "But sometimes, when we're not on tour, I think, I wonder what Gene's doing this evening. You get

*Paul Watkins and Eugene Drucker*

joined in some strange ways—not to get too mystical about it." Chamber musicians pass melodic lines to one another with sways and glances. A whisper of pressure on the beat might mean "Go faster," or "This time with feeling." Watkins turned to Drucker: "You should write an opera, and do the libretto yourself!" Drucker, who has published two novels, murmured something about a third book.

Drucker and Watkins went back outside. After the quartet disbands, Watkins said, "we'll still see each other a lot. We'll keep teaching together at Stony Brook." It was time for lunch, and the Fondation's restaurant had a good *formule déjeuner*. Drucker and Watkins placed their orders and talked about their final program: Beethoven's Opus 130 and Schubert's Quintet in C Major. "Beethoven himself told a friend after he'd composed the piece—he couldn't hear it performed, because he was completely deaf—that every time

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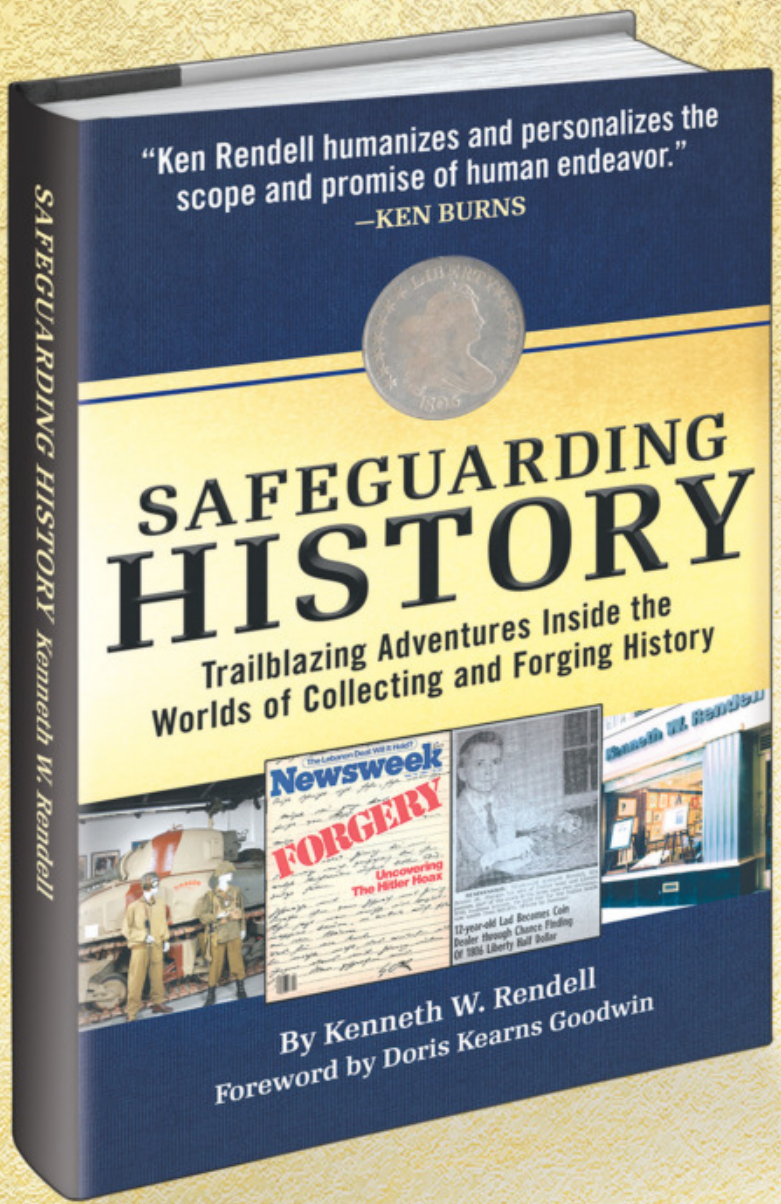


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he thought of the *cavatina* it brought tears to his eyes," Drucker said. "It's a kaleidoscope of different moods and colors. If I had to choose one piece that summed up our experience as a quartet, it would be that."

For Watkins, the Schubert, which requires an invited second cellist, was special: it had been his introduction to the quartet, playing second fiddle to Finckel, and now Finckel would be coming back as the guest. Watkins wasn't feeling too valedictory, though. Orchestras are struggling to fill seats, but both New York shows were sold out. "We're the small mammals among the dinosaurs," he said, munching on a lettuce leaf. "The survivors."

*—Fergus McIntosh*

## THE BOARDS

### BRAID OF LIFE


The playwright Jocelyn Bioh lives around the block from the Good Year African Hair Braiding Salon, on 125th Street and Morningside Avenue, in Harlem. On a recent Wednesday morning, she sat in Nafi Namoro's chair to get a new protective style. Her play "Jaja's African Hair Braiding" was beginning previews at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, and she'd decided on boho mermaid locks for the occasion. "That is a crochet style, which I don't get super often, but I was in the mood," Bioh said. Namoro parted Bioh's hair with a pintail comb and intertwined strands of Kanekalon braiding hair until she'd made a perfect cornrow.

Bioh, who is forty, wore a hunter-green sweater dress and an easy smile. She grew up in Washington Heights, the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants who had high aspirations for their children. "Doctor, lawyer, or schoolteacher, engineer, honorable mention *maybe* to government official," she said. "Those are the big professions that were drilled as markers of American success." Instead, Bioh took dance classes at a local community center, hoping to make it on the sketch show "In Living Color." "I thought I was going to be a Fly Girl," she said. "Then, of course, the show went off the air, and I had to pivot." Dance led to musical theatre and writing plays, including "Nollywood Dreams" and "School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play."

"Oh, there's Whitney!" she said, looking up. Whitney White, one of Bioh's collaborators, had just walked in. Bioh turned to Namoro and said, "This is the one who directed the show, Nafi."

"Next time, make sure my name's in the show," Namoro said, maneuvering a crochet hook to loop wavy dreadlocks around the cornrows.

"She said we should have named the play 'Nafi's African Hair Braiding,'" Bioh told White. "I said, 'Next time.'"

White laughed. She'd taken the A train from Brooklyn to compare notes with Bioh about the first performance. She wore all black and carried a Vuitton Speedy bag. Her natural hair was twisted and pinned back. "You make me wanna get crochet now," she said.

Did the two have early hair inspirations? "Brandy," Bioh said. "It was all about Brandy."

"She was a brown-skinned girl with the braids," White said. "That was the time when studies were coming out where we couldn't wear braids to work. She was in school, she had a life—that was a game changer." She went on, "Do you remember when Vivica A. Fox had the micros? And Queen Latifah would do the braids? That was kind of a renaissance of Blackness."

In a distressing bit of circularity, two weeks before the previews for "Jaja" started, a high school near Houston made the news when it suspended a junior named Darryl George for wearing dreadlocks in a bun to school. (The school said the hair style violated the district's dress code because it was too long, and recently transferred George to a disciplinary program.) "It's abhorrent," Bioh said. "They're worried about hair, when there's school shootings."

The pair began discussing their go-to protective styles. "I like a *medium-long* ombré box braid," White said.

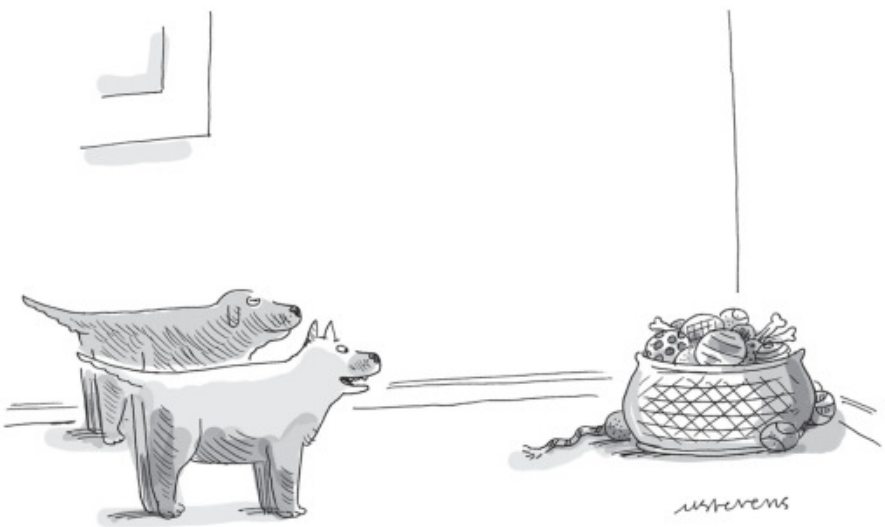
"I like large box braids, in No. 1, always," Bioh said, referring to a shade on the Kanekalon color chart. "Jet black, midnight. They want me to experiment with color. I will not do it."

"I don't want to ruin it, but there's a Beyoncé moment in the show," White said. "It's iconic. And there was an extra wig, and we draped it over Ms. Jocelyn, and she looked amazing."

"No, thank you," Bioh said.

The play takes place in the course of twelve hours at a Harlem salon. (For complicated styles, braiders can spend eight hours working on a customer's hair.) White and Bioh had all the actors learn how to braid. "We had a really incredible hair-braiding consultant. Hair by Susy is her official name," Bioh said. "She is probably the first hair braider to be credited on a Broadway show."

"We had a whole room next to our rehearsal room reserved for hair styling, braiding, practice, wig creation," White said.



*"Wow! I knew you were rich, but I didn't know you were <u>that</u> rich!"*

Namoro was almost done; Bioh had been there for two hours. The salon hummed with hair dryers. A few women in traditional dress spoke French. The owners of Good Year African Hair Braiding are from neighboring countries, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. Bioh said that, for the play, she decided that the stylists would be from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and all over West Africa.

*Jocelyn Bioh*

"That's the part that's probably most fictional," Bioh said. "A lot of times when I go to hair-braiding shops, they're from the same region or speak the same version of Wolof. But I really wanted to reflect all the hair braiders that I've had from various countries. It helps support why everybody in the play is speaking English, because they don't all speak the same language. I think that's important for audiences to know, especially those who think Africa is one big country."

*—Natalie Meade*

## DREAM JOB DEPT.
## NUMERO UNO

On any given workday, downtown Manhattan teems with ambitious transplants, many of them aspiring hot shots fresh out of college. The other afternoon, Litzy Santana, a twenty-two-year-old who graduated from Texas State in August, set up a red tent at Pier 17 for a day's work at her dream job. White letters on her black T-shirt declared her title: "CHIEF UNO PLAYER"—as in the multicolor, match-based card game made by Mattel. Two months earlier, on TikTok, Santana had seen a call for applicants for the temporary position and responded within minutes. Soon she was in New York for the first time. "Honestly, it could've been in the middle of nowhere and I would've applied," she said. "It's an *Uno job*."

For four hours a day, four days a week, Santana had been filming promos and luring passersby to try Uno Quatro, a new Uno variant that involves connecting four tiles with matching numbers or colors on an upright grid. For this she was being paid the handsome and branding-aligned salary of forty-four hundred and forty-four dollars and forty-four cents a week—more than even most of her apprentice stock-trading contemporaries were making. She demonstrated her pitch: "It combines the concept of four in a row"—*not* Connect 4, a Hasbro property—"with the magic of Uno." A nearby security guard seemed intrigued. "You'll get tired of my spiel," Santana warned.

Santana, who wore Capri jeans and sparkly eyeshadow, was once known at her Austin high school for always carrying an Uno deck; she owns more than seventy iterations. (But not the mobile version: "I try to stay away from my phone.") She was five days shy of completing her marketing degree when TikTok's algorithm fed her Uno's chief-seeking missive. She dashed off a video highlighting her credentials in one take, ending it with aplomb: "Do I call Uno or does Uno call me?" The clip had drawn just ten likes before Santana received a direct message from the game's official account. "I literally replied, 'No way, OMG,'" she said. Her mom couldn't believe it, either: "She was, like, Did no one else apply?" Santana gave notice to the granite company where she worked as an administrator and prepared to relocate. Mattel set her up with a studio apartment in the area, sparing her one undignified New York rite. "I was ready to live in a shoebox," she said.

A middle-aged couple eyed a sandwich board alerting pedestrians that Mattel might be recording. Santana invited them to play. "If you beat me, you get a free hat," she said. "Never before seen, never to be seen again." The hat was black, with "UNO" stitched diagonally in sans-serif font. The woman took a seat. Santana asked her companion to join. "You'll double your chances of a hat," she said. Alas, Santana exploited a tactical error to defeat her guests with one of the game's "swap" tiles.

"Oh, dear," the woman said. "I contributed to my own demise."

Santana estimated that she won only two-thirds of the games, but many were routs. "Some go by really fast," she said, smiling diplomatically. "Other times, I get smoked by a six-year-old."

A woman and a child walked by in matching hot-pink outfits, from the direction of the pop-up Malibu Barbie Café. Intra-Mattel interaction was minimal. "I used their bathroom," Santana said. Among her other demonstration sites: MOMA, Central Park, a "Tonight Show" taping, Little Island. She learned how to pronounce Houston Street ("The Texan in me was furious") and to shed her natural warmth in public for a New Yorker's protective indifference ("Now I don't say 'Thank you'—just kidding"). Somehow, she had managed not to see a single rat. "I would cry," she said.

More challengers came and went, with mixed results. A cheery young couple was cheerily dispatched. A curly-haired tyke prevailed. One woman strode up in a huff. Santana recognized her as a repeat visitor. "You're going down," the woman said, not appearing to be joking. A few tiles plunked. "That would be game," Santana announced, triumphantly. A stylish, college-aged trio arrived. One of them, with a flop-topped undercut, asked how someone becomes Chief Uno Player. "Luck," Santana said. A minute or two later, he won; he and one of his companions shrieked.

"So is he the new chief?" their friend asked.

Santana's reign—or, at least, her post—would indeed end soon, at the conclusion of (what else?) her fourth week. She had loved her stint as a New Yorker, but wasn't planning on sticking around: her flight back to Texas was the next day. "I'm more of a living-on-a-farm girl," she said.

*—Dan Greene*

*Alicia Johansen and Fred Thornton didn't realize they were competing for their son.*

RACHEL WOOLF

ANNALS OF LAW

# Fierce Attachments

*How foster parents are battling birth families for custody.*

BY ELI HAGER

Alicia Johansen spent her childhood moving with her drug-addicted mom from one place to the next, trying to brace herself for the moment when the water and the electricity would get cut off. So at twenty-two, when she had a chance to run Dolittle's pool hall, in the ranching town of Akron, Colorado, she was intent on making some money. She kept the bar open deep into the night, after the older guys who bet on horse races departed, and the truckers and the younger crowd, with the meth, drifted in. Meth, she soon discovered, helped her work longer hours.

An occasional customer was Fred Thornton, a former high-school baseball star in his early thirties. Fred was sometimes a roofer and at other times unemployed and homeless. They began dating casually and using together, and he told her of his own complicated childhood: placed in foster care as a toddler, after allegations of neglect, and later adopted.

Alicia's period was irregular because of the meth, which also dimmed her self-awareness. She was six months along before she realized that she was pregnant; a month after that, she woke up in pain. She had preeclampsia, which caused dangerously high blood pressure, and needed an immediate C-section. She was airlifted to a hospital in Denver, a hundred miles away. Her and Fred's son, Carter James Thornton, was born on August 6, 2019—two and a half months premature, two and a half pounds in weight, and, according to his lab work, exposed to meth and to THC.

That first week at the hospital, Alicia hovered over Carter, who was curled beneath a web of tubes and wires, before going home to get baby things. The third week, she and Fred visited their son and held him skin-to-skin. The fourth week, back in Akron, they faltered: they had no gas money for a return to the big city; they were bickering; they were high. On the fifth week, when Carter was stable enough to leave the neonatal intensive-care unit, Alicia returned, but foster parents from Akron were the ones who took him home.

Carter's drug exposure and his parents' weeks-long absence had triggered a call to child-protective services, and then a neglect case against Alicia and Fred in the juvenile court of Washington County, where they lived. To get their son back, the judge informed them, they'd need to take a series of steps laid out by the county's human-services department: pass random urinalysis drug tests, with missed ones considered positives; secure stable housing and employment; and make it to regular supervised visits with Carter. During the next three months, as the department steadily recorded Alicia and Fred's positive drug tests and missed visits, none of their excuses were entertained, a hard line for which they would later be grateful. In December, they decided that if they wanted to raise their child together—and they did—they would have to get sober for good.

By the summer of 2020, Alicia and Fred had met every one of the judge's requirements, and then some. They'd tested negative on more than thirty consecutive drug screens between them, including hair-follicle tests that indicated how long they'd been clean. They had continued to visit Carter weekly through the first months of the pandemic, when a "visit" meant trying to entertain an infant over Zoom. Fred took a job as a maintenance man for the county, installing plumbing in low-income housing and mowing the fairgrounds. Alicia left bar work, and began delivering mail for the U.S. Postal Service and manning the deli counter at a grocery store on her days off. They spent much of what they earned replacing carpets, repainting walls, and fogging air ducts to remove any lingering trace of meth from their one-story house, which,

before Carter's arrival, at times lacked water and electricity. They had completed parenting lessons and were in therapy, getting support for their sobriety and learning how to be better partners to each other. In other words, the foster-care system, whose goal under federal law is to be temporary, in service of a family reuniting, seemed to be working.

As the couple hit six months sober, the county's Department of Human Services added, and the judge approved, one more element to their treatment plan: an expert evaluation of how well they interacted with Carter. If they cleared this last hurdle, Alicia and Fred understood, the system would let them reclaim their son. Alicia worried in advance about whether she could be silly with her baby while under scrutiny, and with everything to lose. She would have been more anxious had she known the truth: that she and Fred weren't just demonstrating their fitness to care for Carter—they were competing for him. His foster parents, hoping to adopt him, had just weeks earlier embraced an increasingly popular legal strategy, known as foster-parent intervening, that significantly improved their odds of winning the child.

It has become harder and harder to adopt a child, especially an infant, in the United States. Adoptions from abroad plummeted from twenty-three thousand in 2004 to fifteen hundred last year, largely owing to stricter policies in Asia and elsewhere, and to a 2008 Hague Convention treaty designed to encourage adoptions within the country of origin and to reduce child trafficking. Domestically, as the stigma of single motherhood continues to wane, fewer young moms are voluntarily giving up their babies, and private adoption has, as a result, turned into an expensive waiting game. Fostering to adopt is now Plan C, but it, too, can be a long process, because the law requires that nearly all birth parents be given a chance before their rights are terminated. Intervening has emerged as a way for aspiring adopters to move things along and have more of a say in whether the birth family should be reunified.

Intervenors can file motions, enter evidence, and call and cross-examine witnesses to argue that a child would be better off staying with them permanently, even if the birth parents—or other family members, such as grandparents—have fulfilled all their legal obligations to provide the child with a safe home. When Carter's foster parents intervened in the hope of keeping him, they turned to the firm of Tim Eirich, a Denver adoption attorney who charges as much as four hundred dollars an hour and has almost single-handedly systematized intervention in Colorado.

A video of the two-hour parenting evaluation that would help determine who would raise Carter shows Alicia and Fred sitting on the floor of a utilitarian playroom in a government building, smiling, and their son, now almost one, grabbing Fred's baseball cap and chewing on it. Alicia feeds him a bit of red bell pepper, explaining to the evaluator, who sits in a chair just off camera, that an occupational therapist suggested that they introduce Carter to new food textures. Both parents cheer as Carter scootches around, and, intermittently, they answer questions that the evaluator poses in a warm Texas accent. What do they think a successful transition from foster care would look like? How would they characterize Carter's personality? ("Curious," "Easy to soothe.") At one point, Fred confides that the playroom has sparked a memory of his birth mother in a similar space, her black hair down to her waist, shortly before she was erased from his life.

After the visit, the evaluator, a social worker named Diane Baird, made a report to the county. Alicia and Fred were kind to Carter, she noted, and she praised them for remaining sober and being "earnest in their regret" about the mistakes they had made. But she criticized them for repeatedly encouraging Carter to crawl, which he wasn't quite ready to do, and for giving him the bell pepper—actions, Baird said, that betrayed a lack of understanding that he had developmental delays. "Neither parent has the kind of relationship with Carter that will help him feel safe in a new situation," she wrote.

When Alicia read the report, she was bewildered. Did Baird not understand how hard it is to bond with a baby you've been allowed to see for only a few hours a week, while masked, or in fifteen-minute stints on Zoom? And why was Carter's eye contact with her, which Baird had specifically praised during the visit, now described as lacking "affective involvement"? But she and Fred decided to focus on the practical advice that Baird had given them, including not to fall silent around Carter and to face his developmental delays instead of avoiding them.

After a follow-up evaluation a month later, Baird reported that Alicia's knowledge of child development was deepening, and that she and Fred had engaged in imaginative play, as when Fred aced a feeding game by using a toy dinosaur. Nonetheless, Baird opposed Carter's being returned to Alicia and Fred, on the ground that the foster-parent intervenors had reported that he pitched fits and struggled to eat and sleep after seeing them.

Although hired as a consultant by Washington County in this case, Baird had a long-standing independent agenda: helping foster parents across Colorado succeed in intervening and permanently claiming the children they care for. Often working hand in hand with Tim Eirich, she has been called as an expert in, by her count, hundreds of child-welfare cases, and she sometimes evaluates visits between birth families and children without having met them. Baird would not say how many foster-parent intervenor cases she has participated in, but she can recall only a single instance in which she concluded that the intervenors should *not* keep the child. Thinking that particular couple would be weak adoptive parents, she told me, she simply filed no report.

In front of the judge in Carter's case, Baird elaborated on the danger of returning Carter to Alicia and Fred, saying that their visits with him were threatening his primary attachment and causing "a biologic hyperarousal that not only burns calories but self-perpetuates"—a state that becomes worrisome when a child spends "twenty-five to fifty-seven per cent of their time, or whatever," in it. Rupturing a primary attachment could ultimately cause "sociopathy" in a child, she said.

In February, 2021, relying heavily on this expert view, the county moved to permanently terminate Alicia and Fred's parental rights. All that remained was a hearing in which the judge would make a decision, and, as it approached, the couple felt outmatched. Akron being a small town, they knew something about the people who'd been fostering

Carter. Lain Bernhardt, who came from a prominent local ranching family, had once run for mayor. He and his wife, J'Lyn, were teachers, he in the public-school system, she at a Head Start program run by a Methodist church.

They lived on a farm, and Alicia could concede that Carter, now a year and a half old, might have a pretty decent life there. But she also knew that, even at the lowest points of her own childhood, she hadn't wanted to lose her mom forever, as Fred had done. Fred, a Mexican American who had been adopted by a white family, worried that Carter would grow up as tormented about his cultural identity as Fred had been, and as uncertain about whether his birth family fought to keep him. Although he and Alicia sensed that some fix might be in, they promised each other not to give up. Even if they lost, they reasoned, Carter might one day know that he'd been wanted.

In the nineteen-fifties, the British psychoanalyst John Bowlby posited that being separated from a maternal figure in the first years of life warps a child's future ability to form close relationships. He and other psychologists later added nuance to what became known as "attachment theory," taking into account new research, such as a longitudinal study of children who'd spent their early years in residential facilities, which indicated that some children had more resiliency than Bowlby had initially grasped. In the ensuing decades, the idea that breaking off a primary attachment would do lifelong damage became influential in child-development spheres, and eventually infiltrated popular culture. Early in this century, several adoption attorneys "hit on this thing of attachment" and saw its utility, Dale Dove, who co-chairs the Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys' foster-care committee, told me. With the supply of adoptable babies dropping, foster children were becoming a "hot commodity," he said, and he and his colleagues (among them Tim Eirich's law partner Seth Grob) realized that attachment experts could be called into court to argue that foster children needed to remain with their foster parents in order to avoid a severed bond.

In actuality, young children may endure a range of caregiver transitions, including being removed from birth parents and sent to foster care in the first place, or going through a private adoption or a divorce. When the American Academy of Pediatrics reviewed recent research, it concluded that kids who grow up with their birth family or kin are less likely than those who are adopted or are raised in non-kinship foster care to experience long-term separation trauma, behavioral and mental-health problems, and questions of identity. The Trump and Biden Administrations have both pressed states to keep a larger percentage of kids with birth parents or kin. Intervention, a state-level counter-trend, is supported by foster-parents'-rights groups and advocates at national conservative organizations.

Naomi Schaefer Riley, an American Enterprise Institute senior fellow, has criticized the fact that some states extend the year and a half that federal guidelines give birth parents to rehabilitate themselves. Intervention, she says, helps stop that foster-care drift, reduces cavalier reunifications in which children taken away after abuse and neglect are returned to the same circumstances, and clears the path to adoption.

Since 2018, South Carolina's courts and lawmakers have affirmed the right of any state resident to file to adopt any foster child, as well as the right of foster parents to intervene. In 2020, Kentucky amended its law to let foster parents intervene as legal parties in involuntary terminations of birth parents' rights. And this year Florida passed a law saying that if birth parents move to have their child adopted, including by a biological family member, long-term foster parents can intervene to contest that outcome. Kathryn Fort, the director of the Indian Law Clinic at Michigan State University, told me that her practice has faced three sets of intervenors this year, all of them non-Native couples seeking to adopt a Native child.

Colorado has been a pioneering state for intervention thanks mostly to Eirich, the lawyer whose firm represented Carter's foster parents. In 2013, he argued and won a state Supreme Court case that ended almost all limitations on the practice, and in the following five years there was a threefold increase in intervenor cases statewide, according to data from the Colorado Office of Administrative Courts. By 2022, at least twenty-five hundred cases had been filed. A tenth of the state's child-welfare cases now have an intervenor. And with an intervenor, court data indicate, the chance that the birth parents' rights will be terminated surges from seventeen per cent to forty-three per cent. Bruce Boyer, Eirich's former professor at the Loyola University Chicago School of Law, told me that he has become concerned about intervenors "bullying their way" into proceedings in which the termination of parental rights, a grave state power, is on the line.

Eirich's firm represents nine private-adoption agencies across Colorado, and he leads intervenor-training sessions for judges and foster parents. He told me that the idea that he helps adopters-to-be thwart the goal of birth-family reunifications is "absolute bullshit." Most of his clients intervene, he said, primarily in order to help the judge make an informed placement decision: one that considers the child as an individual, instead of prioritizing generalized arguments about biological ties or race. "Colorado empowers people who care about maltreated children to be part of the process," he says.

He routinely relies on Diane Baird, whom his clients sometimes hire directly, or on an attachment expert whom she has trained. Baird told me that she decided to work so closely with Eirich because "he knew how to use me most effectively." They both often argue that birth-family visits are causing a child damaging emotional swings due to attachment issues. "A healthy attachment trumps biology in the first three years of life, period," Baird told me. Later, she e-mailed me something that one of her colleagues likes to say about biological families: "Blood is thicker than water but it's also a better carrier of disease," to which Baird added, "LOL."

It's not acceptable in most family courts to explicitly argue that, if you have more material advantages to provide a child, you should get to adopt him or her. Outside the courtroom, though, intervenors are sometimes less discreet. During a 2021 case meeting, according to a specialist who took notes, a foster parent and Eirich client said, of the prospect of reuniting a baby boy with his biological family, "He's used to being raised by a maternal figure who stays home. We have one and a half acres for him to run around, and they have an apartment."

Another foster parent and Eirich client told me that reuniting a baby girl with her birth mother would mean transitioning her from a "personalized nanny" to a "day-care center with, you know, fifty kids running around, and sleeping on a little cot."

When Carter was ready to leave the hospital, in September, 2019, J'Lyn and Lain Bernhardt walked into his room in the NICU and found Alicia sitting there, seemingly disengaged from her stunningly small child. Alicia jumped up and thanked them for taking in Carter. As they all watched child-safety videos, the Bernhardts did their best to be polite, but they later told me how effortful that had been. "You choose drugs over your child," Lain said, "and my opinion about you is not going to be positive."

The Bernhardts care deeply about children. J'Lyn has focussed her career on early-childhood education, and Lain, in his mayoral campaign, advocated for after-school programs for older kids. But since they got married, as twenty-three-year-olds, in 2015, they haven't had biological children of their own. Realizing that, as they put it, there were plenty of children in this country who needed help, they registered with the county as what is called a foster-to-adopt family, stating their willingness to adopt but agreeing that birth parents must first be given a chance to follow their court-ordered treatment plan. Before Carter, the Bernhardts fostered eight kids, one or two at a time, a draining public service for which they received a monthly payment of around a thousand dollars. In 2018, they adopted one of the children, an eleven-year-old boy. But Carter was their first newborn.

He was so underweight that he needed a special high-calorie formula, which he struggled to consume. "It takes over every part of your body that this is an innocent child, and he is here by himself," J'Lyn told me. Lain said, "People tell you, 'It's foster care . . . it's temporary.'" But nothing about the situation felt temporary, he said.

Within days of learning that Carter, at the hospital, needed foster parents, J'Lyn came to work full of emotion, saying that she needed time off because she was getting a baby who'd be fast-tracked for adoption, according to her supervisor at Head Start. (J'Lyn disputes this account.) Before long, she and Lain bonded with Carter; the first time he sat up and the first time he broke into giggles, they cried.


*"Still, I'd rather be here than at the office."*

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The job of foster parents is inherently difficult on an emotional level. They are told that they're needed because a child's parents have severe and potentially dangerous problems, but also that they should support the ultimate goal of returning the child to those same parents. They're expected to simultaneously love the child and accept that their bond with the child may be broken. And although they may spend all day, every day, with the child, a caseworker usually has more influence than they do in determining what's in the child's best interests. Intervening makes some foster parents—whether they went into the process looking to adopt or arrived at that desire over time—feel less helpless.

When the Bernhardts started Googling intervention, they quickly found Eirich's Web site and many effusive reviews from foster families who had won contested adoptions with his help. "He's the one who fought for us to have this right," Lain told me. But Eirich was too busy to represent them, so they hired his associate Kerry Simpson, with whom Eirich discussed the case as it went along. The Bernhardts, in their motion to intervene, argued that Carter might develop an attachment disorder if separated from them, and said that they were concerned about whether his developmental needs would be handled appropriately if there were a change in caregivers. "Cognitive disability and/or autism is likely," the filing said.

As intervenors, J'Lyn and Lain now had a courtroom standing equal to that of Alicia and Fred, and were allowed to sit in the jury box at hearings. They also began getting visits from Baird, who gave them advice about how to calm Carter when he was stressed. (She would eventually suggest a warm bubble bath, along with setting glow sticks afloat in the tub.) They didn't need to pay for Baird's assistance, because, in this instance, she was working for the county. That was lucky; by 2021, payments to Eirich's firm were consuming their savings.

The problem was that Alicia and Fred would not give up. With the motion to terminate their parental rights hanging over their heads, they hadn't had a single relapse and were arriving at visits "relentlessly on time," as one case evaluation put it. Carter was excited by the interesting homemade toys and sensory materials that Alicia brought for him to play with, another report, by a parenting coach, said. (Shaving cream was a particular delight.) The report noted that Carter turned to Fred for reassurance when he

struggled, and that Fred could reliably make his son laugh.

Another judge, recognizing Fred's transformation, had recently granted him full custody of his other son, Robert, who was twelve years old. But, by now, Fred and Alicia understood why Carter's case was different. A social worker had explained that Eirich and Baird "went around the state together," arguing for the termination of birth-parents' rights, Alicia told me. And she guessed that the county backed the Bernhardts, too, because they'd come forward to foster so many children.

In October, 2021, Alicia and Fred felt a little less pessimistic after the county dropped its motion to terminate their rights, admitting in a court filing that it lacked convincing evidence against them. However, Carter remained in foster care, with no transition home planned. This gave his foster parents more time to make their central argument for keeping him: that after visits with Alicia and Fred Carter would still unravel—slapping and kicking, crying and banging his head against the wall, alternating between sleeplessness and nightmares about monsters.

Arguments involving what's called "post-visit dysregulation" are extremely common in intervenor cases, Allison Green, the legal director of the National Association of Counsel for Children, told me. Although the fits are often interpreted with great authority, she said, "in reality, children may be dysregulated for any number of reasons—perhaps they miss their parent, feel confused, or are simply behaving as toddlers do." Green used to employ the dysregulation claim in her own cases, she said. She now regrets it.

Hearing of Carter's distress, Alicia felt "the most unspeakable feeling of defeat," she told me. "You can't help your baby, but you're also being blamed somehow from afar."

In many intervenor cases, foster parents win after their lawyers undermine the claims of other biological relatives, beyond the parents, who want to keep the child in the family. In 2020, Cynthia Cooley, a home health aide on Long Island, received confirmation after a paternity test that she had a six-month-old grandson in foster care in Weld County, Colorado. At first, she was unsure if she could be the baby's caregiver, or if another relative should do it. And she was hesitant to elbow in on the rights of her son, the baby's father, who had recently been released from jail. But, before her grandchild turned one, Cooley, who is Black, decided to uproot her life to take custody of him. She moved to suburban Atlanta, to be near extended family, and installed a baby gate at the top of the stairs. She completed foster-parenting and first-aid classes, and took a job operating machinery at a warehouse. Because she knew the long history of Black-family separation in America, from the forced removal of enslaved kin to the ongoing problem of race bias in child welfare, she was jarred when a new word appeared in case documents. "I said, 'I know what "intervening" means. . . . The word "intervene" means to interfere,'" she told me.

Eirich was representing the foster-parent intervenors who had custody of Cooley's grandson. Late last year, in a closing argument, he said that Cooley had taken too long to raise her hand. He also cited a report filed by Baird, who'd never met Cooley, which said that her visits with her grandson, for which she was flying in from Atlanta, were disrupting the boy's attachment. The intervenors should keep him permanently, Baird concluded.

The Weld County Department of Human Services strongly objected. In a filing, its counsel wrote, "The obligation of the Department is to try and place with family when it is safe, appropriate and available," and "Grandmother Cynthia Cooley is absolutely that person." But, as Eirich underlined to me, though parents have a constitutional right to their child until such right is terminated, grandparents and other relatives have only a preference under state laws. The judge ruled in favor of Eirich's clients, a social worker and a real-estate agent. "Court found [Baird's] testimony credible. She has significant experience," the judge said, adding approvingly that Baird's analysis had "focused on primacy of attachment over cultural considerations."

Eirich's clients, who are white, emphasized to me that they've fostered multiple children and hadn't been looking to adopt; they were willing to do so in this case to give the boy a sense of permanency. Because they value biological bonds, they said, they've tried to keep Cooley involved. ("The best of both worlds," Eirich likes to say in court.) They offered Cooley a post-adoption agreement that would legally require them to stay in touch with her. Cooley told me she doesn't want a contract. She wants her grandson.

Kathy Hammond, a nurse practitioner in rural Farmington, Missouri, was also told that she had waited too long to step up for her grandson. Yet Hammond had repeatedly called the Colorado Department of Human Services to ask about the boy when he was two months old, in 2017. When he was three and four months old, she pressed his caseworker in e-mails, asking for custody. "What is the process at this point?" she wrote. "Will I hear from you or should I expect to hear from someone else? Is there anything else I can/should be doing to be prepared for baby and court? Should I plan a visit to Colorado to meet [the child] or to meet persons involved?" Then she waited on paper-

*"Voilà. I made your table disappear."*

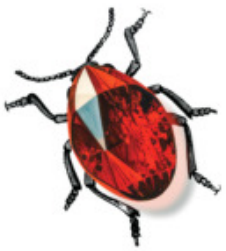
work for a safety inspection of her home, which didn't happen until well into 2018. The delay was somehow tied to the baby's Social Security card.

After more confusion, Hammond started driving fourteen hours each way for court hearings for her grandchild, who was now a year old. She changed for court in the car, then drove all the way back for work. But, she said, she soon learned something that made her heartsick: "The foster family has the best attorney in Denver"—Eirich.

Eirich argued that the boy's developmental and medical issues—including tremors and other abnormal movements—prevented a transition of caregivers, even to a veteran nurse practitioner. Yet his client, a foster mother named Jody Britton, had already had the tremors checked out by multiple doctors. After an EEG, a neurologist at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus reported, "Foster mom still feels that there is something wrong with him but his exam is normal today."

Britton, an evangelical Christian who lives in the Denver suburbs with her husband, a pastor, and has adopted children from Africa, ultimately won permanent custody. She is now a leading advocate for the rights of intervenors like her in Colorado, through a group called Foster Source. As she points out, under a state statute, she was designated as a kinship foster placement because she was close with the birth mother's sister. She says that the blame lies with the county for failing to inform her for a year that Hammond was seeking custody. By then, she said, she understood the boy's medical needs better than another caretaker would. "We intervene so we can sleep at night," she told me. "We need to know we are doing everything we can."

Children with developmental disorders are, unsurprisingly, overrepresented in foster care. Some were exposed to drugs or alcohol in utero, some were neglected after coming into the world. Separation from a birth parent can itself be traumatic, and so can being placed with one foster family after another, as many children are. Sincere concern often drives foster parents to have kids in their care tested for social, emotional, and learning delays and to enroll them in speech, physical, and other therapies. But Paul Spragg, a Colorado forensic psychologist with thirty years' experience with child-welfare cases, told me that, even if there is no formal diagnosis, "intervenors with a view toward adopting a kid have an interest in reporting issues that ultimately make adoption by them more likely." In court, a barrage of tests and therapies often serves the twinned arguments that it's too sensitive a moment to transition the child back to the birth family and that the birth family may be ill prepared to care for the child.



The Bernhardts reported that Carter ate things that he wasn't supposed to, like fuzz from his diaper. In response to this and other developmental concerns raised by the Bernhardts, Carter's caseworker, and experts who had been hired to examine him, the county had him tested in 2021 for autism-spectrum disorder, which the Bernhardts had suggested he had when they first intervened. A clinical psychologist found that he had normal social functioning for his age but that the fuzz-eating could be attributed to pica, a condition marked by eating non-food items, and that other signs of distress might be caused by "upbringing away from parents." Officials also had Carter's brain "mapped" by a local therapist using the "neurosequential model of therapeutics" originally developed by the psychiatrist Bruce Perry; the results proved too murky to be used by either side. Janina Fariñas, another clinical psychologist who evaluated him for the county, told me, "There was almost a need for Carter to not be O.K."

In July, 2022, I watched a hearing in Carter's case held by videoconference. Alicia and Fred, sitting cross-legged on their living-room floor, were frustrated that they couldn't hear, let alone counter, much of what the county's lawyer was saying about them. The judge, for his part, lamented all the medical tests. "We're going to turn this kid into a lab rat," he said. He then told the Bernhardts' lawyer, the Eirich associate, "Sometimes I think your clients are being a little bit coy. They need to flat out say what they want. Are they foster parents who just want what's best for this child, or do they want to adopt?"

Despite his palpable skepticism, the judge did little but say that he would await responses to a motion and schedule another hearing. Days later, the county again filed for the termination of Alicia and Fred's parental rights. Although the couple had complied with their treatment plans, the filing concluded, their son had been in foster care for three years and needed "the permanence that only adoption can afford him."

Intervening is usually "buttoned up relatively quickly," Lain told me, especially in cases involving very young children. So he and J'Lyn were pleased by the new termination filing, and to learn that the county had again brought in an expert—Diane Baird—to assess Alicia and Fred's parenting of Carter. Before long, following sessions that Alicia and Fred thought had gone well, Baird was reporting that Carter's eyes were "dark and bottomless" and that he had a "tic-like blink."

Whenever Carter ran up to Fred to start a game of tag, saying, "Try and get me," Fred froze, worried that if he gave chase a reference to Carter fleeing him in fear might end up in a report. "If Carter laughed, it was the wrong type of laugh," he told me. "If Carter was running, he'd be 'hyperaroused.'" Fred had by now come to think of Baird as some wicked Jedi, converting his positive interactions with Carter into dark ones. Alicia shushed him when he talked like that in public. "If you do everything right, and you tell the truth," she told him, "at some point, you're gonna come out on top." He thought she was being naïve.

Baird has long called her technique for evaluating parent-child interactions the "Kempe protocol for interactional evaluation," after the prestigious Kempe Center, the child-welfare branch of the University of Colorado medical school, where she worked, on and off, from the mid-eighties until 2017. Early on, she helped a colleague develop the method, which extrapolated sweeping conclusions about how parents and children relate from subtle observations of eye contact and body language. Last year, the Kempe Center's director asked Baird in an e-mail to stop using the Kempe

name to describe her protocol and to make clear on her C.V. that she no longer works there.

Patrice Harris, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and a past president of the American Medical Association, says that, although children placed in a series of foster homes may have lifelong trust issues, a child who has had one good experience with a foster family often benefits from it. "That secure placement can enhance their ability to attach again," she told me. The child's brain has been wired that adults can be trusted.

Carter started preschool in the autumn of 2022, with the trial to decide his fate set for just before Christmas. As the date approached, Alicia and Fred, frantic, latched onto an idea that someone they'd met through parenting class had suggested: What if they could get taxpayers to care about all the money the government had spent to keep them from their child?

They filed a Colorado Open Records Act request, and soon received dozens of invoices. In all, tiny, unaffluent Washington County had spent more than three hundred and ten thousand dollars on Carter's case: on his brain-mapping and medical exams, on the many expert evaluations, on Baird's travel to and from Denver, on payments to the Bernhardts, and so on. In December, the director of the Department of Human Services, Grant Smith, resigned. Two days later, a letter from an attorney representing Washington County revealed that an internal investigation had found improprieties in the handling of Carter's case. (The investigative report is under a gag order, and neither Smith nor the new director would elaborate on the resignation.) The trial was cancelled, and, in February, the judge asked for an explanation of what, exactly, was still unfit about Alicia and Fred as parents. The following day, the county finally dropped its case.

"It's over," Alicia's lawyer told her when she answered the phone. Alicia gestured wildly at Fred to turn down the TV. The lawyer went on, "After his next visit. . . you don't have to give him back."

In March, Alicia's fellow mail carriers threw a party at the Akron senior center, with cake and presents. It was a baby shower for a three-and-a-half-year-old boy. The following month, Alicia joined other birth families in testifying in favor of new state legislation that would give biological relatives more priority in foster-care cases and prevent foster parents from intervening until they had cared for a child for a year. In August, that law went into effect.

As Colorado grapples with how prevalent foster-parent intervention has become, other states are taking the intervenor concept further. At least fifteen states, from New York to Tennessee to Arizona, now allow foster parents to directly file to terminate a biological parent's rights, as if they were prosecutors.

In Indiana, the adoption attorney Grant Kirsh handles, by his count, around five hundred adoptions of foster children every year, and he educates foster parents about the process on his YouTube channel. Kirsh tells them that, should the state's child-services agency move to return a child in their care to the child's birth family, they can simply serve a notice of adoption, which the birth family will have only fifteen days to contest. If there is no response in that time frame, the birth family loses the right to challenge the adoption.

"It's nuts," Andrea Marsh, a family-court lawyer in Indianapolis, said, calling the process "similar to intervention, but the nuclear option." One of her recent clients, a birth mother in Indianapolis, was trying to follow her court-ordered treatment plan when the suburban foster parents who were caring for her child filed for adoption in their home county. (Court-shopping is a strategy that Indiana adoption attorneys use to circumvent a court that is still trying to reunify the birth family.) The mother failed to reply by the deadline, and, when the adoption of her child was finalized, neither she nor the local child-services office could do anything about it.

In his first weeks living with Alicia and Fred, Carter would ask where J'Lyn was, and for certain toys he used to have, like "the ones with the buttons." When he grew quiet and seemed sad, Alicia found that what often helped was a visit to a playground, the one with the red slides. By late spring, he had stopped getting quiet. "Can we tell Dad I slept so good?" he asked his mom with excitement one morning, and Alicia wondered if he knew or sensed that his sleep problems had been debated for years.

According to an assessment administered at Carter's preschool, he is on target developmentally, and even "potentially gifted." When I mentioned to Baird that there is little sign of the attachment trauma she predicted, she said this just demonstrates that Carter knows he has to "hero on."

Alicia and Fred kept Carter enrolled at the Head Start program where both Bernhardts now worked, and where Carter could run up and give them hugs. After school one day, Alicia said to herself, "Screw it, I'll go talk to her." She walked into J'Lyn's classroom and said that she hoped J'Lyn would remain in Carter's life so that, as Alicia put it to me, "these two halves of his life are no longer halves." Both women later told me that they had bonded over the fact that neither much liked the other's man.

Shortly afterward, however, the Bernhardts moved to Texas—in part to avoid seeing Carter every day. One afternoon, looking out at the large back yard of their new home, just outside Abilene, the couple told me that they'd paid around thirty-two thousand dollars to Eirich's firm. "We didn't do any of this for any reason other than to make sure that Carter has the best life," J'Lyn told me later. "He deserves that."

Just before visiting the Bernhardts, I'd been with Alicia and Fred in a home, once a meth den, that was brimming with kids' books, drawings, and water guns. Child-size cowboy boots sat by the front door, and Carter was out playing with cousins he once didn't know he had. At the kitchen table, Alicia told me that the Bernhardts "can be victims, too." Once the system "put this idea in their heads that adoption could be an achievable goal for them, it damaged our family, and my son, and the foster parents' family." She paused, thinking over all that J'Lyn and Lain had gone through. "God, how heartbreaking would that be." ♦

# Terms and Conditions

BY PATRICIA MARX

We (hereafter "I") have updated our (hereafter "my") Terms and Conditions. If you do not consent to them, you cannot continue to enjoy the privileges and perks of being friends with me, Patty ("In the friendship business for over sixty years!"™). Benefits include unsolicited advice from Patty about why you should go on the keto diet; Patty's Netflix password; long, repetitious monologues from her about whether she should paint her living room Cottage-Cheese White or Cocaine White; and an invitation to Patty and Larry's annual Yom Kippur break-the-fast supper, at which Larry's third cousin, the actor Pauly Shore, might stop by. If you do not wish to be bound by the new guidelines, you must return the Bundt pan that Patty lent you for one day only last year to make your special Very Merry Berry Monkey Bread.

By reading this far, you have consented to Patty's updated Terms and Conditions.

You are now a Friend of a Friend of Patty's Through Mutual Friend Lenora ($83 a year). This entitles you to run into Patty—perhaps at Amour De Hair, while crossing Lexington Avenue, or even at Lenora's baby shower, where Patty will suggest that you two get together over a hot beverage sometime. If you would like Patty to say this sincerely, there is an additional charge of $300 (plus a $13 processing fee). In the event that she hires an assistant, you'll have to tip the assistant something, too. If, instead, you would like to substitute the above for the opportunity to chat with Patty from time to time during the Vamps Vamping on the Tramp cardio class that you both attend three mornings a week, you must fill out Form 4359A and return it somewhere. If you do not understand this, it is still valid.

Your membership comes with an option to upgrade to a higher level. For reasons having to do with international intellectual property rights and the Monroe Doctrine, the only details about this level that can be revealed here are that it costs $27 per month and that you have been a subscriber for the past nine years.

By not checking the invisible box above, you have agreed to receive Patty's Acquaintances-with-Benefits newsletter. As one of hundreds of names on her contact list, you will receive cc e-mail blasts whenever Patty changes her address or phone number, as well as texts and other e-mails—many, many of them, sometimes the same one over and over, asking for donations to causes and candidates Patty likes. In the event that you die, you still cannot unsubscribe.

Because you neglected to opt out of the Exploitation Rider (sent three months ago to your defunct e-mail address), you have granted Patty the right to reap exorbitant profits by selling your data, including the secret that you confided to Patty about your doing it with Lenora's husband. Hulu will be turning the story into a miniseries as soon as Benedict Cumberbatch signs his Terms of Use agreement. Your Friendship level does not include access to my Hulu password, nor Larry's.

By continuing to breathe, you have been rewarded with Friendship Tenure. This accolade is free of charge but comes with obligations. Among them, you must allow Patty's mother to stay with you when she's in town next week because Patty's apartment isn't big enough. You must also co-sign Patty's new mortgage because her credit rating would otherwise prevent her from buying the spacious apartment that she desires but can't afford.

Patty retains the right to replace a Tenured Friend with an A.I., pull the plug (yours) if you are too sick to put on makeup, and call you a bitch on the Senate floor.

Force Majeure: Patty is allowed to cancel plans if the weather report is dire, including a 16% or greater chance of drizzle, or if she sees a lanternfly.

As a Tenured Friend, you are eligible to join the Inner Circle, "Patty's Navy SEALS of Friends"™. This coterie of Patty's most intimate friends comes with unlimited Bundt-pan-borrowing privileges. Membership is restricted to only a few lucky individuals. Oh, wait. The last slot was snagged by Lenora when she heard that you were eligible.

Security Measures: In an airplane, you must put Patty's oxygen mask on (Patty) before assisting yourself or the flight attendant. If a vampire attacks when Patty is at your house, she has the right to feed your kitten, Fuzzypants, to it. If the vampire is still hungry, Patty can offer it your leg (from the knee down). If Patty feels insecure about looking like a bonobo when she smiles, you must lie and tell her that she looks like Julia Roberts.

Responsible Conduct: Under no circumstances shall you throw a surprise party for Patty, even if Larry swears that Patty would love one despite what she has said many times. The penalty for committing this serious crime is severe. See Section 12: Termination of Friendship. Also see Section 13—the "*Et tu, Brute*?" Disclaimer of Warranties: Breaking Up with Larry.

Third-Party Terms and Conditions: Patty's mother will be arriving this afternoon and likes bacon in her egg salad. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

# The Pitchfork of History

*Beyond the myth of rural America.*

BY DANIEL IMMERWAHR

Demanding that your friend pull the car over so you can examine an unusual architectural detail is not, I'm told, endearing. But some of us can't help ourselves. For the painter Grant Wood, it was an incongruous Gothic window on an otherwise modest frame house in Eldon, Iowa, that required stopping. It looked as if a cottage were impersonating a cathedral. Wood tried to imagine who "would fit into such a home." He recruited his sister and his dentist as models and costumed them in old-fashioned attire. The result, "American Gothic," as he titled the painting from 1930, is probably the most famous art work ever produced in the United States.

The painting was also decidedly enigmatic. Was it biting satire? Grim realism? Proud patriotism? In the words of the late Thomas Hoving, a longtime director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the image served as a "Rorschach test for the character of the nation."

For Wood, however, the meaning was clear. Although he faced "a storm of protest from Iowa farm wives"—one threatened to "smash my head," he recalled—he had painted "American Gothic" with sympathy. Cities dominated culture, he wrote, yet they were "far less typically American" than the rural places "whose power they usurped." In 1935, Wood, who was born on an Iowa farm forty-four years earlier, published the manifesto "Revolt Against the City."

In decrying urban dominance, Wood had a point. The 1920 census marked the first time that urbanites made up a majority of the nation's population, and city dwellers weren't humble about their ascendance. New magazines like H. L. Mencken's *The American Mercury* (founded in 1924) and, indeed, this one (founded in 1925) touted metropolitan virtues with more than a touch of snobbery. "Main Street," Sinclair Lewis's best-selling novel from 1920, captured the tone. "There was no dignity" in small-town life, its protagonist reflects, only "a savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations."

At first, Wood had nodded along. He'd devoured Mencken, adored "Main Street," and tried to stir up Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with a "bohemian" art colony. He visited France and returned with a Parisian beard, a form of preening for which his Iowa neighbors had little patience. Yet his outlook changed—and so did his beard. The financial collapse of 1929 robbed the "Eastern capitals of finance and politics" of their magic, he wrote. He named Mencken and "Main Street" as part of the problem. It would be better, he thought, to take cues from the "extraordinary independence" of farmers and the sturdy, homegrown cultures of the provinces. A bohemian no longer, Wood shaved his face and put on overalls.

It was, in general, an overalls era. Many enduring images of rural America are from the nineteen-thirties—Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House on the Prairie," Dorothea Lange's classic photograph "Migrant Mother," Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind," Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," and John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." The run culminated in the "Wizard of Oz" film, in which Dorothy spurns an Emerald City for a Kansas farm, declaring, "There's no place like home."

All that was generations ago, yet the obsession with rural authenticity sounds all too familiar. In 2008, the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin insisted that small towns were the "real America," where hardworking, patriotic people lived. That sentiment has only gained political potency since. Underlying the country's red state–blue state polarization is a more profound, and widening, rural-urban split. Donald Trump's election was, Politico declared, the "revenge of the rural voter."

Scholars who have spoken with those voters, such as Katherine Cramer, in "The Politics of Resentment" (2016), and Robert Wuthnow, in "The Left Behind" (2018), report a sense of deep alienation. Rural people feel—in terms much like those Grant Wood laid out in 1935—that their authentic, independent way of life

*Grant Wood's sister and his dentist, by the painting for which they had posed.*

COURTESY FIGGE ART MUSEUM, CITY OF DAVENPORT ART COLLECTION, GRANT WOOD ARCHIVE, SB-4

is under threat from an out-of-touch urban élite.

But is that picture accurate? A piercing, unsentimental new book, "The Lies of the Land" (Chicago), by the historian Steven Conn, takes the long view. Wistful talk of "real America" aside, Conn, who teaches at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio, argues that the rural United States is, in fact, highly artificial. Its inhabitants are as much creatures of state power and industrial capitalism as their city-dwelling counterparts. But we rarely acknowledge this, Conn writes, because many of us—urban and rural, on the left and the right—"don't quite want it to be true."

The category "rural" spans a vast range, including small towns, reservations, timberlands, and ranches. One thing that unites such places, however, is that they're rarely thought of as particularly modern. In the "natural order of things," Adam Smith wrote in "The Wealth of Nations," agrarian life precedes urbanization: history starts with people working the land, and only after they succeed are cities possible. In this account, rural people are, like horseshoe crabs, holdovers—living representatives of a distant past. Hence the frequent judgment that life beyond cities is more "rooted" or, less sympathetically, "backward."

Events unfolded differently in the United States, though. There *were* longstanding rural communities that sought to pass their ways and lands down through history—but they faced a devastating invasion from across the Atlantic. There are still places where people have lived continuously for centuries, such as the millennium-old Acoma Pueblo, in New Mexico. But the rural Americans with the deepest roots, the Native ones, were very often violently dispossessed.

The people who replaced them, meanwhile, were transplants, less sprung from the soil than laid like sod over Indigenous lands. Settlers liked to imagine that their takeover was swift and natural, that Native Americans were already en route to extinction. This was a consoling myth. The process of uprooting one rural people and implanting another took time, and heavy state intervention. By the official count, Indigenous people fought 1,642 military engagements against the United States. The ensuing treaties, the historian Robert Lee calculates, cost the U.S. government billions of dollars.

Settlers styled themselves as pioneers who had won their land with their bare hands. This is how it went in "Little House on the Prairie," with the frontier family racing ahead of the law to seize Indian property. ("Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve" would have been a more accurate title, the literary scholar Frances W. Kaye has archly suggested.) Yet in the end land ownership came, directly or indirectly, from the state. The Homestead Act of 1862, along with its successors, gridded up and gave away an area the size of Pakistan. And although homesteading sounds like a relic from the sepia-toned past, its most active period came, the historian Sara Gregg has pointed out, in the twentieth century. The final homesteader got his land in 1988.

One irony is that—after Indigenous towns—it's the havens of the East Coast élite, such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, which have the deepest roots. Most bastions of "real America" are, by contrast, relatively new. Wasilla, Alaska, where Sarah Palin served as mayor, really is a small town in a farming area. But most of its farms were created by a New Deal campaign to relocate struggling farmers from the Upper Midwest. (Hence Palin's "you betcha" accent, similar to the Minnesota ones in the film "Fargo.") Palin's proud patch of "real America," in other words, was courtesy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The historically recent arrival of settlements like Palin's Wasilla or the "American Gothic" town of Eldon gives them a copy-paste quality. The striking outfits of Grant Wood's models weren't homespun; he'd ordered them from Sears, Roebuck & Co. in Chicago. And the Gothic window that had grabbed his attention? It wasn't the product of a distinctive local culture, either. Eldon had existed for barely a decade when that window was installed. It, too, had been mail-ordered from Sears.

Wherever the clothes were from, the image of a stalwart couple humbly working their own land came to represent rural America. Wood described the pair as "tintypes from my own family album," and, indeed, his parents had tilled a plot in Iowa. Yet that sort of farming marked only a brief moment in Wood's family history. His maternal grandparents were innkeepers, not farmers, and his paternal ones had been Virginia slaveholders. When Wood was ten, his family left the farm for the city of Cedar Rapids, where Wood set out to be a jeweller.

The Woods weren't unusual. One of Steven Conn's great themes is the evanescence of those "American Gothic"-style farms. Although "we tend to equate *rural* with *farm*," he writes, small, general farms "disappeared more than half a century ago, at least." Agriculture has become a capital-intensive, high-tech pursuit, belying the "left behind" story of rural life. Fields resemble factories, where automation reigns and more than two-thirds of the hired workforce is foreign-born. "To call 1,500 acres of corn, genetically modified to withstand harsh chemical pesticides and intended for a high-fructose corn syrup factory, a 'farm' is a bit like calling a highly automated GM factory a 'workshop,'" Conn remarks.

Corporate dominance is hidden in agriculture: Apple products are sold by a high-profile, publicly traded multinational, but actual apples come from private companies that few people have ever heard of, like Gebbers Farms or Zirkle Fruit. The government classifies most as "family farms," but this doesn't mean they're diminutive. "Family corporations" is what Conn calls the agribusiness operations that maintained family ownership for legal reasons. In agricultural processing and retailing, the mom-and-pop pretense quickly drops. The country's largest food company is PepsiCo; it owns Rice-A-Roni, Sabra, Rold Gold, Doritos, Gatorade, and Quaker Oats.

You might think that this is how things work under capitalism, but U.S. agriculture is far from capitalist. Since the Depression, the government has aggressively managed the farming economy, variously limiting supply, ginning up demand, and stabilizing prices. "When it comes to agriculture, there is no such thing as the free market," the head of the food-processing-and-procuring conglomerate Archer Daniels Midland explained in 1995. Certainly, the over-all effect of government policy was to favor large firms like his.

As conglomerates grew, most farmers and farmworkers were edged out. In the

years since "American Gothic," more than two-thirds of the country's farms have disappeared, and tens of millions of people left for cities. Black farms were hit especially hard. In 1920, there were nearly a million of them; now there aren't even thirty-five thousand.

The small farmers who stayed faced their own hardships. Performing at a Live Aid concert to benefit Ethiopian famine victims in 1985, Bob Dylan wondered if some of the money could be spared to support debt-ridden small farmers in his own country. It couldn't, but Willie Nelson and others started an annual benefit concert, Farm Aid, treating farmers as charity cases. Farm Aid started during a downturn called the farm crisis, and it's still going nearly forty years later. Small farmers have been in crisis so long, Conn observes, that the word "crisis"—which suggests a deviation from the norm—has lost its meaning.

In truth, the ostensible norm, household farming, was a transitional phase—surprisingly brief, in many places—between Indigenous and industrial. Even in the heyday of pastoral mythmaking, when Wood froze the farming couple in time as the essence of rural America, that image was badly outdated. The Eldon house that Wood depicted, built in 1881, wasn't the ancestral home of sturdy agrarians. The first owner lost it because of overdue taxes, the next tried unsuccessfully to turn it into a candy-and-novelty store, and the property changed hands many more times before Wood's 1930 visit. By then, Eldon's population decline had started. It had some eighteen hundred residents; it has less than half that now.

The small farmer, standing on his property with a pitchfork, has been an endangered species for a century. Today, a leaf blower would be a better symbol for those who tend the land. As the economist Brad DeLong notes, the Bureau of Labor Statistics counts more landscapers and groundskeepers than people working on farms.

If small, rugged farms have not filled the countryside, what has? This is Conn's second great theme. For the past century, rural spaces have been preferred destinations for military bases, discount retail chains, extractive industries, manufacturing plants, and real-estate developments.

Consider Appalachia's legendary southern mountains. These are the supposedly independent, isolated, and tradition-steeped hollows (or "hollers") where moonshine was made, Hatfield-and-McCoy feuds once raged, and Dolly Parton's Tennessee mountain home still stands. The venture capitalist J. D. Vance's best-selling 2016 memoir, "Hillbilly Elegy," is another unavoidable reference. Vance was born and raised in urban Ohio, but he grounded his identity in the "beloved holler" in eastern Kentucky where his grandparents had lived until they were teen-agers. ("As Mamaw used to say, you can take the boy out of Kentucky, but you can't take Kentucky out of the boy.")

Conn rolls his eyes at much of this. The southern mountains aren't exactly isolated, he says. Rather, since the Civil War they've been at the forefront of lumbering and coal mining; corporations have felled the forests, fouled the land, and then, for the most part, left. "Never mind the sentimental invocations of 'hollers' and moonshine and kinfolk," Conn writes; a lot of Appalachian coal country is a "postindustrial moonscape of slag heaps, eroded hillsides, toxic retention pools, and abandoned towns."

Other features of the southern mountains reward a second look. The bloody Hatfield-and-McCoy fight, which killed a dozen people between 1878 and 1890, is remembered as the eruption of an ancient honor culture. Yet the conflict, in which some McCoys took the Hatfield side and vice versa, is better understood as a logging-rights dispute prompted by deforestation and the arrival of the railroad. The Prohibition-era moonshine stills, similarly, can be seen as a desperate strategy—manufacturing and trafficking a controlled substance—by dispossessed people who had lost surer means of getting by.

If railroads allowed corporations to reach into Appalachia's hollows, cars and trucks let them go everywhere. They could shift operations to the countryside, toward cheap land with few neighbors. Relocating also let employers outrun unions; when workers organized urban factories, firms opened rural branches.

This is the story of slaughterhouses. The perishability of meat used to mean that slaughterhouses had to be placed in population centers, near consumers; that's why many cities have former meatpacking districts. Urban slaughterhouses were noxious environments, as Upton Sinclair's Chicago-set novel, "The Jungle" (1906), described in excruciating detail. Understandably, workers sought strong unions. After decades of trying, they prevailed in Chicago, in 1943.

Their victory was short-lived. Refrigerated trucking gave stockyard owners the flexibility to move wherever business conditions suited, which frequently meant anonymous, horizontal structures in the countryside. Someone writing "The Jungle" today, Conn speculates, would probably set it in Gainesville, Georgia, the self-described "Poultry Capital of the World." Gainesville's immense chicken-processing plants are heavily staffed by low-paid immigrants, non-unionized and often undocumented.

The story of how cities such as Chicago lost industrial jobs is well known; the story of how small towns gained them isn't. Still, the "rural industrial boom" that started in earnest in the nineteen-sixties was, the historian Keith Orejel writes, "the defining economic process within the American heartland" in the latter part of the twentieth century. Faced with unrecoverable job losses in agriculture, small-town leaders courted manufacturers with subsidies, obliging regulations, and a cheap, non-unionized workforce.

Manufacturers, accepting this invitation, industrialized the rural landscape. Meanwhile, the Pentagon, also seeking cheap land, militarized it. The U.S. now contains more than four thousand military bases, with a combined acreage the size of Kentucky. Conn observes how this has fused rural people to the armed forces. By early 2007, nearly half the U.S. service members killed in Iraq had come from towns smaller than twenty-five thousand. A fifth were from towns smaller than five thousand.

For Eldon, jobs came from meatpacking, based in the nearby coal-mining town of Ottumwa. The "American Gothic" house looked onto an area called Pole Tail, where cattle were fed, herded with poles onto railroad cars, and sent to the slaughter.

Live by the meat hook, die by the meat hook. The financier Eli Black bought the Ottumwa meat plant in the late nineteen-sixties; before long he merged it with United Fruit and

started trimming costs with layoffs. Then Ottumwa's meatpackers pushed back, and in 1973 Black shuttered the plant. Production was shifted to South Dakota, where he had found a more compliant labor culture. The blow hit Eldon and its environs hard. Trucking firms, utilities, local schools, and sports leagues all "went bye-bye," one employee recalled.

As the region staggered, the "American Gothic" house fell into disrepair, with its windows broken and its white paint fading to gray. By 1977, it had acquired a bullet hole—in a bedroom wall. In the eighties, a family of four rented the house. The father had been a factory worker but was now unemployed; a newspaper described him as a "weed cutter." He and his wife had chosen the house because it was cheap, "on account of tourists sometimes nosing around." Even so, the couple's parents had to pay the rent.

This is how it goes, Conn argues. With so few income sources available, rural people depend heavily on each employer. The opening of a mine, a factory, or a military base might bring flush times, but their closure spells ruin. While cities are, by their diversity, hedged against economic fluctuations, small towns lie dangerously exposed. That's why they were so devastated by the trade liberalization of the nineteen-nineties and, particularly, China's entry into the World Trade Organization, in 2001. Jobs that had once left the city for the countryside moved abroad, causing a rural manufacturing collapse that rivals the urban one of the nineteen-seventies. Rural deindustrialization has received less notice, but it's been potentially "more painful," Conn observes, given workers' lack of other options. Where metropolitan employment bounced back from the recession of 2007-08 in five years, rural employment still hasn't recovered.

As jobs rush out, discount retail chains swoop in—notably Dollar General, which has more than four times as many stores in the U.S. as Walmart. Although its former chief executive, Cal Turner, Jr., has written a book about Dollar General's "small-town values," the corporation essentially preys on distressed rural communities. It pursues profits by minimizing staff and pay, and by shutting its stores whenever they stop making money.

You can find a Dollar General half a mile from the "American Gothic" house; the store is now one of only two places in Eldon to buy groceries. But there is no guarantee it will stay. "We're kind of gypsies," Turner has bragged of his company. "We can close a store and be gone in 24 hours."

A laid-off veteran buying Rice-A-Roni at Dollar General isn't our favored image of rural life. But it's more accurate than the farmhouse tableau of "American Gothic." And it's an image especially worth contemplating today, as rural discontent increasingly drives politics.

Although politics has always had an urban-rural fissure, in the past decade it has become a clean break. Democrats dominate in high-density places. Not one of the ten largest cities chose a Republican mayor in its most recent elections, and only two of the top thirty did. Republicans, meanwhile, reign in low-density places, with the notable exceptions of Native American reservations and the Black Belt, in the South.

It's now possible to interpret elections in geographical terms: Democrats win cities, Republicans win rural areas, and the main question is which way the suburbs will break. Although we normally think of suburbs as outgrowths of cities, Conn notes that they sit on formerly rural land and are often filled

with formerly rural people. They are as much "post-rural" as "sub-urban," and their politics show it.

For city dwellers, this geographical line-drawing is ominous. Rural people are a fifth of the population yet punch well above their weight in elections. The constitutional allocation of two senators for every state gives low-density states outsized representation. This is why, in the past six senatorial elections, Democrats received thirty-four million more votes over all and yet had an outright majority of senators only once. Since a state is allocated two Presidential electors for its two senators, the rural advantage skews Presidential elections, too; in the past six, Democrats won the popular vote five times but the Presidency only three. "Why Cities Lose," a clarifying book by the political scientist Jonathan A. Rodden, explains how similar mechanisms, operating in district-based elections, give Republicans an edge in the House of Representatives and state legislatures.

Still, it's not as if rural people—who die younger and are far more likely to take their own lives—are winning in a larger sense. The surprise hit song of the summer, topping the *Billboard* charts, was "Rich Men North of Richmond," by Oliver Anthony, a onetime factory worker from the former coal-mining town of Farmville, Virginia. The song is a furious protest aimed at a distant élite. One might regard Anthony's anger, which includes a dig at welfare recipients, as misdirected. But half the households in Farmville make less than thirty-seven thousand dollars. Can anyone really say that his rage is baseless?

In the past decade, rural voters have transformed the Republican Party, pushing aside élite-favored politicians like Jeb Bush in favor of ones like Trump. Although some of Trump's hobby-horses—windmills, low-flush toilets—are idiosyncratic, his talk of "disastrous trade deals" and shuttered factories is not. Trump took rural deindustrialization seriously and, astonishingly, turned the market-friendly G.O.P. against globalization. The high-profile "hillbilly" J. D. Vance is now a Republican senator of the MAGA persuasion.

In 2020, Trump lost the national popular vote by four points but won the Iowa county containing Eldon by twenty-four. The "revolt against the city" of Grant Wood's day has become something like a war. Understanding it will require setting myths aside and grappling with what the rich and the powerful have done to rural spaces and people. Such demystification, Conn rightly insists, is long overdue. Because, when you look at "American Gothic" today, it isn't the architecture that catches your eye. It's the pitchfork. ♦

LETTER FROM SAN FRANCISCO

# Spectacular Fall

*The city was on top, until it wasn't. But how broken is it, really?*

BY NATHAN HELLER

In the past few years, accounts of San Francisco's unravelling—less like a tired sweater than a ball of yarn caught in a boat propeller—have spread with the authority of gossip or folklore. As the pandemic recedes, nearly a quarter of offices downtown are said to be vacant, the worst rate in the nation. Drug-overdose deaths are surging; reports of theft on downtown streets, including an almost two-hundred-percent increase in car break-ins in 2021, have crossed the national media to censorious response. "They took down the guardrails around personal responsibility," the *Wall Street Journal* columnist Daniel Henninger declared on Fox News. In May, a local pet owner claimed that her Himalayan sheepdog began "wobbling" after eating feces possibly containing opioids and marijuana. Throughout the summer, Presidential hopefuls came to town to stand on grim street corners and record their horror for the cameras. ("It's really collapsed because of leftist policies," Ron DeSantis repined in his spot. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., lamented the many Americans who "are on the precipice of ending up on a corner like this.") Nine years ago, when HBO premièred the series "Silicon Valley," a deadpan comedy lampooning the Bay Area's life-style blandishments and hapless global power, the city seemed to exist in a helium balloon, floating ever upward. Now the same place is viewed as an emblem of American collapse.

The change has been unsettling because the city's broad project is widely shared. Since the end of the industrial period, the main path of the U.S. metropolis has been what's often called urban renewal: transforming old frameworks into beautiful, dynamic settings for prosperous middle-class life. No city excelled at the assignment more than San Francisco. It invested in lush, landscaped parks, tree-lined boulevards, and world-class museums where there had been none. It grew rich, and seemed to climb out of the Great Recession with both influence and a mandate. "There's a lot of pent-up envy of San Francisco from a lot of other cities that think of themselves as more important," one local told me recently. For a long time, that envy inspired mostly emulation. Universities spent millions to reorient themselves around the Bay Area's style of thinking. Success across industries today is measured by virality, optimization, and unceasing growth. In San Francisco, the nation saw its dreams, and now it thinks it sees its nightmares. The question is what caused so swift a change.

A new story described widespread flight. Downtown San Francisco has seen its highest retail vacancy rate since 2006. In the past few months, Christian Louboutin, Lululemon, Nordstrom, Old Navy, and Williams-Sonoma all began an exodus from the area; so did Office Depot and Whole Foods. In late summer, the owner of Gump's, an upscale shop that opened in the eighteen-sixties, released a testy open letter, threatening to close in response to "a litany of destructive San Francisco strategies, including allowing the homeless to occupy our sidewalks, to openly distribute and use illegal drugs, to harass the public and to defile the city's streets." Urbanists had already begun to circulate a paper by the economist Stijn Van Nieuwerburgh that traced a post-pandemic spiral of collapsing retail and declining safety leading to less public revenue and fewer public services—what he called an "urban doom loop." The phrase became a shorthand around town, where many took it as Cassandra's vision of their fate.

One afternoon in June, I went to see Sarah Dennis Phillips, the official charged with rehabilitating San Francisco's businesses. "I'm confident," she said. "It's just a question of how long it

*Since the pandemic, downtown San Francisco*

*has seen an exodus of office workers and retailers amid battles over its housing shortage. Every faction has a point of view.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY IOULEX

takes." A few weeks earlier, she had been appointed the executive director of San Francisco's Office of Economic and Workforce Development—effectively, the trauma surgeon for downtown—after a career spent bringing the downtowns of small, quiet, boring Northern California suburbs to life. Of one city, Livermore, she explained, "We had to create a 'Right to Live Downtown' ordinance that everyone moving into a residential building would sign, acknowledging they would not get upset that things weren't quiet at 7 P.M." Now she faced the inverse problem: a city worried that its downtown was *too* quiet.

On her first day on the job, it was announced that the lender for the largest mall in the district, operated by the Westfield corporation, would retake possession of the property—a five-story retail center with spiral escalators, opposite the city's most famous cable-car landing. "We knew Westfield would be a challenge to deal with," Dennis Phillips told me, in a loud café near City Hall. People all around us were absorbed in their phones and laptops, poring over the day's work. "We just didn't know that it was going to happen this fast."

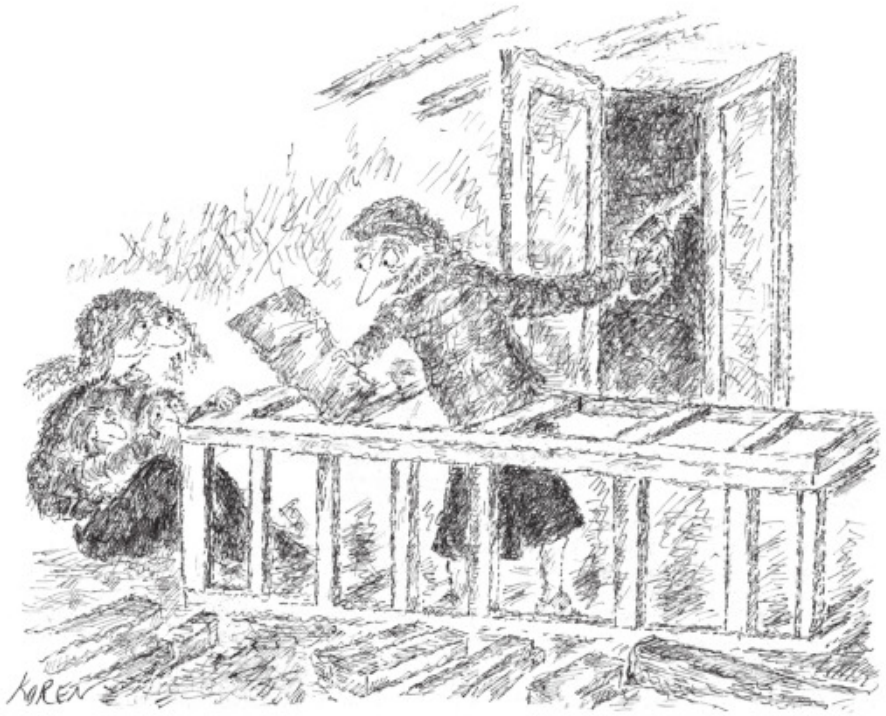
The city's downtown has experienced slumps before. In the seventies and eighties, San Francisco, undergoing what was then described as a wave of drug use and crime, saw a series of exits to the suburbs. Skyline disputes—sparked in part by the city's tallest building, the Transamerica Pyramid, and drawing on fears of "Manhattanization"—produced an over-all square-footage cap, which constrained growth. In a new book, "Portal," the urban-design critic John King recalls the bitter year of 1983, when the city's mayor, Dianne Feinstein, faced a ballot recall instigated by a far-left group called the White Panther Party. (Feinstein sought to ban handguns; the White Panthers believed that poor residents needed them for self-protection.) Remarking on the city's air of terminal insecurity in those years, King describes "a pessimism that was more than a match for detailed land-use plans."

In the wake of a global lockdown, downtown pessimism had a different tone. Before the pandemic, thirty-eight per cent of San Francisco's office space was occupied by the technology industry. "We no longer manufacture things in San Francisco to speak of," Rodney Fong, the president of the city's Chamber of Commerce, told me. "We're the first to see our downtown as impacted as it is, because when we said 'Work from home,' everyone just grabbed a laptop, and boom!" That reliance on tech made downtown especially vulnerable.

Dennis Phillips's mode is crisp and cheery, and, as we sat in the din of the café, she mentioned that she had been reading "Survival of the City," by the economists Edward Glaeser and David Cutler, and "The New Urban Crisis," by Richard Florida, a book about displacement and inequality. More than anything, she was trying to balance San Francisco's grand narrative of its downtown as a techno-futurist Atlantis against a new story of downtown as a great, fun spot to open a small, quirky retail business. "If downtowns aren't a place you have to be, then they have to become places you *want* to be," Dennis Phillips told me. She had been studying communities that turned their stories around—formerly depressed cities like Nashville and Detroit that had shown an aptitude for "constructing that narrative that makes people want to come." "It's a new muscle for San Francisco," she said. "We've never had to do that before."

San Francisco is the capital of social media, streaming media, app tech, the sharing economy, the gig economy, and other building blocks of modern life. It can measure its influence in dollars: the city, whose early industry harvested outlying gold, silver, and timber as the heart of what the architectural historian Gray Brechin has called the "imperial" West Coast, remains the fifth-largest metropolitan economy in the global Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

But the city's influence can also be measured by its long shadow in Democratic politics. San Francisco, it's easy to forget, is a small city, approximately seven miles long and wide—the distance from the World Trade Center to the top of Central Park. Its social sphere is startlingly compressed. One day, I stopped in a coffee shop to send an e-mail asking for an interview and, seconds later, heard a guy reading his phone across the room exclaim, "*The New Yorker* magazine wants to talk to me!" From this tiny ecosystem the political careers of the nation's Vice-President, the governor of its most populous state, the recent longtime



*"Honey, could you take the kids away? This next assembly step warns of serious profanity."*

Speaker of the House, and (until last month) the most senior Democratic member of the Senate emerged. The city's politics can seem preternaturally charged.

"You might have heard of a book called 'Fifty Shades of Grey,'" Joel Engardio, a slender, balding, bearded man in his early fifties and a supervisor for San Francisco's Sunset District, told a crowd a few weeks ago. He wore a blue blazer, with a Board of Supervisors pin on his lapel. "The story of San Francisco politics could have a similar title: 'A Million Shades of Blue.' You see, Democrats in San Francisco like to inflict sadistic pain on each other."

Engardio, who was elected last year to the Board of Supervisors, an eleven-member legislative body that governs both the city and the county, teaches a monthly public class that he calls S.F. Politics 101. His slide-filled lecture surveys the city's history—gold, jazz, gay rights—and lands on what he considers the partisan conflict at the heart of San Francisco politics today.

"We have two dominant shades of blue—progressives and moderates," he said, pointing at a slide. "Now, a San Francisco moderate would be considered liberal anywhere else, and a San Francisco progressive would be considered super far left anywhere else. In San Francisco, they're both Democrats. But they spar as if they were opposing political parties."

Engardio identifies as a moderate—he believes that "we need to roll out the red carpet and cut the red tape" for tech and small-business development—but he began teaching the class, he explained, to help voters contextualize their choices. "I see it as a fun and joyful thing on the surface, but underneath it's addressing some actual issues," he told me.

One major actual issue at play in town right now is public safety. As downtown emptied out with the lockdown—"not a single fucking person on our streets!" another supervisor told me—certain genres of crime flourished. Smash-and-grab operations, in which car windows are shattered and valuable goods are extracted in seconds, usually alongside a running getaway vehicle, had been the bane of parked cars in San Francisco for several years. During the pandemic, the same practice was used to rob storefronts, spiking property-crime levels to forty-one per cent above the national average. Meanwhile, fentanyl, cheap and lethal, exploded in street sales. According to an eighteen-month investigation by the San Francisco *Chronicle*, that surge was tied to well-run Honduran cartels, some of which sold meals to dealers out of car trunks so that they didn't have to leave their posts. (In the spring, Representative Nancy Pelosi, whose district encompasses most of the city, requested special funds from the Justice Department to investigate; no major federal arrests have yet been made.)

"The pandemic and fentanyl collided," Lydia Bransten, the executive director of the Gubbio Project, which offers coffee, health services, and a safe place to nap to a hundred homeless people a day, told me. Congregate shelters were at severely reduced capacity. "People in the throes of addiction were hanging out with other people in the throes of addiction without the rest of the community. Then the city reopened, and housed people coming out of their homes were confronted with this scene of absolute devastation. And they're flabbergasted: 'How could this happen? We've spent all this money!'" From 2021 to 2022, San Francisco spent seventy-six million dollars on drug-treatment programs; its homelessness budget was nearly seven hundred million dollars. (New York City's was $1.4 billion, for about ten times the urban population.) From Bransten's perspective, the lockdown was an experience of absolute damage control, with winnowed ranks of care workers, like her, scrambling to protect a poor and unhoused population from the worst of a deadly pandemic. But after living through their own pandemic challenges, people had what Bransten calls "compassion fatigue."

"It was a feeling of '*Look* at these people. Clearly nothing's working,'" she told me. "So we'll police them, arrest them, detain them, and charge them." The proper role of law enforcement on the street has long been a debate across the moderate-progressive divide, but in recent years—first with the Black Lives Matter movement, then amid pandemic-era concern about crime—the topic has engulfed the city's politics.

"We have an understaffed police department," Matt Dorsey, the supervisor for the South of Market section of downtown, said, citing a shortfall of seven hundred officers. Dorsey, a former police-department spokesperson, had the idea of adding fentanyl dealing to a list of crimes for which undocumented immigrants lose their sanctuary-city protections. "My hope was to incentivize a change to the drug market—if we went back to the good old days of heroin and Oxys, we'll save hundreds of lives every year," he said. "It didn't go over well with my colleagues."

Last year, a city magistrate filed a temporary injunction declaring that, until San Francisco met its deficit of shelter beds, law enforcement couldn't compel anyone who was involuntarily unhoused to move off the street. The rule, which was intended to encourage construction, riled the retail and hospitality trades. "We've got to take the handcuffs off the cops so that they can help these people get up off the sidewalks," Brian Sheehy, who has opened a series of popular bars downtown in the past twenty years, told me. "San Francisco has to get back to being a destination."

This year, the mayor's office signalled that it was emphasizing an enforcement philosophy (the idea that drug use is a crime) rather than relying, as it had in the past, on a harm-reduction philosophy (the idea that addiction is a disease). And the police have received a resource boost. In March, by an overwhelming majority, the Board of Supervisors passed the mayor's request for a midyear increase in police overtime funding of twenty-five million dollars. One of the two dissenting votes, the democratic-socialist supervisor Dean Preston, told me that he saw the request as a cynical effort to use worries about crime to direct cash toward an already overfunded department.

"That twenty-five million was in addition to a fifty-five-million increase last year, and a sixty-million increase this year, and a memorandum of understanding that approves a one-hundred-and-sixty-seven-million increase over the next three years," he said. In

pushing for that funding, politicians had highlighted the Tenderloin—part of Preston's district, and the poorest, densest neighborhood in the city, with the most street homelessness and open-air drug use. But the extra money, he found, wasn't for more policing there. Much of it covered shopping and tourist areas.

"When I walk by a luxury hotel downtown and I see four police officers standing there—just *standing* there, for hours—and then I walk four blocks away, to the Tenderloin, where I have a merchant who's, like, 'Why is there no beat cop walking around here?,' I would challenge any leader to look that merchant in the eye and say, 'Oh, it's because we have too few police officers,'" Preston told me. In the spring, he commissioned an audit of the police budget; it is pending. "I mean, we still fund, for millions of dollars, a mounted *horse* unit." He looked at me incredulously. "We just bought a new horse! In San Francisco! A dense urban city!"

By a month and a half into her new job, Dennis Phillips had propped up a giant whiteboard in her office, in the bowels of City Hall, and divided it into three columns: "PRIORITIES," "DOING?," "WANT TO DO." When I visited her, one afternoon, the board was covered in ideas. "We're in a bit of a period of experimentation," she told me, looking at the scrawl a little dazedly.

Given San Francisco's dearth of housing and glut of offices, many people had raised the possibility of residential conversions. "It is not an easy task, but one that other cities have done with regulatory changes and financial incentives," Rich Hillis, the city's planning director, told me. In July, the mayor sent a letter inviting the University of California system to create a new campus downtown. Still, Dennis Phillips noted, many conversions would likely cost more than developers could expect to earn, making it a hard sell: "It's only twenty per cent of our strategy downtown."

The mandate for downtown included tax incentives and bureaucratic guidance to help get small businesses going, as well as placement services to drop pop-ups into storefronts and employees into jobs. In July, when Sapporo announced that it was shuttering the Anchor Brewing Company, a fixture in San Francisco since the nineteenth century, Dennis Phillips's office tried to help organize an employee buyout. (The effort failed.) She pinned some of her hope for filling offices on artificial intelligence—an idea that many techies share.

"The best A.I. companies and engineers are all in San Francisco and the Bay Area, and they don't want to work separated and in silos," the venture capitalist and political funder Ron Conway told me. It is true that three of the top players, OpenAI, Google AI, and Anthropic, in which Amazon has invested four billion dollars, are within city limits. It is also true that, just as app startups required fewer employees than, say, Citigroup, A.I. needs less office space than older tech: the great promise of A.I., after all, is to obviate the need for labor.

"The A.I. industry is currently, but not for long, composed mostly of humans, and these humans are a social bunch," Jeremiah Owyang, an entrepreneur and investor who works out of an Airstream trailer, said. "I've been to meetups on the beach, bonfires. I've been to house parties. That is their life stage. This is when you get your partners, get your V.C.s." Such human pleasures wouldn't last, he said. Workplaces in the industry were transitioning to a model known as A.I. First. "A.I. First means you turn to A.I. before you talk to a human. A.I. First means you turn to an A.I. before you hire. If the A.I. doesn't do it, you build it. If you can't build it, *then* you hire someone." He added, "That is a precursor of what's going to happen to corporate America." The downtown of the future, then, will be a smaller, tighter, less worker-oriented place.

Dennis Phillips had recently taken her staff to tour the Westfield San Francisco Centre. "We have to understand the possibilities of that building," she explained. The mall loomed so large as a harbinger of San Francisco's struggles that I decided to see the damage myself. When I was growing up in San Francisco, at the turn of the millennium, the opening of the Westfield mall had seemed like the capstone of the city's rise. Now I expected a ruin—the remnant of a once triumphal age.

As I approached, I found the stretch of downtown around the mall lively and crowded. People in the local office garb of slacks and zip vests brushed past, thumbing their smartphones. In front of the Dawn Club, a storied jazz bar that Sheehy reopened this year, men in suits were playing a game that they called Doomloopin Bowling on a strip of AstroTurf. Inside the mall, which as of now has no closure date, I saw customers flowing from Bloomingdale's. To my left, a Michael Kors salesperson chatted with a couple as, on my right, young men studied fancy watches in an I.W.C. Schaffhausen. The food court was noisy, and there were no free tables at Panda Express. The grimmest space was on the top floor: a Cinemark whose lease is up in the fall had gone dark early. "They're closed," a bored-looking guard announced to no one.

In public declarations, Westfield—like Gump's—laid the blame for its lack of business on the condition of San Francisco's downtown. But in the past forty years the number of malls in the United States has declined by nearly three-quarters, and a tour of downtown San Francisco today, its streets packed, its bars busy, can seem an odd me-or-your-lying-eyes experience. By many measures, San Francisco is the safest it has ever been. Violent crime is a third of what it was in 1985, and currently twenty per cent below the average of twenty-one major American cities.

The city has a triple-A credit rating. Most of its residential neighborhoods are clean and green and bustling. With the exception of the Tenderloin, the neighborhood from which most dire imagery comes, a walk through San Francisco is a stroll around an affluent Pacific capital of small bookstores and night markets and weekend festivals—so much so that one can almost wonder where the idea of a city in decline emerged.

"A lot of it is perception," the mayor, London Breed, told me one day. "The feeling of 'I don't know if something is going to happen to me.'" We were sitting in her office, a wood-panelled sanctum deep in City Hall; a placard on her desk read "WHAT WOULD BEYONCÉ DO?" "It's what people are seeing on the Internet," she added.

Breed, who first took office in 2017, after the previous mayor died, grew up in public housing in the seventies and eighties. At a Board of Supervisors meet-

ing in June, a program initiated by Breed that authorizes police officers to arrest people who appear to be using drugs on the street was challenged by Dean Preston, who noted that such programs had been shown to target people of color. Breed shot back, "Here we go—another white man who's talking about Black and brown people as if you're the savior of those people and you speak for them." She said that he didn't understand what worked for real people: "It's not just services—it's also force." Three weeks ago, in a controversial move, Breed called for new legislation barring individuals from receiving city assistance if they decline treatment after testing positive for drugs.

On the Engardio spectrum, Breed's policies have been moderate. Her election campaign, in 2018, was funded in part by tech leaders. In many people's eyes, she distinguished herself with firm action at the start of the pandemic, averting the death spike of cities like New York by announcing a lockdown early and setting up emergency services. Yet on issues unanswerable to a simple executive order, such as homelessness or housing, she has taken public blame. "This mayor has no C.O.O."—chief operating officer—a former member of her administration told me, suggesting that Breed didn't delegate enough to keep tabs on complex projects or their personnel. (In the past two years, top employees in the Public Works and Building Inspection departments have been convicted of bribery and corruption; both agencies report to the mayor.) Breed's approval ratings by some counts once hovered in the fifties, but, with anxiety about downtown growing, two-thirds of San Franciscans now disapprove of her, according to a recent poll.

In February, Breed released what she called a "Roadmap to San Francisco's Future," a set of policy tweaks that included simplifications to the small-business tax code. "We are trying to make things a lot easier, more efficient," she explained in her office. I asked whether leaning heavily on tech to build up downtown had been a mistake. "We realize just how completely relying on office space, and mostly one industry, is not the right decision for any thriving downtown," she conceded.

In June, Breed proposed turning the Westfield mall, which sits on land owned in part by the San Francisco school district, into a bio lab, or possibly a soccer stadium. She told me that she imagined chopping up large retail structures into mixed-use pieces: retail on the bottom, offices in the middle, housing on top—work already under way at the winnowed downtown Macy's. "We're changing what this historic building—with the best bathrooms in the city—is going to be," she enthused.

Breed's critics say that proposing interesting ideas is not the same as executing them. "This mayor is not a collaborative mayor—she grew accustomed to issuing executive orders during COVID," Ahsha Safaí, a supervisor who has filed to run against Breed next year, told me at a sidewalk table recently. "My own home was broken into, and they stole my stove and my microwave," he said. "And my hood fan!" He would deal with problems in a more results-chasing way, he said, and, as if to underscore the point, abruptly sprang up from the table where we sat to sprint after a woman who had left her backpack on a nearby chair. Pen in hand, I watched him vanish at a distance of one block, then another.

"Something as acute and painful as what we're going through calls for an all-hands-on-deck approach—no one's coming to save us," Daniel Lurie, another mayoral contender, told me. He is a fifth-generation San Franciscan whose family owns a majority of the shares of the Levi Strauss company. In 2005, he founded Tipping Point Community, a poverty-fighting nonprofit that has received donations from tech figures like Marc Benioff and Chris Larsen; he is presumed to be the candidate now favored by parts of the tech industry. I asked him whether, as a longtime local, he really thought that the city was in an uncommonly bad state.

"No, it's not as bad as everyone says,"


*"Not bad, but have you guys been to the house where they're giving out full M.F.A.s?"*

• •

he said, hesitantly. "But could it be a lot better? Yes." He added, "I think there's a sense of"—he paused for a well-chosen word—"*disorder* that is different. Before, everything wasn't locked up in the Walgreens. You didn't feel there were no consequences."

Just outside Breed's office, the series of plazas running east from City Hall, toward Market Street, has become one of the most visible reminders of both the drug trade and the city's unrealized goals. In 2017, the city commissioned a plan to remake the corridor. The landscape designer Willett Moss went on a listening tour of the abutting neighborhoods and drew up a green-space plan. ("If I think about any ambition for the city right now, it's to make a commitment to public space, and demonstrate that we're here to stay and we give a shit," he told me.) In 2019, he submitted the plan, which was warmly received, then put on ice. The mayor told me that she didn't remember it; in July, the Recreation and Park Department announced that a renovation of one of the most drug-addled stretches of the corridor would center on a skate park. Phil Ginsburg, the department's director, said that the skate park was a placeholder while the city marshalled funds for the fully reimagined corridor—an investment, he said, "that San Franciscans and our government may or may not be able to stomach in one bite."

In her office, Breed spoke about the difficulty of getting change through government. "First, I pray," she said. "A lot of our rules and regulations are 'You can't do this, you can't do that,'" she went on. "How do we get to yes? How do we become what San Francisco is known for—being creative, innovative, where anything is possible?" I was surprised to find the head of the city lambasting the constraints of departments that she runs, until I realized that she was channelling public sentiment: in the bluest major city in America today, there is a sense that government is something that you work around or leave behind.

"They say that there's a doom loop, but do we believe that?" Manny Yekutiel cried.

"*No!*" a rowdy group of volunteers yelled back.

"Are we going to show them wrong?"

"*Yes!*"

Yekutiel moved to San Francisco eleven years ago, partly as what he calls "a gay pilgrim"—his coming-out at home, in L.A., had been uneasy—and partly as a veteran of Barack Obama's 2012 campaign team. His first job after that was at the tech-inflected advocacy group FWD.us, started by an Obama fundraiser named Joe Green and Green's Harvard contemporary Mark Zuckerberg. Five years ago, Yekutiel opened Manny's, a café and civic-event space in the Mission District. Long a Latino neighborhood, then filled in by techies, the Mission these days is a snarl of conflicting interests; Yekutiel has sought to unite them, and to bring powerful people into the mix. "We've hosted Adam Schiff, Jill Biden, Katie Porter, Barbara Lee, Kamala Harris, and Jane Fonda," he said. Every Sunday morning, he holds what he calls a Disco Trash Pickup for the neighborhood; that Sunday, a hundred and twenty-two people had shown up to volunteer.

"What are the places where the government, private benefactors, and nonprofits aren't able to do the whole job?" Yekutiel said as he handed out orange vests, trash grabbers, bags, and gloves. "That's where people power comes in."

An assistant named Caleb brought Yekutiel a curious platter of walnut-based dips, which he began to munch. "I love disco," he explained. "I'm full disco vibes all the time." Wearing a pendulous disco-ball necklace over his vest and pink-tinted glasses shaped like hearts, he rose and took up a bullhorn to address the volunteers.

"This is why San Francisco is resilient! This is how our city is going to come out of this!" he cried. "All of you, on three, say 'Trash'! One, two, three . . ."

"Trash!" the volunteers yelled.

## SIGNS, MUSIC

The first word my son signed
was *music:* both hands, fingers conducting
*music* for everything—even hunger,
open mouth for the choo-chew spoon
squealing mmm—*music*. We'd play
a record while he ate *music* when
he wanted milk so I pour and hum
a lullaby or "I Just Don't Know"
by Bill Withers because it's O.K.
not to know what you want
and I want him to know that. *Music*
is wiping the table after the plates *music*
is feel my forehead for fever is whatever
occurs in the center of the body, whatever
makes arms raise up, up.
The second word my son signed
was *bird*—beaked finger to thumb, bird
for everything outside—window, sky, tree,
roof, chimney, aerial, airplane—birds. I saw
I had given him a sign name. Fingers
to eyes raising from thumbs—wide
eye meaning *watchful of the earth*
in three different roots—Hebrew, Arabic,
Latin—I love how he clings
to my shoulders and turns
his head to point at the soft body
of a caterpillar sliding across the counter,
and *signs*, music.

*—Raymond Antrobus*

I took a trash grabber and accompanied Yekutiel to the alleyway beside his café. The street was filled with junk. "Don't pick that up," Yekutiel told me as I snatched a plastic bag out of a puddle. "That's probably urine."

To Yekutiel, the Disco Trash program, which has grown to pickups in nine neighborhoods, is an example of civic activism. "There's a bit of complacency, like"—he raised his voice in mock indignation—" 'Why is there trash on the street?' Well, what are you doing about it?" He picked up what looked to be a pair of underwear. "The government is—too much ideology. Not enough action. I guess that's what elections are for. But you can't rely on elections in a crisis."

Yekutiel describes himself as friendly to the public sector—he is the youngest person on the city's transit board—but much of his work draws from private sources. This year, with Daniel Lurie, he created a nonprofit called the Civic Joy Fund, whose advisory board includes people who work in philanthropy, commerce, labor, City Hall, nonprofits, and drag performance. Its contributors include Visa and the Gap Foundation, both based in San Francisco, as well as tech multibillionaires such as Jack Dorsey. It metes out funding for, among other things, small public-art projects, habitat restoration, and a program for city-block improvements.

We reached the end of the alley. Yekutiel suggested that we continue on a parallel street. The point of the cleanup, he said, is to give people a way to make change in the city beyond yearly visits to the voting booth. "Part of what San Francisco is famous for is this spirit of civic engagement—the Summer of Love, free clinics on Haight Street," he said. "It's like Shabbat, you know? Everyone will go to a Shabbat dinner if they're invited." We looked down the lane, where a small dumpster had been tipped over on the curb. "The food doesn't even need to be good," he said.

Even in 2021, San Francisco had the highest per-capita income level of any major city in America—something that would have been almost inconceivable a couple of generations earlier. In 1995, the city's average home value was about double the national mean; a quarter century later, it was five times as much. Organizers such as Yekutiel can work to balance opposing interests. Just as often, though, it happens that the city's old habit of turning to people power is harnessed for new priorities and goals.

One fresh, cool morning, I stopped in the city's Hayes Valley neighborhood to meet a pair of tech workers, Sachin Agarwal and Steven Buss, who, in 2020, founded the organization GrowSF, now one of the largest nonprofit political spenders in San Francisco. They met me in a pedestrian square, known as Proxy, filled with French garden chairs the color of the Golden Gate Bridge. A passerby out for coffee hailed Agarwal as he sat. He shouted back, "You disappeared off the Internet—you don't use X!"

Twitter had been abruptly renamed two days before. I expressed surprise that the new branding was already in colloquial use.

"That bird was from 2012, so it's literally *eleven years old*," Agarwal told me. He had worked as a product manager at Twitter from 2012 to 2016. "The company was really dysfunctional," he said. "You'd ship these tiny little changes to the product, and almost nothing would change. I'm not trying to say Elon has the answer, but at least he's going to try something totally different." He added, "The fact that they were able to lay off, like, eighty per cent

and the service is still up and running shows the amount of bloat, the layers of management, people eating free lunch on the rooftops!"

Agarwal's exasperation with Twitter mirrors his and Buss's exasperation with San Francisco. The city has an annual budget of fifteen billion dollars—for what? "We should have the best public education in the world, public safety, and clean streets. And the city is just not giving it to us," Agarwal, who wore a GrowSF T-shirt, told me. Men beside him, at an outdoor LuxFit gym, were deadlifting and bench-pressing enormous bars of weight. "Huh-uhh-*uhhh!*" they cried.

Buss, who was wearing the same shirt, told me that he had felt a call to action after becoming aware of development obstructionism while living in a rent-controlled apartment in the Mission and working for Google. San Francisco has more community-review processes than most cities; local residents can call for the review of a building project in the run-up to its approval. In 2020, Buss ran for a seat on the Democratic County Central Committee. "I lost that race, but I took a lot of learnings from it," he said. "In particular, I learned what makes a good candidate."

The two created GrowSF with the idea that political change came through uniting candidates around a particular platform and winning elections. "You can't just go fight for every project one at a time," Agarwal said. Instead, the organization, which operates a super PAC, selects moderate candidates who align with its politics and puts money toward mailers and digital ads. It publishes an online voter guide that purports to pin down candidates' exact positions—Agarwal and Buss send them questionnaires—and explains the finer points of local politics. San Francisco's five hundred thousand voters have been grateful for the guidance; in the elections last year, GrowSF's voter guide received four hundred thousand views, and nearly its entire slate was elected. Next year, it seeks to claim all six Board of Supervisor seats up for election, enough to give a moderate mayor full support—or to allow the board to override a progressive mayor's veto. San Francisco government could finally be run with executive force.

GrowSF has also taken up the business of recalling elected officials who it thinks are underperforming. Last year, in addition to helping to coördinate the recall of three school-board members, the group assisted with the successful recall of the city's first-term district attorney, Chesa Boudin, whose efforts to reduce the number of incarcerations in the city had created friction with the police department—during Boudin's tenure, the over-all number of arrests

in San Francisco dropped precipitously. A month after the recall vote, Boudin was replaced with Brooke Jenkins, a mayoral appointee, who has taken a tough-on-drugs tack.

"We're still just the two of us, but the reach we have is beyond what we could have dreamed of," Agarwal said. (They recently hired a third employee.) Two men in shorts behind him performed bend-and-snaps with kettlebells.

GrowSF is not the only nonprofit with center-left politics to have cropped up recently. "Our organization's real, big-picture goals are reforming the governance structure of San Francisco," Kanishka Cheng, the C.E.O. and co-founder of TogetherSF Action, which launched last year, told me. "We would argue that the executive doesn't have the ability to govern the city like an executive." Four of the seven members of the police commission, for example, are appointed by the mayor but subject to Board of Supervisors approval; the others are appointed directly by the board.

TogetherSF Action hosts the S.F. Politics 101 class led by Joel Engardio, whom it and GrowSF helped to elect, and develops other kinds of programming, too. "We launched this event called Why S.F. Is Broken, and we do it as a game-show format," Cheng said. "We play a little game called S.F. in Jeopardy and teach you about the governance structure and what is broken." In May, TogetherSF bought five hundred thousand dollars' worth of ad space around town and launched a campaign with the slogan "That's Fentalife!" to rile middle-class indignation. "Drug dealers now have more rights than our kids," went one ad; "Keys. Wallet. Narcan," went another.

The campaign was controversial. Lydia Bransten, the executive director of the Gubbio Project, whose annual budget is three hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars, described it to me as "nasty." "To blame poor and displaced people for decline when you had a whole influx of people who came to mine the city's wealth during the tech boom, drove the rents way up, got their money, and then, during COVID, popped out? *No*," she said. Yet the idea that San Francisco is an exceptionally dysfunctional city has stuck in the popular imagination so much so that some posit that this idea itself has become a political tool.

"Early in the pandemic, we came together around a very significant set of solutions, most of which were working," Preston told me. "We rented out entire hotels. We were the only county in California that saw a *reduction* of homelessness during the pandemic." Far from being partisan feats of legislative obstruction, he said, these policies were approved unanimously. "We were told, 'Oh, it's a pandemic, no one will want a new tax'—completely wrong," he said. One ballot measure that passed added a tax on real-estate transactions worth more than ten million dollars; another added a tax on businesses whose highest-paid manager earns more than a hundred times the median employee salary.

"What you're seeing now is a backlash and attempt to redefine all those kind of programs as failures," Preston went on. A few weeks earlier, Elon Musk had begun targeting him personally, at one point tweeting that he "should go to prison" for his political work; Preston took this as evidence that a "billionaire class" was feeling threatened by the new policies. "There's an incredibly well-funded and now much more sophisticated echo chamber—some of which is smoke and mirrors, some of which isn't—to create the perception that the city has had a huge shift to the right."

TogetherSF Action launched with funding from the investor and former venture capitalist Michael Moritz, who has recently become one of the most active contributors to civic and political organizations in town. In the past two years, he has helped fund Yekutiel and Lurie's Civic Joy Fund and co-founded the San Francisco Standard, a new digital media company rigorously reporting on the city's decline. I spoke with Moritz over Zoom one day. He had just left his decades-long post at Sequoia Capital and was enjoying a vacation.

"My apologies for this sort of unseemly attire, but I've been out painting," he said. He was wearing a floppy emerald-green fishing hat, a T-shirt, and cargo shorts. "The most important thing is for these groups, some of which I formed, to become a permanent part of the civic landscape in San Francisco. That will change everything. This is a long game."

Moritz—who is among the wealthy figures who recently invested in an effort to buy tens of thousands of acres of inland-California ranch land with the aim of building a new city—conceded that the problem was more perceptual than data-driven. "Have the major crimes escalated massively? No," he said. "But with all the office workers gone the number of people on the streets has shrunk dramatically, which therefore puts the people who live in tents and the mentally ill and those with drug problems into far sharper relief because they can't as easily sort of melt into the backdrop." Earlier this year, he published an op-ed in the *Financial Times* that began, "It's a strange city that bans plastic straws but permits plastic needles."

Moritz told me that he became aware of the poor state of San Francisco's governance after the passage, in 2018, of Proposition C, which imposed a tax on businesses with more than fifty million dollars of gross annual receipts, earmarking the revenue for housing and mental-health initiatives for homeless populations. "A big part of the reason that downtown is empty is because a cadre of supervisors put a punitive measure on the ballot," he said. (The measure actually got on the ballot through a collection of voter signatures.) "More money wasn't going to solve the problem! It's the lack of tailoring treatments to—and, where necessary, prosecuting—the people who are living on the streets."

Moritz excused himself to welcome some guests who had arrived. He pulled open the front door and said, merrily, "I see *intruders!*"

He ushered them through a pair of French doors to seats in the sun, and padded back to the camera. I asked him whether he thought that devoting so much office space to tech had left downtown prone to crash. He didn't.

"San Francisco has Airbnb, Uber, Twitter—or X.com—Dropbox, Square, Instacart, Stripe, Pinterest, any number of companies," he said. "Any big-city mayor anywhere in the world, if they had that number of companies start in their back yard, would have thought they were lodged on the golden seat in Heaven, right? Instead, these companies have become convenient targets to be attacked." He grimaced. "My guess is that there are no more than a couple

hundred people responsible for driving San Francisco to the precipice," he declared. "I think those like myself have only ourselves to blame—for being absent from the debate."

At the old Beat hangout Caffè Trieste one Saturday afternoon, I found Matt Dorsey at an outdoor table, deep in conversation with the president of the Board of Supervisors, Aaron Peskin—the longest-serving supervisor and a figure at once loved and loathed. To his supporters, he's a matador against stampeding billionaires, a protector of the inner politics of Chinatown, and a strong advocate for environmental causes. (Peskin, a bearish fifty-nine-year-old who swims the frigid, possibly unholy waters of the San Francisco Bay, has posed for *San Francisco* magazine in a Speedo.) To his opponents, he's the exemplar of graybeard NIMBYism, the reason locals sit in hearings debating matters such as shadows cast by new condos instead of letting developers build the housing that the city so desperately needs.

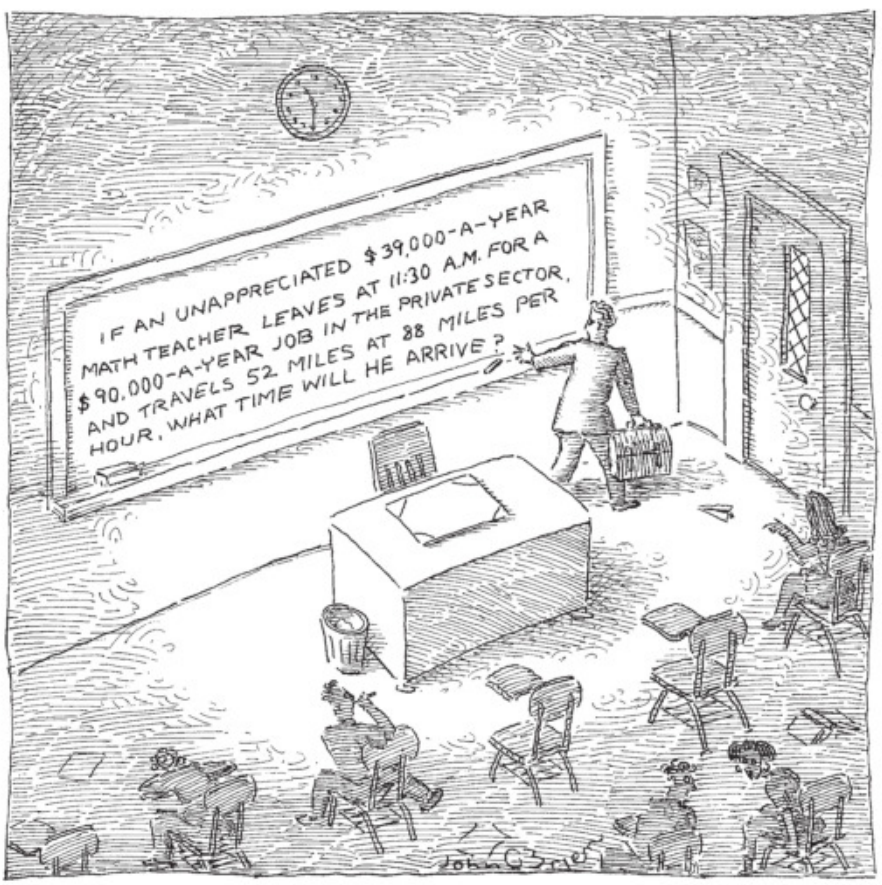
Peskin and Dorsey, his ideological opposite by local measures, were brainstorming about downtown. Since the start of the pandemic, parts of Peskin's district, which comprises sections of downtown and the tourist mire of Fisherman's Wharf, have had some of the lowest commercial-vacancy rates in San Francisco—or, to put it another way, they have proved the most doom-loop-resistant areas of town. In Peskin's eyes, that's a lesson about the trade-offs between volatility and stability. Peskin told me, "There was this notion that Tech 2.0, after the Tech 1.0 contraction, was going to continue double-digit growth forever. Anybody who is rational and has lived twenty-five years would know that that is not true." He wore a flowy black luau-style shirt with the word "CALIFORNIA" patterned across it. A crinkled pink plastic bag containing a white onion and a lime was on the table before him; he was planning to make gazpacho later.

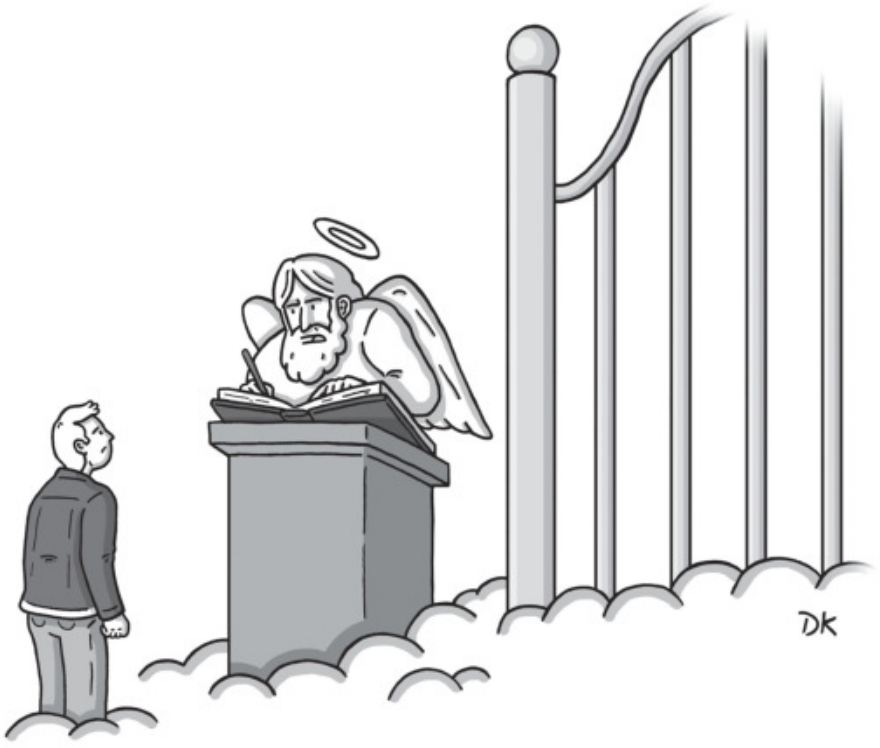
"Everybody thinks that people in the development business are geniuses and only build as much as there is demand for—no!" Peskin said. "It's a game of skill but also luck. If you hit it right, you can make a boatload. If you miss it, you can end up giving the keys back and losing your ass. Welcome to capitalism." In San Francisco, a law passed in the mid-eighties capped the amount of office space that could be built annually, with the unused quota carrying over—a regulatory guardrail that for years kept supply in line with demand and insulated San Francisco from the commercial-real-estate busts that were a regular feature in many midsize cities. Peskin blamed the city's housing dearth on market forces, not red tape. "Residential development has always been a principally permitted use in San Francisco's downtown—forever, forever!" he said. The only reason there aren't huge, dense residential towers everywhere downtown, he said, is that office buildings were more lucrative.

Peskin sees his resistance to the rapid-growth trend as the reason for his district's resilience. Sure, the Italian cafés and jazz bars of North Beach, and the produce stalls and tea venders of Chinatown, don't scream City of the Future. But neither has demand for such businesses ever fallen off, regardless of the economy or where people keep their desks. "Do I care if I'm making everybody feel good because there's a pop-up for two months? Not really," he said of the city's recovery efforts. "Now, if that pop-up says, 'Wow, this is going great and I want to stay for ten years'—*that* was a success."

The city's longtime chief economist, Ted Egan, told me one afternoon that he could see four paths to disaster for a city like San Francisco. "Office industries are eighty per cent of our economy—everything depends on them," he said. If so many workers vanished from downtown that retailers disappeared, causing more offices to shutter, that would be a doom loop. If public transportation had to cut service for want of fares, the city would grow unfriendly to work. If industry fled greater San Francisco, as car-making left Detroit in the fifties, a vortex could begin. And if tax revenue were so depleted that it required stripping services, the city could spin out.

Egan, a trim, bespectacled man employed by the controller's office to analyze the effects of proposed legislation, had suggested that we get drinks at the Iron Horse bar, near his office, and drew down a whiskey cocktail. The






*"So, it says here you threw away a handwritten birthday card from your aunt instead of keeping it in a drawer for fifteen years?"*

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interesting thing, he told me, was that none of those bad things had happened. "In the past year, even downtown, sales-tax revenue is going up," he said. "Retail stores are challenged because of shoplifting, but places like this"—he gestured at the faux-Tudor windows of the Iron Horse—"seem to be doing fine."

The transit system received a $1.1-billion state bailout to continue service. "Everyone sort of thinks tech left, but all that happened is they work from home," Egan said. Employment at San Francisco-based tech companies was, in fact, significantly higher than it had been at the start of the pandemic. "People sort of periodically rediscover that there's homelessness in San Francisco," he added, dryly. "I wouldn't call it a shrinking problem, but they have managed to limit it out of the central business district, whose attractiveness they are focussed on."

And tax revenue? "In 2021, we lost five hundred million dollars—a lot," Egan said. He leaned across the table. "But the context for that is that we had seen so much growth in the last twenty years that we doubled our tax revenue per resident. We were *rolling* in money." Tax losses from commercial real estate were slim. "One of the things that makes it easy for us is Proposition 13"—the much maligned nineteen-seventies law that keyed California property taxes to value at the point of sale. "I never saw the good side of it until we realized how under-assessed all our office buildings are," he said, explaining how the rule cushioned the change in revenue as building values collapsed. "We have to not make utterly moronic spending choices, and generally I think the city is more aware of reality than outsiders give it credit for."

Egan knew how hard it was to keep people in the city after the pandemic: two years ago, he had a child and left the Bay Area for a house in Sacramento. Now he commutes in three days a week—which he finds more remunerative and pleasant than working at a suburban company. There are, he thinks, a lot of people like him: a major metropolitan downtown, like San Francisco's, is simply too well wired with transportation to empty out for long. Suburban office buildings were likelier to bear the brunt of the shift to remote work.

"*That's* really what you want to convert into housing—the suburban office parks by the BART train," he said. "Converting an office building in downtown San Francisco makes no sense, which is why it's not happening." This will be especially true, he thinks, as boom-time mortgages go into foreclosure and office rents fall.

"A one-bedroom was around three hundred per cent of the U.S. average, and now it's around two hundred per cent," Egan said. "A single-family house was six times the average. Now it's four. I think that's a remote-work trend that will continue. So then the question is: Who bites on cheap San Francisco housing? Is it students? Is it immigrants? Is it artists? Is it techies?"

In 2008, the restaurateur Lindsay Tusk and her husband, a chef, opened a restaurant in a part of San Francisco widely believed to be dead. The neighborhood, known as Jackson Square, had old colonnaded storefronts and an interesting history. It had once been a stomping ground for Mark Twain and his circle. (It was home to some excellent booze purveyors.) But the growth of the surrounding city had turned it into an awkward nowhere zone. "It was professional services, like dentists and lawyers," Tusk told me. "There were tumbleweeds."

She had loved the buildings, though—"single story or, at most, two stories, a very relatable kind of architecture," she said—since discovering the neighborhood on a visit to William Stout Architectural Books when she was in college. "It had a very special gravitational pull."

At some point last decade, Jackson Square started to change. Allbirds, the trendy shoe brand, set up its headquarters and flagship there. Fjällräven and other companies moved in. The Tusks' fine-dining project, called Quince, soon began earning Michelin stars, and, in 2010, they opened a more casual companion, called Cotogna ("Quince" in Italian). During the pandemic, when the neighborhood again went dark, the Tusks opened a pop-up grocery and a farmers' market and made de-

livery runs. Their restaurants survived.

And then a curious thing happened: post-pandemic Jackson Square took off. Jony Ive had bought a couple of neighboring properties for his creative collective, LoveFrom, and, according to Tusk, planned to fill retail space with cobblers, bookbinders, and other craftspeople. (There may also be more twenty-first-century activities: it has been reported that LoveFrom is in conversations to produce the first OpenAI consumer device.) Thom Browne, the gray-clad designer of tucked ties and short trousers, opened his first urban California boutique. And Bain Capital is renovating a building on Cotogna's block, with the thought of bringing in a hundred employees.

"Now you've got this interesting mix—some studios, creative spaces, designers, and then a lot of money coming in," Tusk told me at a table at Cotogna. We were eating a salad of gem-lettuce leaves dressed with Meyer-lemon zest and a plate of ravioli filled with corn and melted butter. ("Like summer to me," she said.)

If global tech towers and fast-casual lunch chains reflected one downtown ideal, which is the model now in crisis, the post-pandemic downtown of Jackson Square—eclectic, crafty, and refined—is a vision on the rise. Traders of real estate have noticed. "COVID changed the mind-set," Michael Shvo, a New York-based real-estate magnate who bought the Transamerica Pyramid, in 2020, said. "Tenants want to come to work in a beautiful building with amenities and restaurants and places where they can meet friends and an ecosystem around their working environment." Otherwise, why not work from home?

When the Pyramid was built, the designer, William Pereira, designated land for a public redwood garden at the base of the tower. The trouble was that the public rarely used it. Shvo is fitting the redwood plaza with cafés to pick up on the flâneur commerce of Jackson Square. "Sometimes it requires an outsider to see what the insiders don't really see," he told me. "The Pyramid is the second-most-expensive building to rent in America, in a market that many people have written off. Which tells you two things. No. 1, there is desire from great minds and great companies to be in San Francisco. And, two, tenants are willing to pay." This year, he granted a lease at two hundred and fifty dollars a square foot—the most expensive office space in San Francisco to date.

If the struggle in San Francisco's downtown is the struggle of the American urban dream—how to be a global city and a small, authentic town at the same time—the solution rests with those who can build bridges between structures of power and grassroots enterprise. As the pandemic took hold, Jacob Bindman, a recent college graduate, found himself at home, in San Francisco, looking for a job. On March 10th, days before the city's lockdown, Lenore Estrada, his former boss at a bakery that did catering for big tech companies, contacted him in a state of alarm: March 14th was Pi Day.

"Which does not matter unless you own a pie business in San Francisco, in which case it's on par with Thanksgiving," Bindman explained. "In something like a six-hour window, she had one hundred per cent of her Pi Day orders cancelled, which represented about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of product already made. I was, like, What can we do with this huge volume of pie?"

As they mulled over the problem, they happened to hear that organizations that provided food to people in need had had their normal operations curtailed by the lockdown. They saw

that the two problems fit together. "We know there's a bunch of restaurants that need capital, and we know there's a bunch of people who need food," Bindman said. One of Estrada's friends, the Twitch co-founder Emmett Shear, offered a million dollars to help connect the halves.

Four days later, Bindman, Estrada, and a group of ten friends began buying meals from restaurants and delivering them to food-relief programs. In their first week, they delivered a thousand meals. In their second, eighteen thousand. By May, they were sending fifty thousand meals around the city. To every new restaurant they worked with they committed to spend at least eight thousand dollars a week for ten weeks. When Shear's money started to run out, the delivery team applied for funding to the city government, which opened two contracts of ten to twenty million dollars each, for distribution to homebound seniors and to converted shelter hotels.

Today, the project, a nonprofit called SF New Deal, works with Dennis Phillips's office as a liaison between the city government, private donors, and small businesses, to which it offers services. It runs a transportation program for workers and helps businesses bring outdoor dining structures into compliance. And now, with Dennis Phillips, it places businesses, artists, and pop-ups in empty spaces around town; all the while, it collects data to fine-tune its services to suit common needs. Bindman told me that he saw the effort as at once exacting and broad.

"There has been an obsession for a long time around whose job it is to fix San Francisco," Bindman told me. "There's definitely a strong belief that's, like, 'Tech people made problems. Tech people need to fix problems.' There's a strong cohort that's, like, 'We pay a bunch of taxes. The government needs to be able to solve this.' And there's a cohort of people who are, like, 'Only people from San Francisco can solve San Francisco.'"

Traffic washed by. We were sitting at a sidewalk table at a café on the corner of Arguello and Clement, near the apartment where Bindman lives and works—the nonprofit has no offices. I had taken a long walk across San Francisco, through the neighborhoods and parks and out toward the ocean. It was a bright and sunny day with tufted clouds and breezes sweeping in off the Pacific, and I allowed myself to think that the city had not in years felt quite so set for possibility, so open and warm. "I think what SF New Deal represents is the very obvious answer, which is: everyone. *Everyone* is responsible," Bindman said. He took a sip of coffee and looked up. "The only solution that's a real solution is a solution in which everyone is involved." ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

# Hot Air

*Carbon offsets are sold as a fix for climate catastrophe—but brands have paid millions for worthless credits.*

BY HEIDI BLAKE

One evening in November, 2021, a group of men assembled at sundown on the terrace of the Ruckomechi Camp, a safari resort on the Zambezi River. Since arriving by private plane, they had gone out lion-spotting, boated down the river, and landed a giant tiger fish; now they were clinking gin-and-tonics. Hippos wallowed in the water below.

The party was led by Renat Heuberger, a forty-four-year-old Swiss entrepreneur with narrow eyes and a cropped copper beard. Heuberger was the chief executive of South Pole, the world's largest carbon-offsetting firm, and he had come to Zimbabwe to fight off an urgent threat to his company.

A decade earlier, South Pole had signed a deal to sell carbon offsets from an effort to protect a vast swath of forest on the banks of Lake Kariba, upriver from the camp. The Kariba project, spanning an area ten times the size of New York City, was among the world's first "avoided deforestation" programs; by deterring local people from chopping down trees, it promised to prevent the release of tens of millions of tons of greenhouse gas. Leading corporations, including Volkswagen, Gucci, Nestlé, Porsche, and Delta Air Lines, paid South Pole nearly a hundred million dollars for Kariba credits, allowing them to market goods or services as "carbon neutral."

South Pole thus pioneered a model of carbon offsetting that has been counted among our best hopes for staving off climate catastrophe: a mechanism that diverts funds from polluters in wealthy countries to protect crucial ecosystems in the Global South. Heuberger, a kinetic, grandiloquent man, speaks expansively about his mission. "We're here to save the climate," he told me.

As a child, Heuberger spent his spare time gluing protest flyers to car windows, and he considered himself an activist. But, as he built his company, he had developed a consumer-friendly brand of climate optimism. "It's not true

*One founder of the carbon firm South Pole resigned after developing doubts about offsetting. "It's just paper credits," he said.*

that to save the climate we will all need to go into perpetual lockdown or stop having fun," he said, promoting Porsche's offsetting program. "In fact, it's the opposite"—drivers should enjoy their vehicles, knowing that "every ton of $CO_2$ they compensate for is backed by a verified emission reduction."

This perspective was enthusiastically received: Heuberger had regular speaking engagements at Davos and a spot in the World Economic Forum's network of experts. As brands scrambled for inexpensive ways to reduce emissions, the market for offsets surged, quadrupling in 2021 alone. That year, South Pole was approaching a billion-dollar valuation, which would make it the world's first "carbon unicorn."

But alarming news had reached the company's headquarters, in Zurich: it was at risk of losing its most lucrative project. By the terms of the Kariba deal, the company purchased carbon credits from a developer who oversaw the area's forestland, and sold them for a twenty-five-per-cent commission. Now a competitor had offered the developer a substantial payment to take over the project. To help devise a response, Heuberger turned to an old friend from college, Dirk Muench, who had recently joined South Pole. Muench had left Wall Street to support climate action in the world's poorest places. He was a self-confessed stickler, and could be too fastidious for Heuberger's taste—but he was a skilled dealmaker.

When Muench heard the details, he was astonished that South Pole had done so little to secure its most important project. The entire agreement rested on a perfunctory contract that the developer, a white Zimbabwean tycoon named Steve Wentzel, could break anytime. To insure Wentzel's loyalty, Muench urged Heuberger to buy a stake in his business. They flew to Harare and took a chartered plane to the safari camp to conduct the negotiations in style.

Wentzel, a trim, chiselled man with a buzz cut silvering at the sides, was a former show jumper who had made a fortune in offshore finance and then started investing in gold mines. On safari, he confided that he had no expertise in forest preservation; he had tried out carbon offsetting on a whim, when he was given a parcel of land as payment for a debt. (He told me the same story this July. "I don't know anything," he said. "I'm not a tree scientist or anything like that.")

Muench began to feel perturbed. A core principle of carbon offsetting holds that profits should be shared with local people, and South Pole maintains in its promotional literature that "communities living in the Kariba project area are the owners and main beneficiaries." But, as Wentzel described his indoor horse-riding range in Harare and his varied business interests, Muench wondered how much of the money that corporations spent on Kariba credits made it to the people on the ground.

As Muench probed Wentzel about the workings of his business, Heuberger was abashed. "If you want to survive as a businessman in Zimbabwe, you have to be a little bit of a special character," he later said. "We need to treat him with a little bit of respect." Wentzel told me that the inquiries didn't bother him: "I was, like, Yeah, whatever. As long as I get my end of the deal." Still, he had no intention of disclosing his financial

ILLUSTRATION BY JON McNAUGHT


*"Yes, I was a little late again, but it isn't like I have any control over the traffic or how many daily puzzles keep coming out!"*

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practices. "You have your ways and means, and they're not all traceable, put it that way," he said. "No one actually has a damn clue about what's going on. Not even South Pole. I hold the key to Pandora's box."

As the men sipped their sundowners, Heuberger made Wentzel a striking offer. South Pole would pay about thirty million dollars for almost eight million credits. It would also open negotiations for a multimillion-dollar equity stake in his company, Carbon Green Investments. Wentzel agreed, and the mood on the terrace turned jubilant. Food and wine were ordered, and the celebrations continued by lantern light.

Muench acknowledged that, commercially speaking, the trip had been a "great success," but he couldn't shake a sense of unease about South Pole's work in Zimbabwe. "I realized, O.K., this is a huge money-making machine," he told me. Back in Zurich, he kept asking questions. "I said, 'Do you know what happens with the money?' And then someone told me, 'Dirk, you should look at the carbon side of this project—not just at the finances—to understand how bad it is.'"

The notion of carbon as a fungible commodity, like coffee or cotton, emerged in the late nineteen-eighties. As humanity reckoned with the harms of fossil fuels, a U.S. power company named Applied Energy Services conceived a novel way to reduce emissions: it could surround its main coal-fired power station with a forest, to absorb the carbon billowing from its chimney.

That plan turned out to be implausible. Scientists calculated that, to absorb the carbon the facility would pump out in its life span, the company needed to plant some fifty-two million trees—an impossibility in densely populated Connecticut. Then an executive named Sheryl Sturges had an inspiration: since the atmosphere was a global commons, why not situate the forest elsewhere? The company eventually paid for forty thousand farmers to plant trees in the mountains of Guatemala. It cost just two million dollars—pennies per ton of carbon.

Sturges's idea caught the world's attention. "Antidote for a Smokestack," a headline in *Time* magazine announced. A decade later, the concept of carbon offsetting was enshrined in international law, as thirty-seven industrialized nations and the European Union agreed to emissions-reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol. Through the United Nations' Clean Development Mechanism, rich countries struggling to meet their goals could compensate by paying for projects in impoverished ones.

Growing up in Zurich, Heuberger had been terrified by the environmental calamities that defined the eighties and nineties: Chernobyl, the ozone hole, acid rain. He was a bright, sensitive boy who spent most of his time alone, biking in the mountains and memorizing train timetables. His anxiety about the threats to the planet became "paralyzing," he told me. When the Kyoto deal was signed, he had recently returned from a year as an exchange student in Indonesia, where he was "completely overwhelmed" by the experience of poverty. The prospect of a global trade in carbon struck him as a panacea—a way of using capitalist methods for radical aims. "Polluter pays, cleaner earns," he figured. "You could take the tools of the enemy and make them work for a better world."

Heuberger enrolled to study environmental science at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, where he found like-minded peers: young environmentalists who gathered to dream up gambits, from supplying the campus with organic coffee to publishing a magazine about sustainability. Among them was Muench, who was studying industrial engineering. "Renat was a little bit socially awkward, but also genuinely impressive," he told me. "He was like one of those activist environmentalists, whereas I was a typical business guy."

In 2002, as they neared the end of their studies, Heuberger, Muench, and a classmate named Patrick Bürgi were invited to a sustainability conference in Costa Rica. Preparing a presentation on carbon trading, Heuberger and Bürgi decided to make the concept more tangible by asking attendees to pay to off-

set the emissions from their flights. They got hold of a credit-card imprinter and ambushed delegates after each session: "Do you know that you emitted two tons of $CO_2$ by coming to this conference?" They raised more than ten thousand dollars. "It was quite easy to convince them," Bürgi said. "And then we started to get nervous—'What are we going to do with the money?'"

In the end, they donated the funds to the university hosting the event, to install solar heaters in place of a diesel boiler that supplied gym showers—an intervention that, by their reckoning, saved around seventy tons of carbon a year. "It was all kind of handmade and improvised," Bürgi said. "But it was so successful." Back home, he and Heuberger, along with a few friends, registered a nonprofit named MyClimate to continue offering offsets. (Muench, less confident in the project, left to pursue a career in investment banking.) They set up shop in the office of a supportive professor, launching a rudimentary Web site that allowed people to calculate their emissions and pay the appropriate penance. Carbon "tickets" were printed out and mailed to customers—until the venture became so successful that the professor complained they were using up all his toner.

By the time the Kyoto Protocol was ratified, in 2005, MyClimate was financing significant climate-action projects, including an initiative to supply clean electricity to a hundred Indian villages; it soon won a contract to compensate for emissions from the FIFA World Cup in Germany. The founders were still operating on a tiny budget, yet, as the U.N.'s carbon-trading system got under way, they saw new possibilities. In a multibillion-dollar market, perhaps the profit motive would be the most effective way to spur action. "Capitalism works very efficiently," Heuberger said. "The idea that you could actually make money is a massive driver." The following year, he and Bürgi left their student venture behind and registered a company with three other friends, with a maxim of "profit for purpose."

The new business would focus on cultivating projects to sell credits through the U.N. system. The name, South Pole, referred both to Antarctica's melting ice caps and to the Global South, where most of its projects would be based. Heuberger borrowed twenty thousand francs from his parents for his stake in the business, and the entrepreneurs secured a workspace: a disused university chemistry lab, with long banks of sinks and cannisters of nitrogen that clients sometimes mistook for sequestered carbon. In the summer, they took breaks to swim in the Limmat, and in the winter they skied together.

Their first breakthrough came easily. China had just announced a five-year plan for renewable energy, and developers of wind, solar, and hydropower plants were gathering for the country's first Carbon Expo. Heuberger called a backpacking buddy who spoke Chinese and asked him to meet in Beijing. They printed business cards with a penguin logo, and scheduled meetings with developers in the lobbies of five-star hotels, though they were sleeping in a youth hostel.

South Pole's pitch was simple: it would help developers sell credits based on the carbon that would have been emitted if the power they produced had instead come from fossil fuels. The income would be small compared with what they made selling electricity, but it would come at no cost; South Pole would take care of all the complex carbon accounting, in exchange for a commission.

Heuberger's meetings at the conference led to several large projects, including a sprawling network of hydropower plants in the mountains of southwest China. After that, the company expanded rapidly. The founders scattered across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, signing up hundreds more projects. Soon, South Pole had opened branches in Thailand, Mexico, Indonesia, and India. Staffers, who came to be known as "penguins," greeted new employees with cries of "Welcome to the iceberg!"

In the years after the Kyoto targets came into effect, thousands of projects were registered under the U.N.'s Clean Development Mechanism, and hundreds of millions of credits were issued, each worth one metric ton of carbon. Yet, as the market grew, so did questions about its integrity. Scholars worried that developers would inflate their projects' climate impact. Many environmentalists dismissed offsetting as a system of empty indulgences. One online spoof invited unfaithful spouses to pay someone else to remain faithful: "By paying Cheat Neutral, you're funding monogamy-boosting offset projects."

At parties in Zurich, South Pole's founders were grilled about the ethics of the carbon trade. "We were constantly challenged by friends," Bürgi told me. But Heuberger brushed aside such concerns. If humanity was to have any chance of saving itself, he was convinced, "there must be a positive narrative to climate action." When skeptics disagreed, he told me, his reaction was "Shut up. Keep it to yourself. Because we are on a mission here."

In 2009, South Pole attracted its first major investment, from BP. An executive in the oil company's alternative-energy division, Justin Adams, took a seat on South Pole's board, and made a close study of Heuberger. "Renat's a complex character, who I think is extremely strategic and thoughtful about how you can give people some hope in a time of fear," he told me. "But I suspect, like so many of us, there are deeper shadows in our own psyches. He had all the makings of a little emperor, and he's incredibly tough."

The association with a major oil company didn't trouble Heuberger. "We can talk to the biggest boys in the world," he said. With the market flourishing, he became increasingly focussed on maximizing revenue. "I want to spin a big wheel," he told me. "With more money we can have more impact. We can do better, bigger things."

One day in 2010, an e-mail from Steve Wentzel, the Zimbabwean tycoon, arrived in the in-box of one of South Pole's founders—a tall, bluff German man named Christian Dannecker. It invited the company to enter new territory.

Wentzel ran a business in Guernsey that promised to "provide financial liberty through modern off shore financial services," as well as a money-lending enterprise based in Mauritius. He had recently acquired a parcel of woodland from a debtor who had failed to repay a large loan. The surrounding area was thronged with endangered wildlife, but the plot had been devastated by trophy hunting—"If you see a rabbit, it's a tourist," Wentzel said. At first, he thought that the land had little use. Then he

heard about carbon credits and thought, "Let's see whether we can recoup our money that way." He found South Pole through Google.

Dannecker was thrilled. He had a passion for trees, and had often urged Heuberger to consider forest-carbon projects. "It's bloody tricky, but it needs to work, because otherwise climate finance will not reach those remote corners of the world," he said.

Dannecker flew to Zimbabwe with a team of experts to assess the possibilities. Wentzel's land was in the Binga district, south of Lake Kariba, an area threatened by economic turbulence. Zimbabwe was beset by hyperinflation—the South Pole team brought home a trillion-dollar bill as a souvenir—and by mass unemployment. Subsistence farmers were clearing patches of forest to plant crops, graze animals, and gather firewood. Dannecker and Wentzel figured that they could change those habits, largely by providing training in sustainable agriculture, and then sell credits based on the trees that they protected. "It's the bloody poorest area in the world that I have ever been in," Dannecker said. "This is where the money should go."

To secure coöperation in the area, flyers were distributed with cartoons of trees growing in the shape of dollar signs. Wentzel persuaded local chiefs to allow him to expand the project across four large districts, spanning two million acres of forest. In exchange, he promised that seventy per cent of his revenues from the sale of carbon credits would be invested in Kariba and shared with the populace. "They all jumped on the bandwagon," Wentzel told me.

To Wentzel's mind, the people living in the forest would be getting money for nothing. "Don't cut the trees down, that's about the sum total of what they have to do," he said. "We don't ask them to get up in the morning, we don't ask them to do press-ups, we don't ask the birds to fly backwards. It is just a net positive for them."

He set up a company, Carbon Green Investments, to receive the sales proceeds from South Pole, and opened its accounts in the tax haven of Guernsey. "You have to use certain conduits," he told me. "Ultimately, my goal is to make sure that the project succeeds, and everyone gets the benefit. How it gets there? I'd rather you didn't ask those questions."

There is no hope of curbing the worst effects of climate change without saving our remaining forests. Earth's three trillion trees absorb nearly a third of humanity's carbon output, yet they continue to be destroyed at an alarming rate, releasing those stores back into the atmosphere. Forest-based offsetting rests on a simple premise: if this carbon payload can be sold, it becomes more lucrative to leave trees standing than to cut them down.

Yet it is extraordinarily difficult to quantify how much carbon these schemes really save. To do so, you must demonstrate that the forest would have been razed without protection—a counterfactual that is nearly impossible to prove. There are also issues of "leakage": even if the agents of deforestation are driven out of one area, they may cut down trees someplace else. Then there is the question of permanence. Greenhouse gases can linger in the atmosphere for thousands of years—but forests are vulnerable to wildfires and other calamities, and most protection schemes last no more than a few decades. Twenty years after Applied Energy Services funded the Guatemalan tree-planting project, researchers found that it had largely failed. (A.E.S. disputes this.) The enormous amount of land and labor devoted to forestry had led to food shortages, and arguments had broken out; some farmers had simply refused to plant the trees. In the end, the researchers calculated, the program had offset only about ten per cent of the emissions from the coal plant in Connecticut.

The U.N.'s carbon system allowed offsets in a variety of categories, but it excluded forest-carbon projects, because of the particular challenges of verifying their benefits. U.N. officials had deliberated over an assessment framework called REDD—"reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries"—to distinguish the worthwhile forest-carbon projects from the boondoggles. But, from the beginning, there was controversy over the science, and concern over the human cost of a forest-carbon boom. White developers had begun buying up forestland in the Global South, and reports emerged of "carbon cowboys" using violence and trickery to drive Indigenous people from their territories.

Though the U.N. carbon-trading system never implemented the REDD framework, it was taken up by a rival source of accreditation: a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., launched by carbon-industry players. The agency, which became known as Verra, had adopted the U.N.'s accounting methodologies, promising to apply them with a lighter touch.

Verra allowed developers to choose among several different ways to calculate the credits that their projects would generate. That alarmed critics, who warned


*"Hey, buddy, when life gives you lemons, ask me for startup capital and we can get into the fruit-flavored-beverage market."*

that developers would simply select whatever model yielded the most credits. The agency's longtime chief executive, an environmental entrepreneur named David Antonioli, acknowledged the problem but told me, "If you require perfection, you'll have a hundred million dollars' worth of climate action. If you're more pragmatic about it, you might have two billion or five billion."

To register the Kariba project with Verra, South Pole had to predict how much of the forest would be lost without any intervention, and thus determine how much carbon the scheme would conserve over a thirty-year life span. Credits would be issued every year against that total, and the prediction would be checked once a decade, by comparing Kariba with an unguarded reference area nearby. South Pole's data analysts initially estimated that the program could save around fifty-two million tons of carbon. But Verra required them to rerun these calculations using one of its approved methodologies. The scientists used one named VM9, which generated a startlingly different projection: if the Kariba site was left undefended, deforestation would explode, resulting in the eventual loss of ninety-six per cent of the forest. On that basis, the project would be eligible for almost two hundred million credits—four times the initial estimate.

Wentzel was delighted. At the time, the price of a single credit was about ten euros, suggesting that his cut might amount to hundreds of millions. The project began operating in 2011, opening a patchwork of community gardens and beehives across the site. "This is me on the way to getting this money back," he said. Then, with shocking abruptness, the carbon market collapsed.

"I remember watching the price curve in disbelief," Heuberger told me. "You'd check at 9 A.M., you'd check at 10 A.M., you'd check at 11 A.M., and every time it has fallen another five cents." By the end of 2012, the price of a single credit, which had peaked at twenty-five euros, had tumbled to thirty-nine cents.

Since the Kyoto Protocol had come into force, the market had been driven by government regulations, which obliged polluters that couldn't reduce their emissions to buy credits instead. When the financial crisis caused a slump in industrial activity, demand plunged.

Investors' confidence was further eroded by a series of scandals. Boiler-room scams selling fake offsets had sprung up across Europe, and hackers had penetrated the carbon registries of national governments to siphon off credits. One sprawling fraud, described by French police as "the heist of the century," had cost tax authorities five billion euros. After it was exposed, the Danish government admitted that eighty per cent of the country's carbon-trading firms were fronts for the racket.

Even the legitimate programs inspired little confidence. The U.N.'s Clean Development Mechanism had issued more than a billion carbon credits—three-quarters of which researchers later found to be environmentally dubious. Many of the projects were in China, including the sorts of renewable-energy schemes that South Pole was marketing. These plants, critics said, were too profitable to need carbon finance, and the credits they sold gave buyers license to go on polluting. Still more problematic were coolant factories that deliberately increased production of greenhouse gases, then profited by capturing and destroying them.

The greatest blow to the market was the failure of international climate agreements. The U.N.'s Copenhagen summit, in 2009, was supposed to produce new binding emissions limits, but the negotiations collapsed. Three years later, the Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period skittered to a chaotic end, with almost half the participants having missed their targets and major players refusing to accept new ones. (The U.S. never ratified the agreement.)

"After ten years of believing that governments are lifting up the better world, the plug was out," Heuberger said. He resolved that the market must be rebuilt, but this time the private sector would have to take the lead. "The U.N. was gone, the governments were gone. We and Verra were still around, so we did it ourselves," he said. "Of course, it was not perfect. But it was the only show in town."

Heuberger summoned his team to a seaside resort in Krabi, on the coast of Thailand—a province of white-sand beaches, mangrove forests, and jungle islands. There, he outlined a plan to reposition South Pole. Rather than cater to clients struggling to meet government emissions caps, it would serve the so-called voluntary market—companies who chose to diminish their climate impact, for reasons of ethics or public relations.

Even with the market in retreat, South Pole planned to continue signing up new projects and stockpiling credits. Heuberger was convinced that the demand would soon rebound, and that his company would occupy a position of unchallenged dominance. "Everyone else is dead," he said. "We are going to come out big here." As it happened, it would take years for the market to recover, but Heuberger was right that the absence of competition would provide an advantage. South Pole could "very easily contract with project developers, because there were no other buyers," Hannes Zimmermann, a former corporate-investment director at the company, told me.

As South Pole grew more dominant, some employees felt that it was straying from its purpose. Among the dozens of current and former staffers I spoke to, one quit after being asked to work with a chemical company whose carbon-offsetting proposals seemed to have no climate value. A second resigned after becoming concerned that South Pole was making exaggerated claims about its projects' benefits for local communities. Others objected to deals with commercial timber companies, which could earn credits by leaving tree plantations standing for a short time before cutting them down. One such scheme, which South Pole told clients would transform "degraded land in rural Mexico by sustainably growing teak trees," was run by a company that derives more than ninety-seven per cent of its revenues from logging.

Christoph Sutter, who served as the company's founding C.E.O. before agreeing to share the role with Heuberger, had written a doctoral thesis on assessing the impact of offsetting projects. But, in six years leading South Pole, he had come

to doubt the value of the carbon trade, particularly the sort of large renewable-energy projects South Pole was promoting. "I was building up this worry," he said. "It's just paper credits." He told me that he remained friends with Heuberger, but did not share his encompassing faith in offsetting. "The big majority of what you see in the market, in my view, boils down to a lot of greenwashing, a lot of marketing, a lot of money-making," he said. Heuberger had little patience for that sort of negativity. "Investors can smell it if the mood is not good," he said. Sutter quietly resigned in 2012.

In the depths of the crash, Wentzel became increasingly disillusioned. His income from credit sales had collapsed, and yet, by his estimate, it cost about sixty thousand dollars a month to pay for his project's staff and initiatives—community gardens, beehives, wells, fire protection. "I got myself into quite a big hole," he told me.

Local people were hardly lining up to thank him. In 2014, a community leader named Elmon Mudenda travelled to a Transparency International workshop in Harare and suggested that the Kariba project was a scam. "We have not seen anything really tangible," he said, according to the Zimbabwe *Herald*.

The following year, two Zimbabwean researchers travelled to the site to interview residents and published a damning study, "Struggles Over Carbon in the Zambezi Valley." They reported that the project's developers believed that "communal resources, including forests and wildlife, are there for the taking." The district councils, the study found, were "like a sleeping partner, with very little knowledge of what the project is all about and with no voice in its direction."

As pressure from the community mounted, Wentzel lost patience. One Saturday, he called South Pole and threatened to scrap the whole enterprise. "Carbon is nonsense," Dannecker recalled him saying. Wentzel demanded a million dollars by Monday to keep the project alive. Heuberger was at a friend's wedding in Italy when he heard the news. "We made a snap decision to ship the money," he told me. "Of course, we wanted something against that money. So we just took a few credits."

In fact, South Pole bought three million credits, at a low price of fifty cents apiece; it bought about the same number the following year. Ordinarily, the company made money by acting as an intermediary, selling credits on behalf of developers and charging a commission. Now it bought the credits directly, meaning that it would keep all the profits when they were sold. Wentzel told me that, after receiving the funds, he drove through the Kariba site, settling his obligations with bundles of cash. "A hundred thousand dollars is only as big as a brick," he said. "It's not difficult to carry it around."

The intervention revived the project. Mudenda, the community leader who had previously criticized Kariba, now praised its beekeeping efforts to a local newspaper; villagers were making four hundred dollars for harvests of organic honey. In 2016, Dannecker flew to Zimbabwe, and blogged about his visit under the heading "Why I Get Out of Bed Every Morning." The area had undergone a drought, but the project's wells had provided water, and its farming efforts had yielded food. "Sometimes, the business feels like what it is—a business," he wrote. "But it's actually much more: our business has a purpose."

Yet the company's business in Zimbabwe rested on a shaky foundation. Project monitors had surveyed the site and found fewer trees than South Pole planned to claim credit for. Then Dannecker learned something even more alarming: the rate of forest loss in the project's reference region—the benchmark against which its success would be measured—was starkly lower than projected. The wave of deforestation that South Pole's efforts were supposed to prevent was looking more like a trickle, which could significantly diminish the value of the project.

Dannecker decided not to do anything rash. "There was no urgency, for two reasons," he told me. First, there were still years to go before South Pole was due to check its model against reality. Second, amid the market slump, "there was no bloody demand" for the Kariba credits anyway. But that was about to change.

One Friday in August, 2018, a small figure in a yellow raincoat shuffled up to the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm and sat down at the foot of the building. Beside her was a sign painted with block letters: "SKOLSTREJK FÖR KLIMATET."

Greta Thunberg's "school strike" represented something rare in an age of futility: an individual act that reverberated around the world. The movement that she inspired, in which millions of children skipped class to demand climate action, gave rise to the biggest environmental protests in history. To Heuberger, himself a former child activist, the fifteen-year-old Swede seemed like a kindred spirit. "Greta Thunberg and the climate strike were of outstanding importance," he said at the time. "Today, no listed company can afford to be on the sidelines when it comes to climate protection."

The strike, playing out amid wildfires and increasingly apocalyptic weather, put renewed pressure on the world's largest companies. South Pole's business soared. "Going carbon neutral is the latest luxury trend," the company proclaimed, after Gucci announced that it would use South Pole credits to cancel out the emissions of its supply chain. Nestlé soon declared that Kit Kats and Nespresso pods would become carbon neutral. Porsche assured customers that the emissions from ten thousand miles in a Cayenne could be scrubbed for as little as sixty-seven dollars. "Climate action has to move away from this idea that only completely green people are part of it, the kind of people wearing hemp shirts and walking everywhere," Heuberger said, in an interview promoting the scheme.

Even after Thunberg denounced offsetting as "a dangerous climate lie," her movement fuelled the market. JetBlue announced that it would use South Pole credits to help offset the emissions from its U.S. flights. Delta followed with a billion-dollar pledge. Scores of other companies used South Pole offsets toward their net-neutrality claims.

Though South Pole has a portfolio of more than a thousand projects, its partnership with Wentzel proved singularly lucrative—not least because of the credits it had bought directly during the slump, for fifty cents apiece. The sale of these credits provided no additional funding to the project, but the margins for South Pole were huge. Kariba credits would ultimately be worth more than fifteen dollars.

Heuberger liked to say that business

was like surfing: you waited for the wave to come, and then you rode it all the way. South Pole launched a major expansion, growing to twelve hundred employees and twenty-nine international offices. To celebrate the opening of its New York branch, it announced that it had made the entire city carbon neutral for one hour. It repeated the trick during the city's 2019 Climate Week—but this time it claimed that, for the span of one second, it had neutralized the emissions of the entire world.

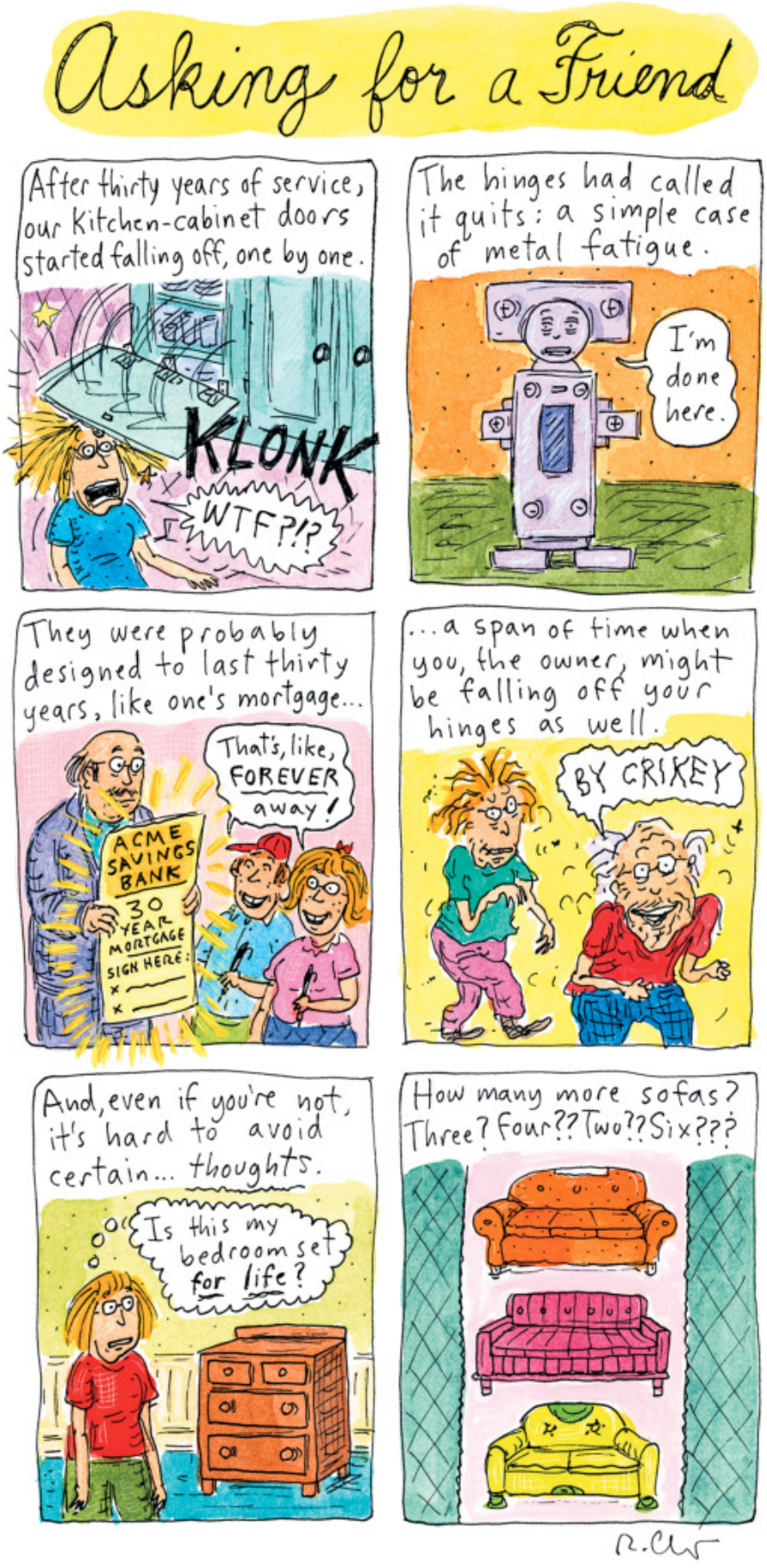
The carbon market grew sevenfold after the school strike, to two billion dollars a year—but that was still smaller than global sales of nail clippers, or fireworks, or pepper. In September, 2020, a new initiative emerged that promised to radically expand the trade.

The Taskforce on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets was a corporate powerhouse, led by Mark Carney, the former head of the Bank of England. It had some four hundred members, including many of the world's largest suppliers of fossil fuels. Oil companies presented particularly voracious demand; their net-zero pledges required cancelling out several billion tons of carbon a year—far more than the world's supply of offsets. Carbon credits had typically been sold from a single developer to a single buyer, often with the aid of an intermediary like South Pole. Carney's vision was to effectively create a stock market for offsets, so that they could be traded with the same speed and ease as any other financial instrument.

By the logic of the markets, such trading would help facilitate funding to environmental projects. In practice, it often diverted funds to speculators. BP and Shell had opened carbon-trading desks, and the Saudi government did, too. Gilles Dufrasne, of the nonprofit Carbon Market Watch, observed that credits could be traded over and over before being used to offset emissions: "When you buy a carbon credit, what is the chance that somewhere in the value chain it was once owned by Shell, and that some of what you pay represents the cut they took?"

When the task force held a promotional event at a U.N. climate summit in Glasgow, Thunberg and other protesters were filmed outside, singing, "You can shove your climate crisis up your

SKETCHBOOK BY ROZ CHAST




*"I've been making an effort to go to more cultural events in between severe weather events."*

• •

arse." Later, she tweeted an addendum: "I've decided to go net-zero on swear words and bad language. In the event that I should say something inappropriate I pledge to compensate that by saying something nice."

Despite the controversy, South Pole was quick to capitalize on the demand. It made deals with Gazprom and Chevron. TotalEnergies announced that it had delivered its first shipment of "carbon neutral liquefied natural gas" using Kariba credits, and the Dutch provider Greenchoice bought millions more to market its gas as "sustainable." South Pole's willingness to do business with energy giants rankled its workforce. The staffers were largely young and idealistic, and many felt that the company was helping the world's worst polluters repair their image. Heuberger defended the choice: "Why wouldn't those guys who make gazillions of dollars of profits put a portion of that money into funding climate action?"

The head of South Pole's consultancy division, Rebecca Self, was concerned that the company was awarding "Climate Neutral" badges to clients who seemed to be making little meaningful effort to cut their emissions. But, she told me, when she raised these objections, Heuberger accused her of "sounding like an N.G.O." and "trying to kill the projects." (Heuberger maintains that he does not recall saying this, but in our conversations he repeatedly condemned environmental nonprofits, complaining about their "destructive all-out bashing" of the carbon market and even suggesting that such organizations are secretly chaos agents funded by the oil industry.) Not long afterward, Self learned that South Pole had helped the Qatar World Cup substantiate a carbon-neutrality claim that excluded most of the emissions from the construction of seven air-conditioned stadiums. She put her concerns in writing and resigned.

South Pole's growth continued unimpeded, and it acquired five smaller rivals. The founders began selling their own shares to wealthy investors, including the government of Singapore, the Liechtenstein royal family, and Salesforce. A deal with Swisscom secured South Pole's billion-dollar valuation, though Heuberger told me that he came to regret the status it conferred. "As long as we were a startup, we were everybody's darling," he said. "People think if you're a unicorn you must have made a shitload of money and completely ripped everybody off." Still, he remained afraid of being outpaced by some fast-growing competitor. "We have to defend our market share," he reasoned. "Doubling is for losers, because everybody else is tripling."

When Dirk Muench went to work at South Pole, in May, 2021, it felt like a homecoming. In his early days on Wall Street, he had been enthralled by the "prestige and grandeur," he told me, but he had come to see all that as "smoke and mirrors." He had left JPMorgan, studied climate science at Columbia, and eventually reached out to his old roommate Patrick Bürgi. "What I really want to do is try to direct large amounts of capital towards climate projects," Muench said.

Hired as the head of corporate investments, he rejoined his college friends at the Technopark, a hulking research complex in Zurich that had housed South Pole's first office. The company now occupied a much grander space there, but the founders still swam together in the river. "Everything felt really good," Muench told me.

Gradually, though, he realized that South Pole was far less deeply involved than he had believed in the projects it presented as its own. "They have created this image of being a project developer that protects the climate," he said. "They are nothing of that sort. They are a broker." Heuberger was hard to recognize as the radical environmentalist he had admired in college. "I started to see that he's lost," Muench told me. "If you're in a business that's so lucrative, so good, and you've gained your power, your status, and your money from that, you do all you can to protect it."

When Muench went to Zimbabwe to salvage the Kariba project, he returned even more troubled. Asked to perform due diligence on the investment South Pole planned to make in Wentzel's company, he pulled the rec-

ords of payments to Kariba and saw that all the money—some forty million dollars—had been wired to a single account in Guernsey. He told Wentzel that he needed evidence of where the funds from that account had gone. But, after six months of e-mails and phone calls and another meeting in Zimbabwe, Wentzel remained evasive. South Pole had hardly any idea what had happened to tens of millions of dollars its clients had spent supposedly offsetting their carbon emissions.

The published project literature outlined what should have happened to that money: Wentzel's company was to keep thirty per cent, and the rest was to be used to pay district councils, fund project activities, and top up a rainy-day fund. Some of it had clearly been spent on the Kariba site. Along with the farming activities, there were new school huts and clinics, anti-poaching patrols, and fire-suppression measures. But, Muench said, when Wentzel finally sent a spreadsheet of his spending, in the summer of 2022, it accounted for only around six million euros. Even that, he told me, had "no backing, nothing behind it."

On July 9th, Muench sent an e-mail to Heuberger and other executives, with the subject line "Red Flag." He reported that, after a long investigation, he could only conclude that most of the funds for the Kariba project had gone astray. In private, he says, he urged Heuberger to admit the problems: "We need to come public before it is in the press." Heuberger was disinclined to listen to Muench. "He's very driven—the mindset is totally on impact," Heuberger told me. "For him, there's only good and bad." South Pole removed Muench from the inquiry into Wentzel's finances, after which "the relationship and flow of information proved to be more productive again," the company said. To Heuberger's mind, the Kariba project was as good as it needed to be: "Is it perfect? Is the guy a hundred per cent? Every dollar always a hundred per cent?" He shrugged. "You have to navigate your way around."

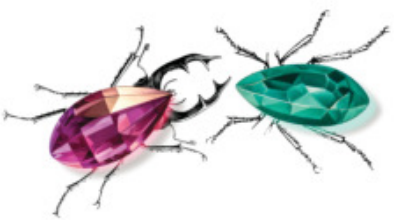
In September, Wentzel flew to London on business, and I met him for breakfast at a bistro on Sloane Square. He wore designer chinos, Chelsea boots, and a crisp white shirt, but when he greeted me I noticed that he was missing a front tooth.

I had spent hours in two previous encounters questioning Wentzel over the project's finances. At first, he had reeled off contradictory figures, getting out a calculator and punching the keys before giving up and pushing it away. In the end, he admitted that his inability to account for the money was no accident. "There's no paper trail," he told me.

Years of political and economic instability had made it too precarious to bank in Zimbabwe, he said, and transferring money to a sanctioned state from Guernsey was a bureaucratic headache: "Do you know how much compliance I had to go through to just have one transaction?" So he had devised an untraceable way of moving the funds. "It was illegal," he acknowledged, "but it got looked over."

When he needed money for the project, he said, he would transfer it from Guernsey into the account of an acquaintance who wanted electronic funds, in "Mauritius or the Cayman Islands or the Seychelles or Russia or wherever," and they would arrange for the equivalent in U.S. dollars to be delivered to him in Zimbabwe. Other times, he would pay an invoice for someone else—for a consignment of motorbikes, perhaps—and that person would deliver him the same amount in cash.

"This looks really bad, because you're just sending money here, there, and



everywhere, but, on the receiving side, I can show where we've got it," he told me. "Well, I can show you the bundles of cash on the floor." When payments arrived, he said, he would "grab the money and run with it," distributing it among the stakeholders in the project. "For any kind of European or American, that's not comprehensible," he said. "How many Western people have carried half a million dollars of cash in their hand?"

Wentzel's demeanor seemed to lighten as he unburdened himself, and he began to stage a mock interrogation. "Can I see the SWIFT?" he boomed, referring to the code that banks use for international payments. "The money got there swiftly, but I can't tell you what the SWIFT was." Suddenly his waggish smile gave way to a frown. "I don't know what you're going to report on this, and I hope to God it's not all of it, because I probably will go to jail," he said. Then he reassured himself. "I'll go to jail for the right reasons," he said. "Savior or villain? I'm right in the damned middle. And I'm happy to be that way."

The Castello di Modanella is a twelfth-century castle whose battlements rise from the Tuscan hills. It claims to have hosted at least two Popes, and Galileo is said to have been banished to its tower after being convicted of heresy. Its stone chambers are now mainly used for gala dinners and, in recent years, for South Pole's management retreats.

On a warm night in September, 2022, as staffers partied in the gardens, a circle of weary executives, including Heuberger, Dannecker, and Muench, stood in a courtyard. They were reckoning with bad news.

The previous year had marked a decade since Kariba was launched, which meant that South Pole was required by Verra to check its explosive predictions against reality. After months of reviewing satellite imagery, the company's data analysts had determined that deforestation in the control zone was dramatically lower than projected. They estimated that only fifteen million of the forty-two million carbon credits generated by the project had actually been backed by avoided emissions. All the rest of those supposedly offset tons of carbon simply weren't real.

Muench and another executive urged Heuberger to stop selling offsets from the Kariba project immediately. "If it comes out that we've knowingly sold credits that weren't equivalent to a ton of $CO_2$ emissions avoided, it would do huge damage," Muench said. Heuberger rejected that idea. The credits had been validated by Verra, he argued: "If you want to scale, you have to rely

on certain rules and systems." (South Pole acknowledges that this conversation occurred but says that it took place after the trip to Tuscany.) Back in Zurich, South Pole continued enthusiastically promoting Kariba. In the months after learning of the miscalculation, it sold more than three million environmentally worthless credits, to Porsche, Nestlé, and Nando's, along with others including the Cannes Film Festival and a network of Australian zoos.

But scrutiny of the market was increasing. Investigations by the *Guardian*, Bloomberg, and others had highlighted questionable accounting and community abuses by carbon projects. Greenpeace and other nonprofits had published reports denouncing the trade as a dangerous distraction from genuine efforts to reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

One Friday evening that November, a forest-ecology expert named Elias Ayrey posted a satellite image of the Kariba area online. "I find myself quite upset," he wrote. "I just reviewed a #carbon project that's likely receiving more than 30x as many credits as it should." Ayrey, who works for an independent ratings agency called Renoster, had used NASA satellite imagery to calculate that deforestation in the Kariba reference region was significantly lower than the company had stated. He signed off with a disclaimer: "All opinions are my own. And my own opinion is that everyone involved with this project should be arrested."

Late that night, Heuberger posted a caustic response: "It looks like you really don't understand how carbon finance works, and your only goal is to criticize and spread fake news." His phone soon started buzzing with calls from alarmed clients, and four days later the company finally instructed staff to pause the sale of Kariba credits. By then, South Pole had off-loaded twenty-three million credits from the project—eight million more than it could justify.

The mood around the Technopark was tense. One day that fall, Muench sat down next to Heuberger in the open-plan office and said that he was still worried about Kariba. "You sold credits that weren't real," he said. "They didn't have an impact on the climate that you expected, and, on top, you guys took a lot of money."

Heuberger was enraged, he told me: "He came and said, 'Renat, you enriched yourself. I demand that you come out and rectify all those omissions transparently. Talk to your investors and your clients and hand them back their money.'"

Muench said that Heuberger screamed at him, "Get out! Get out! You know nothing!" But then he followed his old friend into the street and persuaded him not to leave.

In December, South Pole organized an all-hands meeting to quell the staff's concerns about Kariba—to "build trust around this truly amazing project," as one executive said. (A recording of the session was shared with me by Follow the Money, an investigative newsroom in the Netherlands.) Christian Dannecker began his talk with a convoluted disquisition on deforestation curves, counterfactual modelling, and the limitations of NASA satellite data in assessing dryland deforestation. Then he took questions.

"Are the Kariba credits based on reality?" one staffer asked.

"I give the question back: What is reality?" Dannecker snapped.

South Pole's head of U.S. sales tried again: "We have clients coming to us saying, 'Hey, the credits that you sold us, that impact that we claimed, did that actually happen? Yes or no?'"

A public-affairs executive intervened: "Which is why we're holding the current verification at the moment—because we want to make sure that that is the case."

"How much profit has South Pole made by selling Kariba credits?" another staffer asked.

"I didn't do the numbers, to be honest," Dannecker replied. "I guess we probably made ten million dollars." There were audible gasps, before another executive warned, "To be clear, we don't want to repeat that publicly."

Muench watched the meeting in disbelief. "It was Machiavellian," he said. "I think, at the end of the day, they started to lie to themselves." He left the company three days later, after filing a report through its whistleblower channel. He received a brief response a few weeks later. "An investigation has been completed and we conclude that South Pole were following the approved Verra methodology," it read. "We are therefore going to close this case." That month, Verra certified another seven million credits for the Kariba project.

In the absence of a government regulator, Verra had become the primary standard-setter of the voluntary carbon trade. The agency controlled about two-thirds of the market, and nearly half its projects were forest-carbon schemes like Kariba. As the global trade ignited, the scenes inside its head office had been chaotic. "One day we were just bumbling along, and then the next day it was drinking from a fire hose," Andrew Beauchamp, who worked at Verra for eight years, told me. The chief executive, David Antonioli, a rangy man with an elastic grin, said that developers applied increasing pressure to wave their applications through. "They got pretty worked up," he said.

For years, Verra had delegated the oversight of projects to outside environmental auditors. (The Kariba project had been reviewed five times, which Heuberger often cited as evidence of careful supervision.) But the auditors were hired and paid by project developers, potentially creating an incentive to ignore concerns. When Verra staff ran "sniff tests" on some of the auditors' reports, they found scores of serious errors. "There are a lot of us who believe that this resembles an elaborate fraud," Danny Cullenward, a climate economist at the University of Pennsylvania, told me. Verra allowed credit sellers to claim that they had undergone a robust certification process, "even though every element of that process, when you dig in, is conducted by financially self-interested parties."

Many observers felt that Verra had an even greater conflict of its own: it charged a fee to certify each credit. "The more credits they issue, the more money they make," Niklas Kaskeala, a founder of Compensate, a Finnish nonprofit focussed on carbon-market integrity, told me. "It's structural corruption." (Verra recently began overseeing auditors more thoroughly, and

is working to revise its procedures around forest carbon—but only after verifying more than a billion credits.)

This January, the *Guardian* ran a story that alleged, on the basis of three scientific studies, that more than ninety per cent of the forest credits Verra had certified were "worthless." Though Antonioli resigned soon afterward, Verra disputed the report, arguing that most forests protected through its programs are still standing, despite commercial pressures to cut them down. Several independent agencies and academic studies have since concurred that most forest-carbon projects in existence are selling offsets based on vastly inflated claims. By those reckonings, several hundred million tons of carbon that were supposedly offset will linger in the atmosphere for centuries.

As 2023 began, South Pole was struggling to control the damage to its reputation. It had invited clients to visit the Kariba site, and Dannecker had published a blog post presenting the project as a resounding success. Then, in January, a tape of the staff meeting about the project was leaked to Follow the Money. The resulting story ran under the headline "Showcase project by the world's biggest carbon trader actually resulted in more carbon emissions."

South Pole responded with a lengthy rebuttal, complaining of "exaggerated and misleading reporting." Yet its own statements about its profits were tangled. Dannecker had written in his earlier blog post that the company took a twenty-five-per-cent commission on the Kariba-credit sales and sent the remaining forty million euros to Wentzel, for distribution. Now he acknowledged that the company had made far higher margins on the credits it had bought directly, claiming Wentzel had received fifty-seven million euros, from total revenues of more than a hundred million.

Within South Pole, the handling of the Kariba project inspired dismay, and several staffers resigned. The public, too, was increasingly suspicious of the voluntary market. Consumer groups began suing companies for greenwashing, and the European Parliament proposed banning claims of net neutrality based solely on offsetting, after finding that forty per cent of green marketing in the E.U. was "completely unsubstantiated." Gucci quietly dropped its carbon-neutral claim. Volkswagen, Barclays, L'Oréal, and McKinsey said that they would stop buying offsets from the Kariba project. As the price of carbon credits tumbled, Heuberger was aghast. "This is now a loose cannon—it's spinning, spinning, spinning," he said. "We have to stop the feed."

A few weeks after the details of the all-hands meeting came out, Muench received an e-mail from South Pole's lawyers, demanding that he present himself for questioning about the leaked tape. He denied being behind the leak, but the investigation struck him as an opportunity to relay his concerns about Kariba. He agreed to meet the lawyers, and sent them detailed written testimony in advance. The lawyers abruptly cancelled the meeting.

Muench said he heard nothing more about the accusations against him. But, when I met Heuberger this summer, he told me that the Kariba controversy had been concocted by his former friend. "It's very psychological," he said. "To his frustration, we were more successful than him. And in his mind there was this story created—like, the only reason South Pole is successful is because it's a weird company. It's a little bit fishy. We are cheating." (I first spoke with Muench after Heuberger mentioned the concerns that he'd raised, but he declined to speak publicly. He eventually agreed to do so only after Heuberger continued criticizing him.)

South Pole insists that all the Kariba credits it sold will ultimately be backed by a real emissions reduction: Verra's methodology allows it to pay back the over-issuance with offsets generated in the future. But several experts, including sources at Verra, told me that this may be impossible, since the drop in deforestation in the reference region


*"Our mission is for you to love and accept your body—but not so much that you stop coming here."*

• •

will severely limit the project's eligibility for new credits.

Justin Adams, the former BP executive who had sat on South Pole's board, told me after first hearing about the controversy that he believed the company was being unfairly maligned. "Have they got all the calls on Kariba right? No. But have they been a net positive force in a world that's full of darkness right now? Of course they bloody have," he said. Yet as he learned more he began to lose sympathy. "As a billion Euro company (a fabled unicorn) SP should have had far greater control and audit mechanisms," he wrote to me. "Certainly they took a lot of risk early on but the rewards in later years look out of whack. More commensurate with an oil and gas concession than an environmental and community development project."

People in the area suggest that the project's impact has been minimal. Iain Foulds, a white Zimbabwean farmer who has become an outspoken critic of Kariba, told me, "It's nothing to do with the environment or safeguarding our flora and fauna. This was about money. Yes, there's a bit of petty cash filtering in here and there for their little projects. But the big bucks—where's all that going?" Nevertheless, community leaders are wary of losing whatever benefit they receive. In June, I spoke with Elmon Mudenda, who joined a video call from a dimly lit room, with cracked plaster and peeling paint. His great fear was that the project would be deserted. "At the end of the day, who suffers is the community. Nobody else," he told me.

The next month, Follow the Money published another story. Reporters had visited the project site, and disaffected locals had shown them a series of abandoned vegetable gardens. The lead author, Ties Gijzel, told me he and his reporting partners had also heard that Wentzel was involved in trophy hunting.

Big-game hunting is legal in Zimbabwe, but South Pole has portrayed the Kariba project as a haven for wildlife, protecting "numerous endangered species such as the African elephant, the lion, the hippopotamus." When I questioned Wentzel, he acknowledged that trophy hunting occurs across the project area. He had taken control of the sport himself in one region, granting rights to an operator named Dalton & York, whose Instagram page has dozens of images of hunters displaying dead lions, elephants, and crocodiles. In one, a grinning man holds up the carcass of a leopard as blood drips down his forearms. A video shows hippos being shot through the head as they wallow in the Zambezi.

Over the summer, the Zimbabwean government announced plans to centralize control of carbon-trading projects within its borders, and to seize thirty per cent of future profits. Wentzel told me that he didn't much care what happened to Kariba. "It's no skin off my nose," he said. He was already planning a new venture, which he described as "Kariba on steroids." In his scheme, local women might be employed to stitch car mats for Porsche or to sew beads onto Gucci accessories—though he confessed that neither brand had agreed to the endeavor. He was "struggling to think of something for Nespresso," he said, but he had been working on a deal to sell driftwood lampshades to an American furniture catalogue. He has already registered the new business in Ireland, under the name Fair Share.


*"The doctor will make you wait elsewhere now."*

Sylvera, the most prominent of a small group of ratings agencies that are seeking to improve transparency in the carbon market, occupies a plant-filled office in an unassuming building in London. When I visited this June, I was met by the chief executive, Allister Furey, a round-cheeked man in sneakers and a vaguely psychedelic T-shirt.

Furey, a neurobiologist with a Ph.D. in machine learning, worked for a decade in renewable energy before becoming fixated on carbon removal. In order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees, the U.N. has said, humanity will need to find a way to suck around ten gigatons of carbon a year out of the atmosphere. "The scale of the challenge is so extreme," Furey told me. "You need to move trillions and trillions of dollars." Carbon offsetting seemed like a viable source of that kind of funding, so Sylvera was founded in 2020 to stimulate investment by sorting out the good credits from the junk. Since then, using spaceborne radar and satellite imagery,

it has estimated that some eighty per cent of the forest-carbon projects it rated were likely over-crediting. "People get paid more for issuing a higher number of credits without going to prison, so there's a very strong incentive," Furey said.

Recently, two new initiatives have arisen to encourage higher standards. The Voluntary Carbon Markets Integrity Initiative, launched with backing from the British government, set guidelines to deter corporations from making vacuous claims about the benefits of offsetting. The Integrity Council for the Voluntary Carbon Market, a successor of Mark Carney's task force, announced a set of "Core Carbon Principles" to assess the quality of existing schemes. "If you build integrity, scale will follow," Annette Nazareth, the council's chair, told me. But an analysis by the carbon-data firm Trove Research found that ninety-five per cent of projects on the market would fail to meet these new standards.

Yet offsetting remains central to global plans to reach net zero. The Paris Agreement, signed in 2016, envisaged a new carbon-trading framework—though the details are still being debated seven years later. More than two-thirds of participating countries plan to use offsets to meet their goals, and an alliance of governments and industry figures is lobbying for forest-based projects to be included in the new system.

Experts told me they feared that the same registries they blamed for catastrophic mismanagement of the voluntary market would, by virtue of sheer convenience, end up taking a central role in the U.N. process. Axel Michaelowa, a researcher at the University of Zurich who co-authored several U.N. climate reports, said Verra had been telling officials that, if they used its verification services, "you'll have a one-stop shop—you don't have to pay a single cent." That, he said, "would of course mean that all the shortcomings of these private programs would contaminate the compliance market."

This November, when world leaders gather in Dubai for the U.N.'s annual climate summit, they will seek agreement on the principles of the new system. To lead the summit, the host country, one of the world's largest exporters of fossil fuels, has appointed the head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company.

One afternoon this July, I met Heuberger at the Technopark. The sky over the city was cobalt blue, and the air felt strikingly clean. We strolled along the Limmat, passing city workers shedding their suits to dive into the water, then turned up a set of dilapidated steps to his house—an unobtrusive cream-colored structure, set into the hillside above the river. When I remarked on its modesty, he nodded. "It was not cheap, but it's way far away from the villas you can see," he said, gesturing at the mansions up the hill. Heuberger also has a pied-à-terre near Davos, but he insisted that the allure of business had never really been about money. He saw building his company as a kind of game: "All of us are driven, of course, by winning."

For the moment, Heuberger was winning his latest fight—what he called the "shitstorm" in the carbon market. He blamed a handful of enemies: Muench, environmental campaigners, oil companies funding secret plots to destroy those seeking to put a price on carbon. As he enumerated these annoyances, he batted his hands in the air, as if swatting gnats. "We are stubborn, whack-a-mole people," he said. "You can slap us as many times as you want. We always come up." In recent weeks, Heuberger had been working to "change the narrative." He had revealed plans to collaborate on carbon-removal projects with Mitsubishi, and had travelled to London for Climate Week, where he joined a panel on preventing misinformation around offsetting. Though his company had spent years awarding its clients badges that proclaimed them "Carbon Neutral," Heuberger dismissed this designation onstage as "an easy catchphrase." The times demanded a new approach, he said: "We have to become robust and honest." To that end, South Pole was launching a new insignia. Its penguin logo would now be encircled with the words "This Company Funds Climate Action." The announcement was met with cautious applause.

At his house, Heuberger led me through a garden overgrown with lavender and brambles, and into a sparsely furnished living room, where a baby's play mat was the only splash of color. He has four daughters with his wife, Zani, whom he met in Indonesia while scouting projects for South Pole. Their youngest was born last year. When he talked to his daughters about climate change, he said, he focussed exclusively on messages of empowerment and optimism: "There's no climate anxiety at all in our house."

On a deck with sweeping views of the city, Zani was grilling sausages, halloumi, and tempeh kebabs. After dinner, Heuberger sat sipping wine with his feet tucked under him, and grew a little maudlin as he gazed out over the dimming skyline. "We were eating dry bread for many years, happy that we just survived," he said. "I'm sounding like an old guy now. But I look at those young kids who come with their blockchain-enabled super-transparent solution, and say everything has been shit, what we did. O.K. Calculate Kariba credits. Good luck. It's not that easy." In my earlier conversations with Heuberger, he had parried every perceived slight or criticism, but as we kept talking those defenses seemed to slip. He confessed that it had been hard to maintain his positivity. "When you think you have done the right thing, something goes wrong, and somebody says you had bad intentions—that's the most harmful," he said. "You have to build a thick wall between you and your true feelings, which are of course depressing."

He told me he was spending a lot of time cycling these days, on the same battered Titan road bike he had bought with saved-up pocket money as a boy. "I had my beliefs and my convictions and my bicycle," he recalled fondly. "I was in my own world." To lift his spirits, he had also taken up the cello again—another childhood pursuit—and started singing lessons. "Except for me, everyone else is a little kid at the class," he said. In a few weeks, he was due to appear in an amateur opera, a production of "Hansel and Gretel." Heuberger had been cast as the children's father—"the bad guy, the weird guy"—who returns triumphantly from a profitable day at the market to find that his children have been abandoned alone in the forest. "He doesn't really understand," Heuberger said. "He thinks he's doing a good thing. But he doesn't get it at all." ♦




PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA SCHRIEK

At the San Mateo Community Center, a sign tacked up at the end of the hallway says "If you're here for FALLING, NATURALLY you've walked too far. Go back. It's the middle door." On closer inspection, the comma turns out to be some schmutz or stray ink.

The young Filipino instructor allows me and another nonstudent, Bun (pronounced "Boon"), an African nurse, to observe. We sit away from the participants, at the back of the basketball court that has been commandeered for Falling Naturally. Mats cover a large section of the floor, and the centerpiece is an obstacle course made of hard foam. The color scheme is schoolyard—not a pleasure on the eyes. Bun's charge is the friendly white guy with the belly and the tonsure. Mine is my father, and we are both old men: he is seventy-six, and I turned fifty-one a few months ago. Among the reasons that I sit in on this class and on his doctors' visits is to see what could happen to my own body in the not too distant future. Also: Is there anything I can do to prevent it? In other words, I am trying for a different demise. I am my father's only child. My mother has been dead going on thirty years—whatever future ailments await me may have more to do with her than with my father.

That I came back to San Mateo temporarily to live in my childhood home and help care for my father, and that I have not agonized about it—this was a surprise. And that my father had a plan—not only would he pay the rent on my New York City apartment, which I would keep, but he would give me a thousand dollars a month, plus let me use his well-maintained Datsun—was another, greater surprise. I wonder, though: Will I sell the house after my father passes and make a renewed stab at my life as a writer in New York, or will I stay on in San Mateo? That I am considering the latter is a sign of how congenial life here has turned out to be. I am speaking of the warm weather, the drowsy routine: grocery shopping with my father, accompanying him to his doctor and dentist visits, making solo trips to the mall or to the campus of Juniper State, the local college. And, of course, there is Falling Naturally, which is held on Tuesdays and Fridays, with two days of rest in between. This is to help address his recent fall.

The teacher's name is Marco Santamaria. In addition to working at the community center, the twenty-eight-year-old teaches two classes—Physiotherapy and Body Mechanics—at Juniper State, although I've never run into him on campus. Five years ago, he won a grant to research a new kind of workout for the elderly that was being taught in Copenhagen: how to fall with as little injury as possible, as well as how to get back up without hurting yourself. Though sometimes the lesson is to lie comfortably for however long it takes for help to arrive. We haven't got to that part of the course yet, and Marco has warned everyone that he will be slipping in a few Zen Buddhist precepts and practices to better prepare the students. Just *be*, he says. Just fall.

Not everyone in the class has enrolled at the San Mateo Community Center because of a previous fall. These are take-charge folk, happy preëmptors. They are a rowdy, talkative bunch. Food is brought from home, shared. Pictures of family members are passed around. In this, my father has bested the others—an actual live offspring can be pointed to. I am a smiley presence, performing our father-son success. When asked what I do, my father leaves me to explain. I say that I'm a writer. When asked where I've published, I say, In journals. If asked to elaborate, I say, Scholarly journals, which is not, strictly speaking, true. What I mean is that these are publications put out by the creative-writing departments of colleges. Niche offerings, whose readerships number in the tens.

Today being Tuesday, the first hour of class is spent going over the previous Friday's lesson. The seniors wend their way through the obstacles. They make peace with the lack of a straight path. Smack dab in the middle of the course is a large wooden board seesawing on a cylinder, so that climbing onto it, advancing to the mid-point, making the board tilt downward with that crucial forward step, and then successfully alighting are parts of a suspenseful odyssey. This is the fourth week of a twelve-week course, and Marco does not believe in saving the most difficult tests for last. There is no loss of face. Everyone is applauded—even the ones who lose their balance have a chance to show off their falling skills. *Try to land on your side and take the anticipatory "grimace" out of your body. There will be discomfort but hopefully no pain.*

Bored by the repetitive drills, I go to the parking lot. I'm following Bun there. He lets me bum a cigarette. Bun's patient is a veteran, and the V.A. takes care of his medical bills, including Bun's services. Bun's patient does not talk about his experiences in the Vietnam War but will happily bring up his love life—very much in the past tense, but you would hardly know it from the heatedness of the telling. Bun tells me that he is from Cameroon. When his mother died, he was sent to Minnesota to live with distant relatives. He had to re-start college because his African credits weren't considered "legitimate." I am happy to be the listener, and Bun doesn't ask me about myself.

Speaking of Marco's class, Bun tells me that there is no such thing as "just being" in Africa. How can you "just fall"? he says. If you slip in the city, people will trample you, that is for sure. If this happens in a village, days may go by before you are found. Also, the sun will kill you. It gives life or it kills: nothing in between. So, if you fall, you get up at once. I had to leave the gym just now because, in my mind, I am always two people, and sometimes being two people is too much. In one version, when I fall, I just lie there, like the teacher said, because I am in San Mateo. The sun, it is a different sun. But, in the other version, I have to get up quick, because the sun is starting to stick a knife, and I understand that I am in Africa—I will always be in Africa. The San Mateo Bun and the Cameroon Bun are always together. You could say that this is balance, but you could also call it very, very crazy. This is no way to live.

Car rides into San Francisco are a quiet affair. Not even the radio is on. Sometimes my father loses himself in his iPod, which I bought for him on eBay. Usually, he's listening to a BBC podcast called "Great Lives," another of my interventions in his daily habits. Nina Simone, Walt Disney, Graham Greene, Jorge Luis Borges: a selector,

who is also notable, makes a case for why the chosen subject deserves "great-life status"—*I was drawn to Borges because his fractal and exponential stories reflected his mathematical intelligence*, or something like that. A scroll through my father's played episodes reveals many writers: Malcolm Lowry, Oliver Sacks, Virginia Woolf. The Borges episode has been listened to three times. Borges? Why Borges? I chalk it up to a desire on my father's part to imagine himself into the writing life, the writing mind—obtuse, masochistic—without having to involve me, a failed writer.

I park the car, and it's only a block's walk to Miyako's, in the Mission. At noon on a weekday, the restaurant is not busy. As usual, we sit at the bar, where the chef greets us in Japanese—he does this for all bar customers, not just because we're Japanese. My father is given his regular California roll and a bowl of miso soup. I order more exotic à-la-carte stuff. The chef has long since learned not to try to make conversation with my father. The silence is a little shy, certainly on my end. Since I have use of my father's card, I make sure to leave a big tip, and to my father's credit he never looks at the checks, or, if he does, he has never brought up the apology-in-gratuity that I leave for the chefs and the restaurant staff.

Today, my father has forgone his cane. The chief benefit of Falling Naturally is the restoration of his ego, the muscle most bruised by last year's fall. About the details of this incident, he has refused to be cornered. One day, he'll say that he tripped on the bottom step of the stairs in the San Mateo house. Ask him another time and he'll say that he had an accident getting off the bus. I've begun to think that he had two falls. But he doesn't really need his wheelchair anymore, and the cane is arguably unnecessary now, too. He was reimbursed for both by Medicare. Yet the psychological toll, as it were, seems genuine, acute. His inner ear is fine—the fall was not a result of poor balance. Nor of brittle bones or mental confusion. Sheer bad luck. My father told me that he gave the doctor an earful, because such a diagnosis was unworthy of the time and the expense of being seen at a hospital. Although, of course, he must have been glad. His decline is far off, still.

His card game is five blocks from Miyako's. It's on the second floor of a building that belongs to someone who worked on our farm before my father sold it, fifteen years ago. We take our time, and my father is proud of the fact that he does not need to stop en route. I walk him up a flight of stairs and depart when Tim, the former employee, answers the door.

I wait out my father's time with Tim at a handful of used bookstores—holdovers from my youth. And then it's off to rescue my father.

The ride to our next destination is not silent. I gamely listen as my father calls out his card-playing friends for cheating. His spiel never changes, and yet he always shows up for his bimonthly session at the game table. He loves being cheated or loves thinking that he's being cheated; otherwise, what would there be to talk about?

Parking at the Embarcadero is a bitch. I have to circle several times to find a spot. And once I'm at the next apartment I have to stay. The host insists on it. It's a meeting of the Gilbert and Sullivan Group, a local company, to plan next year's production. My father is on the board and, up until two years ago, was still in good enough voice to join the various onstage crowd-choruses. He has been a palace guard, a pirate, and a townsperson in Japan. The group has pinballed back and forth among a handful of box-office hits: "Pirates of Penzance," "H.M.S. Pinafore," and, last year, explosively, "The Mikado."

It had been five years since the group's previous production of "The Mikado"—surely a strategic decision to wait out the political trouble in the air, or the perennial money-maker would have made a swifter return. Even so, activists successfully pressured the company to discontinue the use of "Asian" makeup in last year's production: the slanted eyes and the paste-on droopy "Chinaman" mustaches, used despite the fact that the show invokes a fantasy Japan. (It's a shock to think that such retrograde choices had endured until last year.) But about the "concept" the group did not budge: "The Mikado" would be set in what the production team called "medieval Japan," and the characters would keep their cartoonish baby names.

On every day of the weeklong run, a crowd of activists gathered on the campus of Juniper State, which was renting out its auditorium to the Gilbert and Sullivan Group. By this time, I was already back in San Mateo, and my father was in his wheelchair. But when the two of us attended, on opening night, and then once more, for the closing show, the protesters did not rein in their anger at the sight of this Asian cripple being attended to by an Asian relative or nurse. If anything, they warmed to the task. *Shame! Shame!* My father and I were the only Asian Americans to brave the censure, and no doubt the Gilbert and Sullivan Group loved having us as political cover.

I envied those protesters, who were mostly young, their certitude, their group brain. But my face wore a look of tenacious imperturbability. It was an expression I maintained even inside the auditorium and throughout the show, as if a camera were trained on me, waiting to catch me out. On the Gilbert and Sullivan Group's part, there was little honor. Instead, there was blind defiance and aggrievement at being besieged in this way. As for my father, the protest was one more occasion for him to dig in his heels.

"The Mikado" is his favorite Gilbert and Sullivan. For him, the silliness of the show is inextricable from its glory. Every time I've seen it, I, too, have fallen under its sway. It's not so hard to face down a wall of activist hatred if you have "The Sun Whose Rays Are All Ablaze" to look forward to. Another highlight: "Three Little Maids from School Are We." The Gilbert and Sullivan Group's productions are often erratic, but for "The Mikado" they had the singers to do those numbers justice.

To prepare my father for my departure, I buy him a fancier cell phone, which may help compensate for his increasing disabilities, and to encourage its use I nudge him to Twitter, which provides hours of entertain-

ment for a man who can never hear enough about what a bad bet human beings are. I tailor his feed by following anodyne celebrities and personalities, but even so the algorithm turns up howlingly stupid posts and videos that elicit the cackling that is the soundtrack of our breakfasts.

Among my father's favorite Twitter accounts is the Dodo, which frequently follows the rehabilitation of life-mangled dogs and cats. I see no paradox in a man so comprehensively misanthropic making a show of his sentimentality over animals. Ohhing and oohing. Sometimes tearing up. He will often hold out the phone so that I can watch a new video, introducing it this way: I am that dog.

A pit bull chained to a fence twenty-four hours a day: *I am that dog.*

A mother looking for her pups underneath a collapsed building: *I am that dog.*

The horrifying skin of a pit bull (why is it always a pit bull?) that has been abused with acid: *I am that dog.*

The very short videos always end on the upbeat of a new life, but my father never acknowledges that particular parallel—that he survived, despite having been beaten by his father. He has never succumbed to the perverted argument that the abuse was necessary, that it toughened him up for a tough world. He is a misanthrope who recognizes his misanthropy to be a deficit but knows that it is too late for him to correct it.

Another thing that goes unspoken: the beatdowns that I suffered at my father's hands were a mere fraction of what he endured from his father. My grandfather apparently truly believed in the dictum "Spare the rod, spoil the child," while my father, though a largely indifferent parent, was subject to occasional flares of temper that my rowdiness did not help. So I never say, "I am that dog." It's a testament to how lightly I got off.

I ask my father if the Gilbert and Sullivan Group has decided on the unfinished business of next year's production, and he tells me that they are leaning toward "Patience," one of the obscurer works in the œuvre. The way he says it, it could be the title of a book: "Leaning Toward Patience." An improbable best-seller about a fifty-one-year-old who cares for his ailing father and learns important life lessons. My "writing life" these days largely consists of thinking up preposterous "pitches" and then enervatingly swatting them away.

Where were you?!

Smoking in the yard.

Didn't you hear me calling? My father's face is wet with tears.

I'm here now. O.K., I'm going to lift you by the shoulders. Under my hands, I feel his upper body tense. You have to let me help you, I say. When he doesn't move, I say, Isn't that what I'm here for? Come on. On the count of three.

I eventually get him sitting up against the cupboard beneath the sink. What happened? I ask him.

I fell. He spits the words out he's so angry.

Do you know why?

When he doesn't reply, I go to the sink and get him a glass of water, which he bats away. I don't want to keep peeing, he says.

Just drink it.

He does, without looking at me. I take the glass, put it in the sink, and squat back down. Tell me when you're ready.

Ready for what? He's still angry.

To get you up. Seated. Then we can have a talk.

Talk about what?

What do you think?

Nothing to talk about, he declares. An accident, like the doctor said.

*Three* accidents?

What three? This is the second.

I say to him, Two is the beginning of a trend. Why would I say this—an inconvenient truth for both him and me?

I got dizzy. Must be the medication. He's referring to his medications for blood pressure and for cholesterol. Both of which my own medical provider has recommended I take, though my trip west has temporarily put that on hold. I am poorly made. I'm looking at the source. I hope that my expression is tender, and I hope that my father knows how to read my version of tenderness.

You've been taking them for a while now, I say.

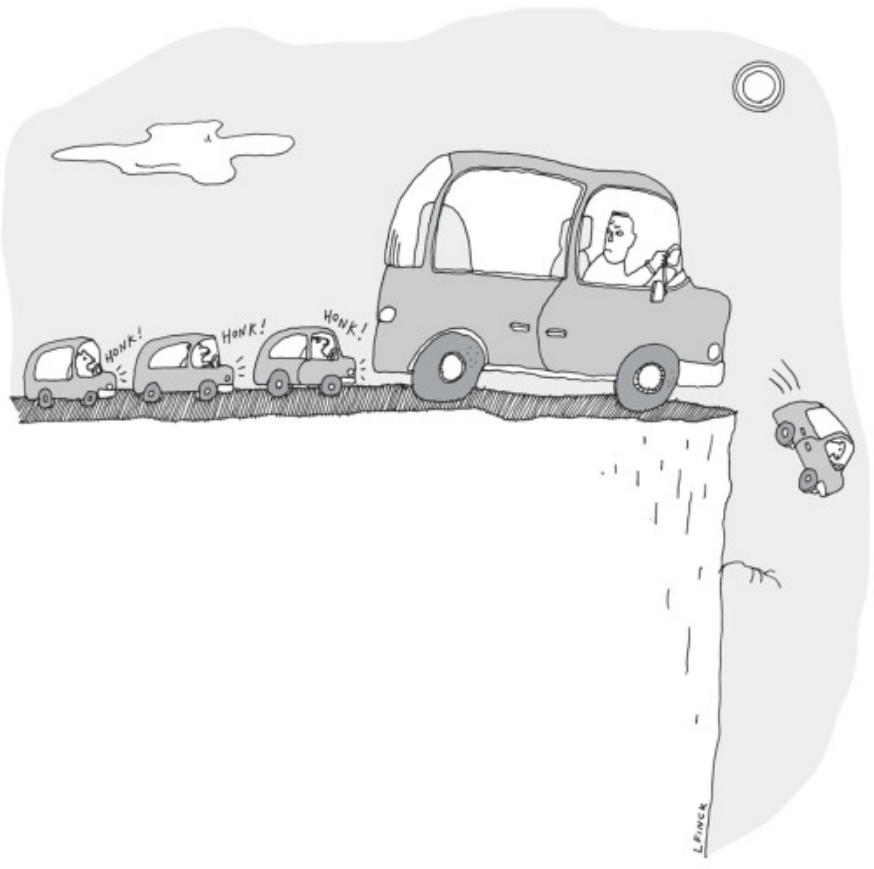
So?

So has this ever happened before?

Of course not, he says. First time.

How can you be sure it's the medication?

It says in side effects: possible dizziness. I always known. This just a



reminder. Now I have to start taking seriously.

He consents to be hoisted up, placed on a chair at the kitchen table, where we have our breakfast. I make tea. Proffer the tea. He sips. What does this mean? I say.

What do you mean?

Do you need me to stay longer?

He shakes his head. Same contract. Sixteen weeks. When Falling class over, you go back. Besides, I cannot afford you.

You don't have to keep paying me.

I cannot afford two homes, yours and mine.

I ask him if anything hurts—and did he fall on his side, as Marco suggests, or on his back? Did he hit his head? How are his knees, hips?

Too quick. I don't remember. One moment I stand at the sink, next moment I am down on the ground.

He allows himself to be taken to the doctor the next day. The doctor corroborates my father's hunch about the medication, and I see why my father has stuck with this man: he seems happy to take my father's lead.

But my father cancels his attendance at Falling Naturally for the week.

Once more, I bring up my offer to stay past our original agreement, and again my father dismisses this idea. I cannot afford you, he says again. Is there a double meaning? Yes, I decide. After sixteen weeks, our companionability will begin to seep its poison.

You're getting me for cheap, I say. I hope you know that.

I hope you're saving up, he says.

I'm silent.

I know you only doing it for the money, my father tells me.

And when I don't contradict him we both take pleasure in my mercenariness. My father warms to the idea that he's raised me correctly.

I slip Marco a hundred bucks so that my father can be caught up. He gives us a half hour before the next two classes, and he quizzes my father on his fall at the sink: Close your eyes and take yourself back. Is there a window in front of the sink? Were you looking out? Could you see the sun? Your body is smarter than your brain. Let your body take over.

Marco then has my father, to the best of his recollection, fall the same fall as on that afternoon. He voices his disapproval at my father's first few attempts. Don't try to fall the way you think I want you to. Remember yourself standing and yourself on the ground. So stand the way you stood, and let's see if your body can bring you back to your position on the ground.

When my father has fallen to Marco's satisfaction, Marco talks him through some adjustments: a softness in his shoulder; putting the side of one forearm out as a brace, a shield, but as gently as possible; allowing his legs to go limp before making contact with the ground. The task is to make these movements instinctive, habitual. The unspoken conditional: for when it happens again.

While my father was falling in the kitchen, I was in the yard smoking pot I'd bought from a dealer who scoped me out on the Juniper State campus. While he waits for classes to end and for his student clientele to come out and find him, I am his congenial companion. Sharing a joint makes me talkative.

I tell him that my father had a fall and that one of my caretaking duties involves accompanying him to a class on how to fall, at the community center.

## ARTS & SCIENCES

What if this time I don't begin with a requiem
or a memento mori with a split pomegranate
and a harem of flies? What if instead I tell you

a sleeping octopus changes colors while dreaming,
or how my gender is sable and softens with all
the gorgeous etceteras of age. No one guessed

a chameleon's tongue measured longer than
its body, but it unscrolled beyond tail, beyond
reasonable need. We wanted the mystery

of Mona Lisa, but a physician in line at the Louvre
stood staring so long he noticed her thinning hair,
her yellowed eye, and diagnosed her thyroid.

Sometimes it pays to wait. After all, love is
a syllabus of domestic chores with rolling
due dates and extra-credit candlelight. I once

loved someone who hated raspberries. That was
my first mistake. What if this time I love someone
like you who likes fur on a fruit, someone who's

better at suffering, who doesn't confuse their
sensitivity with goodness. What if this time
I think of Darwin, who saw a rare orchid

with a nectary a foot long and exclaimed
*Good Heavens what insect can suck it*. But he knew
that anatomy could not exist unless a moth

evolved a tongue alongside it, some unknown
species with a proboscis long enough to complete
this union. No one believed because no one

had seen it. Victorian women used belladonna
drops to widen their pupils—that Latin word
for little doll—and make their gaze a black mirror

so lovers could see themselves. You push me
back to study it, the best distance for beholding.
Always you lament, torn by this choice of look

or touch, but it's time, you say, and close your eyes.
I admit it's easy to spot a forgery with an X-ray—
brushstrokes too quick, rendering too clean,

the first draft the final one. Behind a masterpiece—
lavender swapped for gray, a lamb under the unicorn,
a hundred mistakes proving how difficult it is to

become something. You joke I'm the Isaac Newton
of feelings. I can predict failure's orbital speed,
can calculate the chess of silence and confession,

or even the path vines will take to injure the brick.
It's a gift from my last love, who made a study
of his wounds, made me balletic, a cat burglar

in a house of eggshells. But what if this time
I can't see it all coming—not the coup dressed
in Fahrenheit, not you dressed as Aphrodite,

not how I could ever trust your marble hands
cooling the twin crescents of sweat beneath
my breasts, marvelling at this wealth of apples.

*—Traci Brimhall*

No shit. My brother teaches that course, I think.

You're Marco's brother?

O.K. So you know my brother. Small world. F.Y.I., he's the black sheep of the family.

What do you mean?

You don't understand black sheep?

I don't say, Clean-cut, upstanding Marco? Who has an entire group of seniors happily eating out of his hands?

The dealer, whose name is Bruno, says that Marco came back from his research trip to Copenhagen with a Danish girlfriend, who is now his wife. She is ten years Marco's senior and no one in the family approves. She had a failed marriage back in Copenhagen, and her ex-husband has custody of their daughter. Marco, for his part, by choosing this Danish woman, ended a very promising relationship with a Filipina his age. They had known each other since high school, and their families shared "good history," which was now irrevocably damaged. This had more than local repercussions, as the enmity trailed all the way back to the Philippines, where relatives in the two families slagged one another off on social media.

You have no contact with him?

I'm not allowed, Bruno says.

But he teaches here, I say.

I'm not here on his days, Bruno says. Besides, it's been years since he saw me. He wouldn't know what I look like now.

Your brother talks to us about his kid. You have a niece. Do you know that?

I'm not interested.

Seriously?

It's a surprise to hear myself being an advocate for family closeness and conventional morality, but, between a physiology professor who is an advocate for senior citizens and a pot dealer, who is the true black sheep?

At Falling Naturally, under the pretense of drilling Marco on my father's progress, I get him to disclose that his wife works as a temp in the city—as much as she hates it, they need the second income. He himself is building a Web site to advertise his services as a licensed massage therapist. They are hoping to buy a home, saving up for the down payment. Also, they are considering having another child. But without the extra income they can't do either. One of the senior students overhears and says that she would happily introduce Marco to her mah-jongg circle—women who can easily afford regular massages.

I'm back in New York when the call comes. My father's had the decisive fall. It's been six months since I left him. But it turns out to be a stroke, and according to the doctor it could not have been predicted, as my father's most recent checkup, just a month prior, did not flag anything.

A small compensatory pleasure to be reunited with Bun, who's the first person I think of when signing my father up for nurse services. Bun's presence allows me to mope and smoke pot, and my avoidance of my father's sorry figure in the wheelchair that is now necessary cannot fail to register to my father, as well as, perhaps, to Bun, as desertion. Many times in my youth, I longed for just this outcome—my father humbled, literally and figuratively. It gives me no pleasure now to recall those ardent days: fights conducted at such a pitch of fury that, of course, they had to end with wish-exhortations for the other's death. Could these have been ameliorated by a female presence in the household? Probably not. Without the ugliness, there would have been no calm.

My two-coast life is once again made


*"So, chatbot3000 was thinking that since it wrote Brad's term paper, maybe Brad could take chatbot3000 to the homecoming dance?"*

• • •

possible by my father. At his insistence, I've been given control of his finances, and I see, or rather confirm my hunch, that he could afford our twin expenses many times over.

Bun has to go back to Minnesota for a week, and I sleep on the cot he usually occupies, in my father's room. My father's words can sometimes be garbled, especially when the hour grows late. Watching TV no longer draws out his snark; in a way, you could say that he is more content. There are days when the lopsidedness of his mouth is pronounced and others when it is barely noticeable. After a string of the latter days, my hope for his full recovery will quicken, and then he'll wake up with his stroke face and I'll see that my wishes and his body are on opposite sides of a vast room. Bathing him is one of Bun's duties, and my father and I decide that he can wait till Bun comes back to resume this part of his life. Meanwhile, I help him change his shirt and pants daily, and I run a wet towel over his face, neck, and armpits every few days. Thank God he is not entirely helpless and requires only minimal assistance in the bathroom, mainly the pulling down and pulling back up of his pants. If my father's humiliated, we don't talk about it. Like I said, a new contentment seems to have come over him. Also, he's conserving energy, attempting to prevent a second stroke by keeping himself calm. In this spirit, Twitter is no longer allowed—laughter presents dangers. Besides, his fancy phone has mimicked its owner and conks out every now and again. He forbids me to spend money on a new one, and the compromise is to lend him mine. To do this with some peace of mind, I've uninstalled Grindr (which I never used much anyway).

One night, my father looks up from my phone to ask, What is this Pizza Rat? I am aware of the clarity of his voice before the meaning of his words swims to the surface.

What are you talking about?

He holds out the phone. It appears that he's gone into one of my folders, most likely by accident. To do so intentionally would require some skillful maneuvering—and what could he hope to catch me out in? There is no concealing my failure in life. My e-mail is open, and he is free to check out its vast stretches of desert, where no manuscript submissions have been accepted, no teaching-job queries answered.

Pizza Rat exists on my phone amid the detritus of a more hopeful life. An Internet image clipped and labelled, and then dropped into a folder marked "Possibilities," alongside various other pictures intended to, maybe, spark some writing but eventually forgotten about: photographs of Anna Magnani and Setsuko Hara, two actresses I admire, the first volcanic, the second sphinx-like; Joel McCrea from Preston Sturges's "Sullivan's Travels"; and a young Chekhov, chosen not to springboard a short story but as a kind of presiding spirit, a patron saint of my life, my endeavors—*as if*.

I explain Pizza Rat to my father. The daredevilry and desperation of a New York City citizen dragging a dropped slice nearly three times his size down uncoöperative subway steps. Even after I've played the famous YouTube video a third time, my father's face tells me of his bafflement. Back in ordinary days, there would also have been exasperation, but the stroke is a second reinforcement of Zen in his life, after Marco. Everything is to be met openly, on its own terms.

He doesn't even get away with the pizza, my father says. He leaves it on the step.

Maybe he's going for help? I say.

What I don't say is that when Pizza Rat exits the frame he walks right into my imagination. He's been living inside my phone as an avatar for a potential short story about hoarding for the bad times ahead.

Bun has introduced me to a pot pharmacy in downtown San Jose. The whole operation is very bourgeois, but its convenience does not outshine the furtive satisfactions of being palmed the product by Bruno on the Juniper State lawn.

Smoking as frequently as I've been doing has turned out my sentimental side. I take pictures of my pill bottles

and make a diptych with my father's pill bottles. I show him on the phone, and, too late, I realize that this is a bad idea: he appears saddened. Because of this, we don't talk for the rest of the day.

At breakfast the next morning, he is back in good spirits, engrossed by the Dodo's many animal rescues, though he no longer says to me, I am that dog.

It occurs to me to ask him, Shall I get us a dog?

I know he'll only bat the suggestion away, so I'm surprised by his Where would you get one?

There's an A.S.P.C.A. here.

And then his pragmatic side takes over. I cannot take care of it, so it is all you. So you do not ask me that question. You ask yourself.

When my father returns to YouTube, the algo suggests—based on his recent viewing and re-viewing of Pizza Rat—more urban foraging-animal videos: there is Bagel Chipmunk and also Croissant Squirrel. Part wildlife documentary, part comedy routine. The comedy is of hunger and dietary omnivorousness. Also, of course, of brazenness, because many of these videos take place in New York City in broad daylight, sometimes with throngs of people close by. Need I mention the superstars of the genre? Welcome Taco Pigeon, Chipotle Pigeon, Dead-Rat Pigeon. None of these, however, can hold a candle to Pizza Rat, the "Citizen Kane" of the format, the Odessa Steps sequence of the genre. In one of my most watched remixes of the original video, someone has added a soundtrack: the boy from "Oliver Twist" saying, "Please, sir, I want some more," leading into "Gimme More" by Britney Spears. It's not hard to recall the viral fever of the video's first weeks. What I had forgotten was the funny outcome my father has pointed out: Pizza Rat got spooked and abandoned his slice mid-haul.

Bun calls to say that he's afraid his stay in Minneapolis has been extended for another week, and the news does not make my father groan, and, also surprisingly, I feel no panic. I run a hot bath in the middle of the day, and, leaving my father to take care of his underwear once inside the tub, I tell him that I'll be in the yard right outside the bathroom window.

Through this open aperture, my father can hear me kicking around the pebbles and the dry ground. On the other side, he is completely quiet except for a periodic draining of the tub, to refill it with fresh hot water.

What do you do most days, when Bun is here to stay with me? It's a shock to hear my father in full voice, in clear voice. That he has the energy and the will to project—this can only be a good sign, and if he could see me he'd tell me to stop smiling (my version of a smile: more a crease of the corners of the eyes than a movement of the mouth).

I tell him that I go to Juniper State to use the library. I don't say that I wear sunglasses, a hoodie, and a baseball cap, in an effort to evade Bruno, the dealer. I tell him that I'm writing. I don't say anything about this being a re-start following a long dry spell. That I've been—for now—restored to a state of volubility after years and years of silence when there was no guarantee. . . . In stories, books, I'm a sucker for the moment when a dormant character awakens. When it's to me that this happens, I'm the biggest sucker of all. But I tamp down my enthusiasm, not wanting to jinx myself. Newfound creativity is always the most vulnerable.

When Bun returns from Minneapolis, he transitions from round-the-clock care to a part-time schedule—a good sign for my father's health. Bun and my father and I make

a party of three for dinner most nights. There are frequent leftovers, which Bun packs for his roommates, who are also nurses. My father's eyes shine as he listens to Bun talk about his life in Cameroon, in Minnesota, the ups and downs of his immigrant existence conveyed in an amused tone.

My father asks if Bun has ever seen Pizza Rat.

He says no.

Show him, my father tells me.

I direct Bun to the video, and he watches on his phone. He laughs. He slaps his knees. Wow, he says. This is a crazy world. He asks me, This is New York?

It's New York.

How can you stand to live in a place like that?

I shrug. We're having this conversation after dinner. I'm at the sink, washing dishes. Bun has cracked open a beer for my father and another for himself. My father is drinking his beer with a straw. These will be the happiest moments of his day—the hours after his one beer, which we sometimes spend rewatching old movies that send him into a reverie of names and histories, many predating my birth. The goal is to let him talk himself hoarse. If a second beer is required to put him to sleep, there will be a headache in the morning that is treated with strong coffee, three cups of it sometimes, even though his cardiologist said to be careful. I will never give up coffee, my father says.

What do you do in New York? Bun asks me now.

I feel uncharacteristically shy with him all of a sudden. My father must notice.

Nothing, I reply.

Wow, Bun says. You are rich, to do nothing.

I mean, nothing important. Just like what I do here.

You take care of another father in New York? Just like here? Bun asks. This is a representative joke from him—its humor edged with metaphysics. He is the Borges of Cameroon.

Yes, I say, laughing. There is another father in New York. I take care of him, too. I smoke pot and piddle around. On top of all that, I look out for a second father.

He must be the bad father, Bun says, before turning to my father to say, Because this is the good one.

The nurse and his patient share a moment. My father can't decide what face to make.

Yes, I say. You are correct. ♦

**NEWYORKER.COM**
Han Ong on fathers, sons, and Pizza Rat.

THE ART WORLD

# The French Connection

*Manet and Degas had a long, often petty friendship. The result was modern art.*

BY JACKSON ARN

It began, the story goes, with an insult, unless the insult was a compliment—with ambitious young artists, one never knows. Édouard Manet would have been about thirty when he visited the Louvre and met Edgar Degas, only two years his junior but as sullen as a teen-ager. Degas was hunched in front of a Velázquez painting of the Infanta Margarita Teresa, trying to copy what he saw. Manet, the chatty type, looked down at his fellow-artist's attempt and said, "How audacious of you to etch that way, without any preliminary drawing, I would not dare do the same!" It was the early eighteen-sixties, and a two-decade friendship, marked by endless subliminal pokes and a few out-and-out slashes, had just been born.

"Audacious" is a weaselly word, but I mean the best when I say that "Manet/Degas," the Met's sprawling yet intimate two-hander, is an audacious show. To me, it comes as a breath of fresh air, since—I might as well admit this now—I've often found its co-stars easier to respect than to enjoy. With Degas, I know I'm not alone: the austerity of his paintings borders on nastiness. (That they've decorated so many little girls' bedrooms is one of art history's tartest ironies.) Manet is a gentler painter, beloved by many, but his work has a peculiar stiffness that's sometimes hard for me to take in bulk—I can't always tell if it comes from the artist, his subjects, or both. What follow, then, are the thoughts of a reformed skeptic, who's still not blind to these artists' foibles but has learned to love them unconditionally.

The Louvre meeting, almost too perfect-sounding to be true, was nothing special by nineteenth-century Parisian standards. These guys all knew one another, not just the artists but the writers and the politicians. (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Zola make cameos in this show, as does Antonin Proust, Manet's childhood friend and later France's Minister of Fine Arts.) Both Degas and Manet came from posh families and bobbed on the same vast sea of connections. Degas, despite being something of a loner by temperament, as well as an enthusiastic critic of women and Jews, seems to have been incapable of *not* knowing everyone. When Manet's brother married the Impressionist artist Berthe Morisot, Degas gave him a portrait as a wedding present; Manet's son later worked for the Degas family. Degas painted Manet, too, and drew him looking dark-browed and bushy-bearded.

Apparently, Manet never returned the favor. The show's curators, Stephan Wolohojian and Ashley E. Dunn, are wise not to overexplain this, or much else about the relationship. (Notice the lack of subtitle in the show's name—just Manet and Degas, thanks very much.) As you walk through the Met, theories come to you unbidden. It could be the case, e.g., that Manet never painted Degas because he wasn't as natural a portraitist (a fifth of his œuvre are still-lifes), though I suspect an unspoken hierarchy of reputations. For much of their friendship, Manet was the bigger deal, touted first for his success and then for his succès de scandale; Degas later became highly popular, but by then Manet was dead of syphilis. In some of the portraits at the Met, one senses Degas eying his cooler friend with a lean and hungry look, begging to be eyed in return. The show's most revealing pieces, however, are a pair of heads modelled on Filippino Lippi's self-portrait. Manet dials up the gawkiness of the lips and teeth, but not out of cruelty; there's plenty of warmth in this face. Degas's version is smoother, with a silvery sheen as pretty as it is chilly. They were only in their twenties, but they already knew what kind of artists they wanted to be.

The Lippis raise an important point, which "Manet/Degas" can't help circling back to: great painters are not necessarily good painters. Art lovers, probably overcorrecting for "my kid could do that" philistinism, can be touchy about this, but in the case of Manet, a painter as great as he was technically dubious, it can't be said too often. In much of his early work, near and far bump against each other—the rainbow in "Fishing" (ca. 1862-63) is as phony as the backdrop for a middle-school play—and his figures never really seem to be standing on solid ground, as though he's cut them out of someone else's painting. In the eighteen-sixties, Manet cut out a significant chunk of his own painting, "Episode from a Bullfight," in response to criticism that he'd botched the perspective. It's the kind of story you rarely find in art mythology: avant-gardists are supposed to be indifferent to critics, deliberate in their desecrations of tradition. In the case of Manet, the celebrated ur-modernist who made the world safe for flat, unfinished-looking

ÉDOUARD MANET / COURTESY RISD MUSEUM; OPPOSITE: LALALIMOLA

*In works like "Repose" (ca. 1871), Manet depicted the entitlement of the bourgeoisie, if on somewhat gentler terms than Degas.*

art, it's extra startling. Surely he, of all people, understood what he'd done.

The ur-modernist painting to rule them all, "Olympia" (1863-65)—Manet's triple portrait of a Black maid, a bug-eyed cat, and a naked white prostitute making no effort to pretend she enjoys her work—is this show's inevitable centerpiece. Most everyone who saw it at the Paris Salon of 1865 despised it, for the subject or the technique or both. It's fun, reading old complaints that Manet made the prostitute too ugly or mishandled the shaping of her flesh, to imagine that we would have known any better, but in a sense the haters were onto something—you can't really appreciate "Olympia" unless you feel the rude slap of its shortcomings. Manet was as uneven with faces as he was with bodies; here, you look at, rather than into, the prostitute's eyes, and her elbow sticks out ever so slightly more than an actual human being's. And yet unevenness hits harder than refinement could. Manet's refusal to play along with the strictures of academic art matches his refusal to cater to France's bourgeois fantasies. His painting is about going through the motions: half obeying the rules of your profession, whether that's art or sex work, until they start to seem ridiculous. Studying "Olympia" at the Met (this is only the third time it's left Paris), you're reminded that, long before it was a masterpiece, it was a gamble, courtesy of an artist who knew his formal limitations, worked hard to rebrand them as strengths, but wasn't always sure if he'd succeeded.

You're reminded of this because Manet has been paired with an artist who was both great and, on a formal level, astonishingly good. Vividness was Degas's superpower—he had a schoolyard bully's knack for noticing what was wrong with people and making sure everyone else saw. When you look at his 1857 oil portrait of the banker Hilaire Degas (who appears to be trying to convey his disappointment with his grandson telepathically) or his 1869 pastel portrait of Yves Morisot (who appears to have been rushed from the emergency room where she had her sense of humor removed), it's unclear if he's being mean or merely telling the truth, or if there's a difference. His faces are so un-Manet-like—so precisely rendered and so defenselessly transparent—that he seems to be roaming the aesthetic plains, looking for somewhere new to plant his flag.

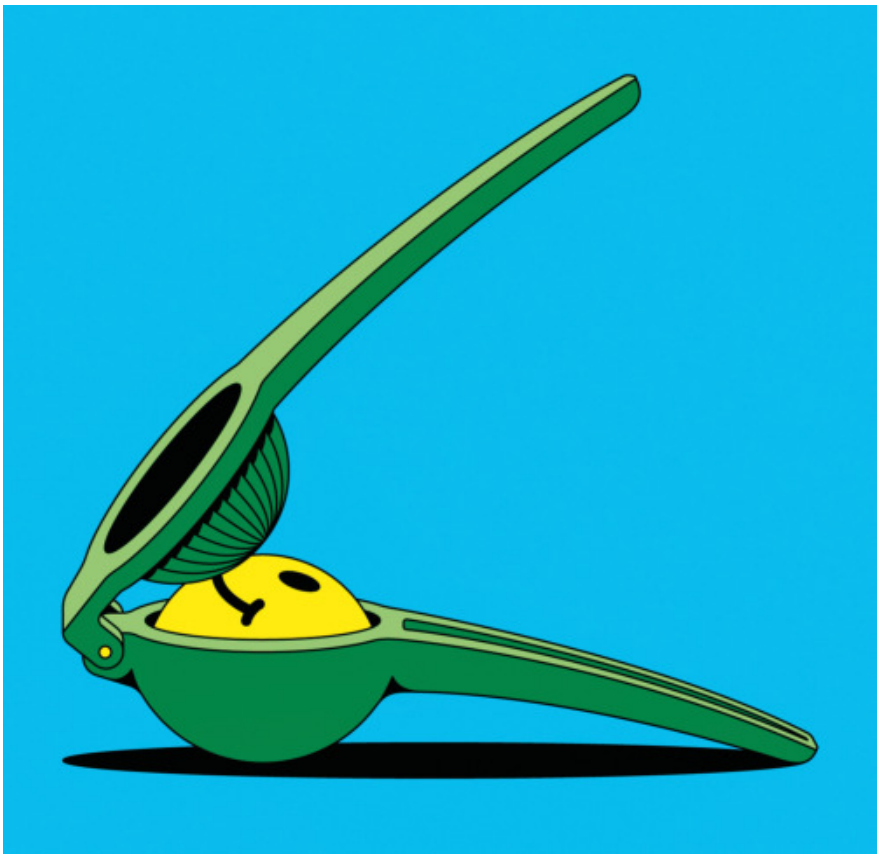
"The Bellelli Family" (ca. 1858-69) marks something close to the pinnacle of ruthlessness in visual art. It's less a massacre than a slow, miserable bleed. Each of the Bellellis—Degas's aunt Laura, her husband, and their two girls, plus a tiny chalk portrait of her late father—is in a different stage of upper-class zombification. Laura's is the most pronounced; somehow, she looks deader than her dad. Her daughter Giulia, in the center, still has some warmth left, but one day she'll be just like her *maman*. Degas, a lifelong bachelor, was still young when he completed the painting. In many ways it's a smug, young-guy view of domesticity, but his technical prowess gives him an alibi: he's not *doing* anything to these people, even if he refuses to make them look any better than they do. Just because he's smug doesn't mean he's wrong.

Annihilate the entire institution of marriage before you turn thirty-five, and you'd better find some other way of occupying yourself. I'd say that this, as much as anything else, explains why Degas went on to experiment with Impressionism, despite resisting the label. The pitiless gaze came too easily to him, so he switched to the glimpse. In 1870, he discovered that he couldn't see a rifle target with his right eye, and by the end of the century he was almost blind. But first came acres of color-smeared jockeys and naked women seen from odd angles. Vividness pounces when you least expect it. "The Millinery Shop" (ca. 1879-86) looks mistily Monet-ish at first, but then you notice the hollow in the woman's right cheek, a side effect of the pin between her teeth, and realize that Degas is as sharp as ever, determined to see everything for as long as he can.

Manet refused to call himself an Impressionist, too, but in the years leading up to his death, in 1883, he learned from the movement as much as any card-carrying member. In his later paintings, you can almost discern what gesture the subject is making, but not quite. His lushly enigmatic portrait of Berthe Morisot slouching on a sofa is like the optical illusion of the duck that's also a rabbit; her dark eyes and long pale hands seem to communicate everything at once. In the interest of science, I took a picture of the painting, sent it off to a dozen or so of my friends, and asked them what they thought it suggested. Some said anxiety, or disappointment, or exhaustion. Many said boredom.

No one guessed repose, which happens to be the painting's title. Clearly, that's a joke on Manet's part, but I think he's up to something more. In a sense, almost all of Manet's and Degas's best work is *about* repose, the glorious right of the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie and the seed from which a thousand entertainments sprouted: gardens, promenades, dances, horse races, picnics, prostitutes, bars. Manet is milder in his depictions of these new delights, but on some level both artists understand what's going on: leisure can be anxious, disappointing, exhausting, and boring—sometimes for the bourgeois, sometimes for the working-class folks paid to keep them happy, sometimes for all concerned.

And perhaps this explains their biggest fight. Toward the end of the eighteen-sixties, Degas began to paint a double portrait: Manet reclining on his sofa, his wife, Suzanne, playing the piano—the spitting image of cozy bourgeois repose. Later, for reasons nobody remembers, Manet took a sharp blade to the picture, ripping out most of Suzanne. There's some evidence that Degas was hoping to restore the painting, wife and all, but I prefer to think of it as a finished work, co-authored by his paintbrush and his rival's razor. On the right, the back of Suzanne's head pokes eerily out of nowhere. On the left, Manet stares at nothing in particular. Everyone who knows this painting has his own hunch about what happened to it, so here's mine: Degas gazed deep into the Manets' marriage, found something sad and empty, and didn't bother to sugarcoat it, the smug bastard. Manet saw the result and accepted the slight—Degas had accepted plenty of his—but refused to let it extend to his wife. He did the nastiest thing you can do to a painter, but only because he couldn't stand knowing that Degas had a point. In the right circumstances, an insult is the ultimate compliment. ♦



BOOKS

# Get Happy

*The business of contentment.*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Staring into the mirror, on a Tuesday morning, you decide that your self needs all the help it can get. But where to turn? You were reading James Clear's "Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones" and doing well until you spilled half a bottle of Knob Creek over the last sixty pages. Now you'll never know how it ends. You tried listening to David Goggins's "Can't Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds," on Audible, in your car, but so thrilling was Goggins's prose style that you stomped on the gas and rear-ended a Tesla. Do not despair, though. Succor is at hand. Roosting on Amazon's best-seller list is "Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier," by Arthur C. Brooks and Oprah Winfrey (Portfolio).

At this point, your conscience rebels. By buying a book on Amazon, you tell yourself, you will be directly funding a new angora lining for Jeff Bezos's monogrammed slippers in the master bedroom of his private yacht—not the main one but the backup vessel currently moored off Patmos. Quivering with righteousness, you close your laptop and stride to your nearest bookstore, only to bump into a dilemma: whereabouts in the store, exactly, can "Build the Life You Want" be found?

It is not an easy volume to place. You'd assume that it belongs on the self-help table. Yet the title suggests home improvement or even civil engineering, and so ardently does Brooks insist on the "four big happiness pillars"—family, friendship, work, and faith—that readers of a nervous disposition may choose to wear a hard hat. On the other hand, Brooks is a professor of management practice at Harvard Business School, so he would slot into the business section with ease. Given that, as he says, "the macronutrients of happiness are enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose," there's an equally strong case for the cookery shelf. Or how about philosophy? Anyone who cites Marcus Aurelius, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Mick Jagger, Epicurus, *and* Epictetus, as Brooks does, would be totally stoked to hang out in such lofty company. No one, of course, is loftier than his co-author, and, if your bookstore is furnished with an Oprah wing, that is where the book must be displayed.

When two writers join forces, it can be tricky to sort out who did what. Not in this case. Brooks is the principal player, and Oprah is his guest star. Only four times does she enter the action to offer "A Note from Oprah," and the four notes, added together, take up less than fourteen pages in a book that is more than two hundred and forty pages long. What does she bring, then, apart from the humongous commercial clout of her blessing? Well, she reveals that "The Oprah Winfrey Show" was "always at heart a classroom. I was curious about so many things, from the intricacies of the digestive system to the meaning of life." (Had she been French, of course, those two items would have been the same.) Near the start of the book, ever alert to her audience, she scrunches what she considers Brooks's most valuable lesson into "words you should tape to your refrigerator," and, for extra clarity, accelerates into italics: "*Your emotions are only signals. And you get to decide how you'll respond to them.*" One more scrunch, and Oprah has the mantra she wants: "*Feel the feel, then take the wheel.*"

What's interesting about this advice is that far behind it, dimly discernible, is another speeding vehicle, fuelled by allegorical intent: the chariot drawn by a pair of winged horses and deployed by Socrates, in Plato's Phaedrus, to illustrate the motions of the soul. One

*Restructuring your inner being is now like running a company.*

ILLUSTRATION BY TILL LAUER

horse, representing our nobler instincts, is "upright in frame and well jointed," whereas the other is a hell of a nag, "a crooked great jumble of limbs," forever dragging us down toward the lower desires. All in all, chariot-driving is what Socrates calls "a painfully difficult business," as is being alive, and the task that Brooks and Oprah set for themselves, in their affable and optimistic fashion, is the age-old one of turning us into better charioteers. Our feelings urge us this way and that, and we should learn when to yank on the reins and when—steady now—to try a touch of the whip.

Whether Brooks has an actual chariot, Massachusetts traffic laws being what they are, I cannot say. Heaven knows what Oprah keeps in her stables. But it's charming to note the confidence with which Brooks, for one, presents his credentials as a successful whipster. He experimented on his own routines and began teaching a class on happiness at Harvard, not to mention composing a regular column for *The Atlantic* on the same topic. By his account, "I saw more and more progress in my life." Onward and upward he flew:

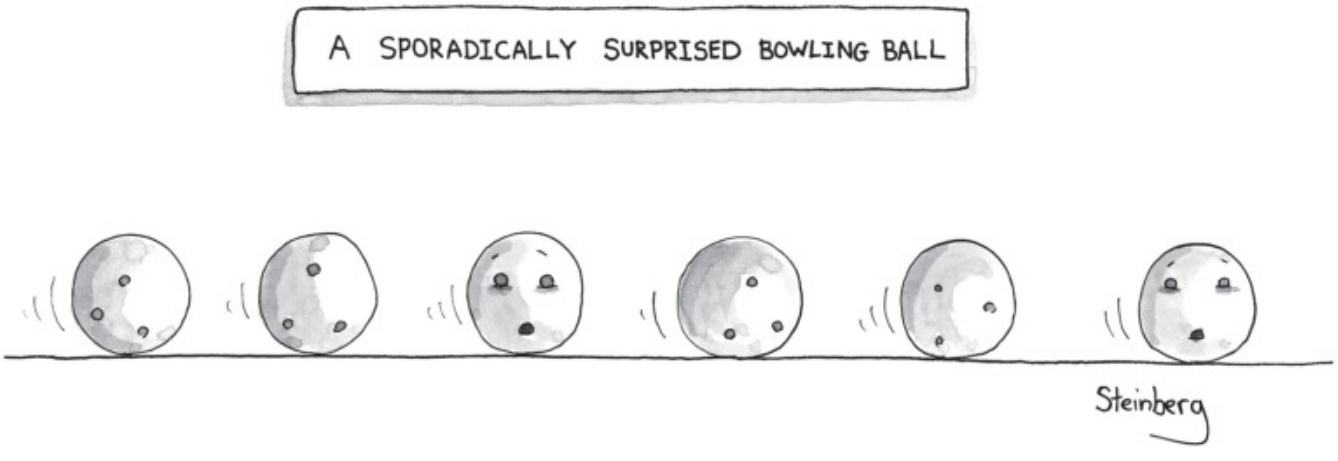
> In the years since I made this life change, my own well-being has risen *a lot*. People notice and remark that I smile more, and I look like I'm having more fun in my work. My relationships are better than they were.

We're so happy that you're happy, Professor! Far be it from me to point out that such protestations of improvement, sincere as they are, have a whiff of the travelling salesman—you know, the guy who puts a foot in the door and says, "Believe me, Ma'am, I've been using this very same vacuum cleaner in my own home for three months now, and the effect of that heightened suck power is just tremendous. My dust has all but vanished. My carpets look brand new." To anyone browsing "Build the Life You Want" and books of a similar ilk, it soon becomes clear that the care and maintenance of the self is no longer a branch of the social sciences, if it ever was, or an offshoot of popular psychology. Restructuring your inward being, and increasing its turnover, is now akin to running a company. Personhood, like religion and politics, is a business.

It doesn't take long for Brooks to get the business going. He proudly inducts us into the thrill of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, or PANAS, which gauges "your natural happy-unhappy mix." This gives us a list of twenty emotions, such as "6. Guilty 7. Scared 8. Hostile 9. Enthusiastic." (A perfect guide, as it happens, to the average day of a movie critic.) You note down how keenly you feel the feel, as Oprah would say, grading each emotion for intensity, then calculate your final score. This, in turn, shows where you belong on a pretty diagram, reproduced on page 16 of "Build the Life You Want," that divides *Homo sapiens* cleanly into four basic types: Cheerleader, Mad Scientist, Judge, and Poet. Really? Imagine asking J. Robert Oppenheimer to nominate which one of those he thought he was. He would have exploded.

You've got to love the PANAS test. It means almost nothing, yet it gives you the bracing impression that you're down on the factory floor, tinkering away on the unique machine that is you. It is, to use Oprah's splendidly honest term, "science-y," right down to the vague, if benign, laboratory conditions that Brooks dictates. "To take the test, find a time when you feel relatively neutral about life—say, right after lunch," he writes. But what sort of lunch? If it's three o'clock in the afternoon and you're lingering over coffee and gazing out across the Bay of Naples, you will give thanks for the wonders of creation. Conversely, if you just blew seven dollars and twenty-nine cents on a Subway footlong, you will hold your fellow-humans in contempt and assume, naturally, that the world is an overcooked meatball hung in a meaningless void.

Undaunted, Brooks forges onward, and makes further encouraging claims about his methods. Eager to prove that even negative feelings, if shrewdly handled, can have a positive outcome, he ventures into the realms of the book-y. He even gets arts-y on our ass. Quoting a line from Keats's letters—"Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?"—Brooks adds, "Scientists have found that Keats was right." If only all literary criticism could be as brisk as that. Moreover, according to a study cited by Brooks, "The research found that among great composers like Beethoven, a 37 percent increase in sadness led to, on average, one extra major composition." That sentence makes me twenty-four per cent less sad, and eighty-one per cent more in-



clined to giggle, than anything I have read this year.

Brooks is scarcely the first to propose that our happiness, and its opposite, can and should be quantified as precisely as barometric pressure. In "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation" (published, by a murky coincidence, in the year of the French Revolution), the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, clinging fast to his utilitarian creed, devised what came to be known as the felicific calculus. In theory, this allowed you to evaluate any given act in terms of its ensuing pain or pleasure, which could be graded according to various criteria: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. In practice, the last of these—which sounds tame, and which refers to the number of people who will be affected by the act—is probably the most morally ticklish, as any secondhand smoker can confirm.

With a couple of centuries' worth of medical probing behind him, Brooks can boldly go where Bentham was unable to go before and lead us to the particular neighborhoods where pain and pleasure hang out. "Build the Life You Want" plays peekaboo with the reader, affording sneaky little glimpses of the hypothalamus, the insula, and the adrenal glands. Are we genuinely expected to master this material, though, or is it designed purely to reassure us that we are in safe hands? When Brooks, analyzing our reaction to fear, writes, "Your periaqueductal gray, which also receives a note from your amygdala, tells your body to move," the prosaic image of the note—plucked from our everyday lives—is what sticks and stays. To be told that our internal mail system is like that of a well-run office comes as quite a relief. Then, there is metacognition, a buzzword that hums throughout the book and entails "experiencing your emotions consciously" and "refusing to be controlled by them." Brooks expounds:

> You might compare it to the process of taking petroleum from the well (your limbic system) to a gas refinery (the prefrontal cortex), where it can be made into something you can use purposively.

It's not the greenest analogy I've ever seen, but, hey, it does the job. Such is the tactic by which Brooks and the other sovereigns of self-help, with considerable skill and a pinch of cunning, advance their cause. They borrow difficult concepts from the realms of neurology and behavioral science, among others, and couch them in a patois that we recognize. Few of us may have read a paper from a 2013 issue of *Depression and Anxiety*—think *The World of Interiors* without the cashmere throws—titled "Reports of Drinking to Self-Medicate Anxiety Symptoms: Longitudinal Assessment for Subgroups of Individuals with Alcohol Dependence." But Brooks *has* read it, and has filtered its findings into his thoughts on addiction. (The paper, I couldn't help noticing, had eleven authors. I trust that they ganged up and got pie-eyed on Zombies to celebrate publication.)

Homework, though, is not the nub of Brooks's enterprise. The nub is that he's required, by the panic-stricken temper of the times, to insist that we can and must get better at being who we are. It could be argued that so positive an outlook is, and always has been, a by-product of any inquiry into the conduct of our earthly existence, although a self-help book by Schopenhauer would, perhaps, flummox more readers than it would assist. On the other hand, if anything yokes together the philosophers cited by Brooks, it is the willingness, or the unavoidable compulsion, to worry away at one moral conundrum after the next, like dogs unearthing a bone to have another go at the marrow. You could spend a lifetime, say, stubbornly chewing on what Aristotle, in the Ethics, means by *eudaemonia*. "Happiness" alone won't suffice. Aristotle himself, treading carefully, writes, "We have practically defined happiness as a sort of living and faring well." I am partial to the modesty of "human flourishing." Others prefer something like "the activity of a rational soul in accordance with virtue"—a daunting ideal that held sway for twenty-five hundred years, until it was roundly rebuffed by the creators of "Jackass."

Whether there is still a place for the steady intellectual grind is open to question. Readers and publishers alike are worried by all that worrying. Understandably, their quest is for books that

promise results, primed to beef up one's *eudaemonia* levels like a shot of Vitamin $B_{12}$. Hence the speed with which the mood of Brooks's book, grammatical and tonal, is set within the title: not "How to Build" but "Build." Thereafter, the imperative reigns supreme. "Start by working on your toughness." No sweat. "Take your grand vision of improvement and humble ambition to be part of it in a specific way and execute accordingly." Check. "Rebel against your shame." Done. "Widen your conflict-resolution repertoire." Kapow! "Treat your walks, prayer time, and gym sessions as if they were meetings with the president." Which President? "Journal your experiences and feelings over the course of the day." Since when did "journal" turn into a transitive verb? "Dig into the extensive and growing technology and literature on mindfulness." Sorry, I was miles away, what? Above all, "Remember: *You are your own CEO.*" Holy moly. Do I have to wear a suit to brush my teeth? Is my dog a shareholder? Were last year's migraines tax-deductible? Can I be fired by me?

The problem with imperatives is that the more frequent they become, or the more impassioned, the harder it is to obey them and to predict what the fallout from their implementation might be. When Judy Garland, in a tux and black tights, belted out "Get Happy" in "Summer Stock" (1950), you bowed to her command, even if you knew that her life off camera lay in ruins. When she sang the song thirteen years later, on TV, it was intertwined with "Happy Days Are Here Again," sung by Barbra Streisand, who sat beside her: a rending mashup of two American anthems, delivered at a slow and stricken tempo, as if to acknowledge that the getting of happiness exacted too high a price. And, once it was got, then what?

You hear that fear again in the voice of Cary Grant in "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House" (1948). He plays an advertising man, hitherto squashed into a small New York apartment with his family, who buys a wreck in Connecticut, has it torn down, puts up a new place, and gets pushed to the brink. "Anybody who builds a house today is crazy. The minute you start, they put you on the list. The All-American Sucker list. You start out to build a home and you wind up in the poorhouse," he cries. "What about the kids who just got married and want a home of their own? It's a conspiracy, I tell you, a conspiracy against every boy and girl who were ever in love." The movie is a light comedy, but, this being Grant, the shadow of desperation is never far away, and what maddens Mr. Blandings is not just the practical chaos and the financial waste but the expense of spirit. He has been sold on his own dream.

I thought of Mr. Blandings often as I plowed through "Build the Life You Want." Brooks radiates decency and good will; if you yearn to do up your life, like somebody who knocks down a wall and repaints the kitchen, he will lend you the tools. There is almost nothing that he will not undertake to fix. He has a stirring chapter on friendship, for which he has a proper Aristotelian reverence. (Even Bentham, no party animal, recommended "the pleasures of amity.") So kindly is his disposition, indeed, that he has faith in the gentle resolving of ideological differences. The trick, apparently, is to reserve judgment: "You will find yourself not weighing in on political debates and giving fewer opinions; this will keep you calmer and in a greater state of inner peace." It's wonderful to reflect on the millions of people who will heed that advice and maintain a monastic silence as we enter an election year.

Here and there, however, as you browse the book, you catch murmurs of disquiet. They tend to arise in casual comments, such as "Taking negativity personally can lead to rumination." Heaven forfend! A ruminator on the loose! At other times, a plain recitation of statistics can freak you out, as when Brooks adduces an academic study from 2007:

> The researchers then examined a data set from another study that rated incoming college freshmen's "cheerfulness" and tracked their income nearly two decades later. They found that the most cheerful in 1976 were not the highest earners in 1995; that distinction once again went to the second-highest group, which rated their cheerfulness as "above average" but not in the highest 10 percent.

Where to begin with this? With the assumption that cheerfulness is a measurable quality and that, more to the point, a person is guaranteed to be the most reliable assessor of her or his own cheer? Or with the uncontested idea that a rising income conveys you ever closer to the summum bonum? It might have been pertinent, at this juncture, if Brooks had directed inquisitive readers to the Easterlin paradox—that is, to a controversial paper of 1974, "Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence," by the economist Richard A. Easterlin. The link between earnings and contentment, Easterlin claimed, was not as firm as might be expected, especially when one compared a variation in earnings inside a single country with a variation *between* two separate countries. The fun part came in a chart that laid out the "Personal Happiness Rating" of thirteen nations, as recorded in the late fifties and early sixties. The lucky winners were the United States and Cuba.

How most of us would rate our personal happiness these days, even without the Bay of Pigs to look forward to, is not something that Arthur C. Brooks and Oprah Winfrey presume to plot on a graph. I suspect, however, that in their view most of us are weltering in a woe of our own devising, and that, unlike Beethoven, we can't even get a decent symphony out of it. Hence Brooks's most provoking sentence of all, which is tucked away in parentheses, lest it disturb our equanimity. "(Unhappy people make great consumers)," he writes. And there we arrive at the heart of the matter. "Build the Life You Want" is the pure product of a liberal capitalist democracy: First World fretting, one might say, politely disguised as universal wisdom. It both springs from and speaks to an unmistakable patch of the planet, and, with the aid of muscular marketing and the imprimatur of Oprah, it will be ingested by those whose dolor, to their bewilderment, has been aggravated rather than soothed by mass consumption. "Turn off self-view on Zoom. Don't take any selfies," we read, in this rousing hymn to self-help. Round and round we go. ♦

KEYSTONE / HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY

*The Japanese leader Hideki Tojo listens as his death sentence is pronounced, in 1948.*

BOOKS

# The Verdict

*Did the Allied tribunal in postwar Tokyo secure justice—or merely vengeance?*

BY IAN BURUMA

In Nuremberg, in the fall of 1945, twenty-two high-ranking Nazis were put on trial before a group of judges from Allied nations. A year later, twelve of the defendants were sentenced to be hanged, and seven received prison sentences. Few people, even in Germany, felt particularly sorry for the condemned men, who had caused so much death and destruction all over Europe. But there were reservations about a trial in which the victors prosecuted the vanquished. Winston Churchill, for one, would have preferred to shoot the Nazi leaders and be done with it. (Stalin thought that killing fifty thousand Germans might do; even Churchill was a little put out by that.)

Instead, the London Charter was created to try the top Nazis for crimes against humanity (a new concept) and crimes against peace (another new idea), along with conventional war crimes. Crimes against humanity meant murder, extermination, enslavement, and other such acts against a civilian population, or persecution on religious or racial grounds. Planning and waging a war of aggression counted as crimes against peace. The aim in creating these laws was to set norms for the future. But critics of the Nuremberg proceedings quickly objected to the use of retroactive justice—punishment by laws that hadn't existed when the crimes were committed. They also noted that, before Nuremberg, political leaders had not been held personally responsible for acts of state, however cruel and aggressive they may have been.

Hypocrisy was another issue raised by critics. German leaders were accused of killing large numbers of defenseless civilians, but what about the eradication of entire cities by Allied bombing? And how was one of Stalin's hanging judges, who presided over some of the bloodiest Soviet show trials, entitled to try Germans for crimes against humanity?

If the Nuremberg trial was questionable in some respects, the trial of Japanese wartime leaders in Tokyo (which resulted in seven men hanged, sixteen imprisoned) was far more dubious. John Dower, the finest American historian of modern Japan, called the Tokyo trial "a murky reflection of its German counterpart." On a visit to Japan in 1946, the eminent U.S. diplomat George Kennan dismissed the proceedings as "political trials." Charles Willoughby, General Douglas MacArthur's intelligence chief in Tokyo, thought that the proceedings were "the worst hypocrisy in recorded history." And Radhabinod Pal, the trial's Indian judge, didn't think that any of the defendants should be found guilty, because he viewed a trial conducted mostly by representatives of colonial powers as illegitimate.

The International Military Tribunal for the Far East, as the Tokyo trial was officially called, lasted longer than the trial in Nuremberg—it stretched from May, 1946, to November, 1948—and was on a far grander scale. Where the Nuremberg judges came from four countries, the Tokyo judges came from eleven: the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, China, the Philippines, the Netherlands, France, New Zealand, India, and the Soviet Union. The Tokyo trial was also more of an American affair than the tribunal in Germany had been. Japan was under Allied occupation until 1952, but control was almost entirely in the hands of General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP). And, if the ferocious Allied destruction of German cities was a point to be skirted in Nuremberg, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not to mention the incendiary bombing

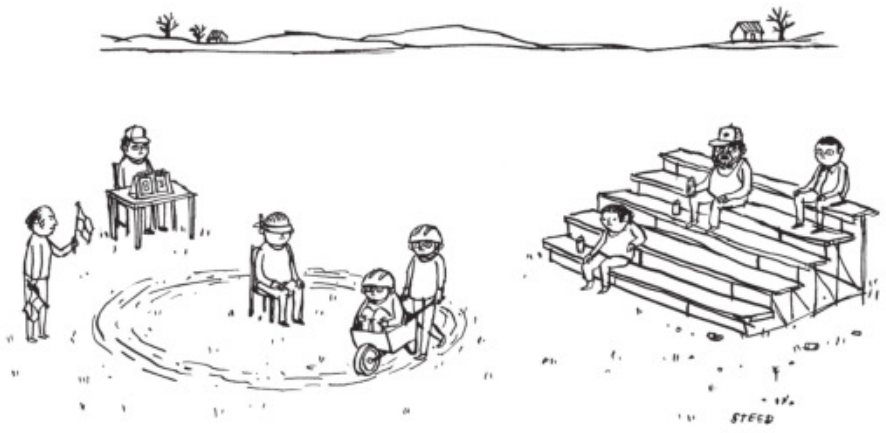
of many other Japanese cities, cast even greater doubt on the legitimacy of Allied judgment of Japanese war crimes.

Illegitimate or not, as Gary J. Bass points out in his exhaustive and fascinating book "Judgment at Tokyo: World War II on Trial and the Making of Modern Asia" (Knopf), the Tokyo trial had serious consequences that continue to play out to this day. Placing the trial firmly in the context of colonialism, racial attitudes, the Cold War, and post-colonial Asian politics, Bass argues, quite rightly, that the trial "reveals some of the reasons why a liberal international order has not emerged in Asia."

It is impossible to imagine a mainstream German politician openly disparaging the Nuremberg trial as mere foreign propaganda, or paying tribute to convicted war criminals in a place of worship. Yet several Japanese Prime Ministers have done just that with regard to the Tokyo trial. The late Shinzo Abe, for example, prayed at the imperialist Yasukuni Shrine, in Tokyo, where major war criminals are glorified and monuments set among elegant gardens honor such notorious wartime organizations as the Kempeitai, the rough Japanese equivalent of the Gestapo. One reason Abe and some of his predecessors have done so—provoking Japanese liberals as much as other Asians—is their desire to overturn what right-wing nationalists like to call the "Tokyo-trial version of history." They believe that Allied propagandists, and the Japanese leftists who parroted them, imposed a "masochistic" view of the past on Japan, and unfairly accused the country of waging an aggressive war and committing worse atrocities than other nations.

The version of history offered by the Tokyo trial *was* a little skewed. The proceedings followed the example of Nuremberg, as though the war waged by Japan had been an Asian mirror image of that waged by Germany. Indeed, many Westerners at the time thought that the Japanese were even worse than the Nazis. Racial prejudice had something to do with this belief. Bass quotes an Australian newspaper: "The Jap has not a soul to think in terms of decency." But the attack on Pearl Harbor also contributed, as did the treatment of Western prisoners of war, which was more severe than the usual German handling of P.O.W.s (as long as they weren't Soviet soldiers). Bass quotes some startling statistics. In 1944, a third of Americans wanted Japan to be "destroyed as a political entity"; thirteen per cent thought all Japanese people should be killed.

These were just the views of ordinary Americans responding to opinion polls. Henry L. Stimson—the wartime U.S. War Secretary, who had blocked Jewish refugees from coming to the United States as late as 1944 and who, after the war, saw no reason to prosecute the Nazis for what they had done inside Germany—was appalled by the "horrible pictures of the way the Japanese are treating our poor Air Force boys when they get hold of them." These boys, of course, had been killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians from the air. General MacArthur, meanwhile, wanted the Tokyo trial to deal only with Pearl Harbor, and not with Japan's far greater war crimes committed against other Asians, especially the Chinese.




*"It's more exciting if you bet money on it."*

The Japanese war was, in fact, not the same as Hitler's war, nor were the defendants in the Tokyo trial much like the Nazis in the dock at Nuremberg. There was no Japanese equivalent of the Nazi Party, and no dictator like Hitler. Koki Hirota (who was sentenced to death by hanging), Shigenori Togo (twenty years in prison), and Mamoru Shigemitsu (seven years) were neither fanatics nor thugs but civilian politicians who served in a number of governments that were more and more dominated by military men. All three—Hirota as Prime Minister and foreign minister, Togo and Shigemitsu as foreign ministers—had tried at different times to stop the militarists from going to war.

They failed. But the prosecutors' allegation that these men were part of a "conspiracy to wage a war of aggression" was never plausible. There were too many disagreements inside various Japanese cabinets for that. Conspiracy to commit a crime, in any case, wasn't a Japanese judicial concept; it was a peculiarly Anglo-American one.

Many of the military leaders on trial were belligerent. General Hideki Tojo (hanged) certainly was. And they were unable or unwilling to stop their troops from raping and murdering countless civilians. Tojo also ordered P.O.W.s to do hard labor, which often killed them. Torture—especially at the hands of the dreaded Kempeitai, whose leaders, oddly enough, were not tried in Tokyo—was routinely practiced all over the Japanese Empire. But the defendants in Tokyo had not been driven by a genocidal ideology. Many of them may have been warmongers, but they weren't Nazis.

As latecomers to the imperialist game, the Japanese had been fighting wars on the Asian continent since 1894. They colonized Korea, Taiwan, and islands in the South Pacific; conquered Manchuria (now northeast China) in 1931 and set it up as a puppet state; and invaded the rest of China in 1937. Much of this was done in the spirit of defensive jingoism. Japan wanted to protect what it saw as its legitimate interests in Asia by building its own empire, one that both opposed Western empires in the region and mimicked them. This Japanese enterprise was often vicious, frequently dishonest, and ultimately disastrous, but it was essentially an imperialist war, and

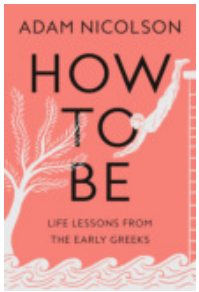
did not include a systematic and ideological program of extermination.

Still, Bass is right to keep returning to the question of race. Tojo, who served as Japan's Prime Minister from 1941 to 1944, believed that his country needed to liberate Asians from Western imperialism and spread its "superior" culture "all over the world." It was a brutal liberation that most Asians didn't much appreciate. But the Japanese leaders, Tojo among them, defended their mission by claiming to be fighting against white supremacy. In 1919, the Japanese demand for racial equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations had been denied. Some two decades later, Japan, in the view of Tojo and others, was forced into a war with the West—the invasion of China was harder to justify—because Western imperial powers had conspired against Japanese interests, cutting the country off from oil and other vital supplies. At the same time, the president of Japan's privy council warned the militarists against a war with the West, lest such a venture unite the Europeans and the Americans in a common "hatred of the yellow race."

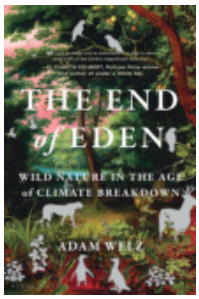
Some anti-colonial Asian leaders in the nineteen-forties—including José Laurel in the Philippines and Sukarno in the Dutch East Indies—were prepared to view the Japanese as liberators and hoped that collaboration with Japan would rid them of their Western masters. It did, in the end, but not before Asians suffered a great many horrors at Japanese hands. Two of the three Asian judges on the Tokyo tribunal—Delfin Jaranilla, from the Philippines, and Mei Ruao, from China—were, Bass points out, harsher on the Japanese than the Western judges were. That shouldn't have been surprising, since Mei had suffered from Japanese bombing in Chongqing, the last wartime Chinese capital, and Jaranilla had been in the Bataan Death March, in 1942, which claimed the lives of as many as eighteen thousand Filipinos.

Justice Pal, on the other hand, an eloquent Bengali intellectual who had become a respected lawyer under the British Raj, agreed with Tojo and his colleagues in the dock in finding the idea of a Japanese conspiracy "preposterous." Pal claimed that his fellow-judges from the West had a "bias created by racial or

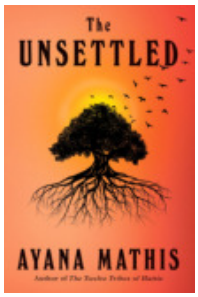
# BRIEFLY NOTED




**How to Be**, *by Adam Nicolson (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This eminently readable tour of Greek philosophy from approximately 650 to 450 B.C. brings the "sea-and-city world" of Heraclitus and Homer to life. Anchoring his study in Iron Age Greece, with its bustling mercantile economy and conflicting embraces of both slavery and personal autonomy, Nicolson traces the emergence of several key philosophical concepts. In the poetry of Sappho, he locates the stirrings of an interior self; in the writings of Xenophanes, the political mind; in the thought of Pythagoras, an immortal soul. Together, he shows, the early Greeks developed intellectual habits, chief among them the use of questioning as the basis of knowing, which laid the groundwork for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and for how we reason today.




**The End of Eden**, *by Adam Welz (Bloomsbury)*. By cataloguing wildlife whose habitats have been thrown into disarray by climate change, Welz, an environmental journalist, details some of the "cascades of chaos" that define our ecological era. In Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria decimated the island's endangered indigenous parrot, the iguaca, killing the last birds able to pass down the species's language. The depletion of the Pacific Coast's sunflower sea star has led sea urchins, formerly the starfish's prey, to begin feeding on seaweed that nearby fish depend on. Welz's study, which he conceived as an attempt to examine such disruptions "without turning myself to stone," amounts to a haunting warning.




**The Unsettled**, *by Ayana Mathis (Knopf)*. Set in Philadelphia in the nineteen-eighties, this absorbing novel follows a mother and son as they search for a place to live, eventually landing in a derelict family shelter. Mathis's chapters alternate among several points of view, but she primarily orbits the mother's consciousness. Everything in her life is unsettled: her grip on reality, her relationship with her son's father, her childhood home in a dwindling Black town in Alabama, where her estranged mother lives. As she attempts to chart the "real story" of how things went wrong, the novel suggests that her struggles often stem from outside forces—some arising from racial injustices, others from the fragility of memory and inheritance.


**The English Experience**, *by Julie Schumacher (Doubleday)*. The third in a series of academic satires about Jason Fitger, a hapless Midwestern professor of English, this book finds the divorced failed novelist coerced into chaperoning a group of undergraduates on a winter-break excursion called Experience: England. Fitger harbors "a vague hostility to all things British," and his sojourn in London is calamitous: he injures himself, bungles his pedagogic responsibilities, and obsesses about his ex-wife's possible departure for a job in Chicago. The novel's highlights include the student assignments, many of which are reproduced with their errors intact ("I know my writing needs work but I am not taking it for granite"), and Schumacher's sympathetic humor, which reveals her characters' flawed humanity.


*"They say eventually I'll start to look like him."*

• •

political factors." Japan had been right to feel threatened in the nineteen-thirties, he thought, "with Nationalist China, Soviet Russia, and the race-conscious English-speaking peoples of the Pacific closing in on her." And if Japanese education and propaganda had been a little racist, too, well: "I cannot condemn those of the Japanese leaders who might have thought of protecting their race by inculcating their racial superiority in the youthful mind."

No wonder, then, that Justice Pal should have a monument all to himself at Yasukuni Shrine, bearing the words "When Time shall have softened passion and prejudice, when Reason shall have stripped the mask from misrepresentation, then Justice, holding evenly her scales, will require much of past censure and praise to change places." Few of the Japanese nationalists who go to the shrine to pay their respects to the Indian judge will recognize that these words were spoken originally by Jefferson Davis, the Confederate leader, who mourned the lost cause of slavery.

Are the Japanese nationalists right? Was the Tokyo trial just a hypocritical piece of Western propaganda, taken up by Japanese leftists? The truth is far more complicated. Western bias can safely be assumed, since the trial was decided upon by the U.S. and dominated by judges from the British Empire. The chief judge was an Australian, the chief prosecutor an American, and, aside from Jaranilla, Mei, and Pal, the judges representing Asian peoples were Dutch, British, and French. The Koreans, who had suffered from Japanese aggression longer than any other people, had no judge at all.

Nor is it a stretch to think that a sense of wounded imperialism might have colored the perspective of some of the European judges. Although Bass overstates the case when he says that Britain's postwar Labour government "embraced imperialism"—the independence of India and Burma, at least, had its approval—there's no doubt that the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, and the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, still had an exalted view of British power in the world, which they sought to preserve through the Commonwealth, and through a global network of military bases. The Japanese invasions of European colonies were clearly experienced as a humiliation. Publicly abasing Western P.O.W.s had been a deliberate Japanese tactic to show other Asians how low the white man could be brought down, and to promote the mission of restoring Asia to Asians.

The legacy of the tribunal was certainly muddled by the lack of consensus among the judges about the legitimacy of the charges. Justice Pal was not the only one to challenge the idea of conspiracy to wage war. The charge of crimes against peace had been justified in Nuremberg by various prewar agreements to proscribe war, such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. (In the wake of the First World War, the French foreign minister, Aristide Briand, suggested a Franco-U.S. agreement to outlaw war between the two nations. When his U.S. counterpart, Frank B. Kellogg, showed little interest in a bilateral arrangement, the idea was expanded to include most of the countries in the world, including Japan.) But international agreements are not criminal laws. Even the Australian jurist William Webb, the tribunal's chief judge, admitted that "international law, unlike the laws of many countries, does not expressly include a crime of naked conspiracy," and that the creation of this crime was "nothing short of judicial legislation."

Natural law, based on religious and legal philosophies associated with such figures as the seventeenth-century Dutch statesman and jurist Hugo Grotius—and systematized earlier by Thomas Aquinas—was also invoked to condemn the Japanese. The Dutch judge, Bert Röling, was among those who dissented from the tribunal's rulings (much to the alarm of his government in The Hague), and he pointedly took issue with the effort to enlist natural law. Fully conscious of the Dutch colonial record in Asia, he wrote, "I hesitate to approach the Far East in our effort to determine the criminality of aggression with quotations from idealists and philosophers of the very period when our heroes and soldiers were conquering its territories in what could hardly be called a defensive war." Röling wanted to limit the trial to conventional war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Meanwhile, Joseph Keenan, the American chief prosecutor, was prone to sonorous absurdities. He claimed that the Japanese aggressors had invaded countries in Asia intending to "destroy democracy and its essential basis—freedom and the respect of human personality." These countries in Asia were, of course, European and U.S. colonies. That Keenan was often drunk is no excuse. Even Asians who had loathed their Japanese oppressors would have been as-

tonished by this delusional flourish of American idealism.

The Asian judges, apart from Pal, had no doubts about the court's jurisdiction. Bass is especially good on Mei, the Chinese judge, to whom too little attention has been paid in other books on the Tokyo trial. A man of considerable learning who had studied at Stanford University, Mei was perhaps the least cynical of the judges. He truly believed that the trial would create a more peaceful and democratic world order, and had the thankless task of promoting this idea even as his Nationalist government was being quickly overwhelmed by Mao Zedong's Communist revolutionaries. He also did his best to focus attention on Japanese atrocities in China. If MacArthur thought the attack on Pearl Harbor was a murderous war crime, Chinese claims were far more persuasive: as many as twenty million Chinese died in the war between 1937 and 1945.

The retreating Japanese had destroyed most of the documents attesting to their actions, but there was nonetheless sufficient evidence to shock Japanese public opinion. Various witnesses gave accounts of what they saw when the Nationalist capital, Nanjing, was ransacked in the course of six weeks in 1937 by Japanese Imperial Army troops, who raped countless women and killed tens of thousands and possibly even hundreds of thousands of people. A Japanese Army document produced at the trial showed that superior officers had either encouraged or ignored these crimes. "In the battlefield we think nothing of rape," one soldier said. Chinese P.O.W.s were lined up and "killed to test the efficiency of the machine gun," another recalled.

The Japanese press reported these horrors at length, but Mei's noble intention to establish a thorough historical record of Japan's crimes was further hampered by the civil war in China. The Nationalist generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek tended to see trials against Japanese war criminals as a distraction from his struggle against the Communists. He even employed one of the most ruthless Japanese generals as his military adviser. The massacres perpetrated by this particular general had been directed mostly at Communist guerrillas, which didn't especially concern Chiang. The Communists, in turn, didn't bother much about the Nanjing Massacre until decades later, because its victims were governed by the Nationalists.

Other Japanese crimes were ignored at the Tokyo trial for equally cynical reasons. Japanese doctors and scientists in the notorious Unit 731, which was in charge of biological and chemical warfare, had conducted hideous experiments on Chinese and Russian prisoners, and deliberately infected large numbers of Chinese with fatal diseases, such as bubonic plague, just to see what would happen. The leader of this unit, Shiro Ishii, and his team received immunity from the Americans in exchange for their data, which were thought to be useful. Quite how useful the data proved has never been divulged.

Nor was attention paid at the Tokyo trial to the organized effort of the Japanese Imperial Army to force Chinese, Korean, and other Asian women into sexual slavery. The wide-scale rape of local women had become a headache for the Army, since it provoked greater anti-Japanese resistance. To mitigate this problem, so-called comfort women were tricked or kidnapped and made to service Japanese soldiers. But their suffering wasn't on anyone's agenda in 1946. This enormity would become a serious issue only much later.

The extent to which the defendants in the Tokyo trial were personally responsible for the crimes in China, or in other parts of Asia, was hard to prove, so they were convicted for their failure to stop those crimes. But in the end it wasn't the Western powers that came down hardest on the Japanese. Justice Mei thought the final judgment had been too soft in some respects. The Chinese Communists were outraged that Tojo and other defendants had been allowed to make self-justifying speeches in court and to be defended by able U.S. lawyers. The *People's Daily* thundered, "MacArthur's protection and indulgence is the real reason why war criminals such as Tojo dare to be so arrogant."

In one important respect, the "Tokyo-trial version of history" was indeed utterly remiss. Emperor Hirohito, whose name was on many incriminating documents, was, for political reasons, neither prosecuted nor even called as a witness. When Tojo inadvertently let it slip that "no Japanese subject would go

against the will of His Majesty," he was swiftly reminded not to implicate the Emperor and stated that the Emperor had never had anything but peaceful intentions.

MacArthur, as well as his advisers, decided in 1945 that if the Emperor did not remain on his throne there would be a nationwide revolt that would upset SCAP's administration. Only a few days after the formal Japanese surrender, as Bass writes, "both the American occupiers and the Japanese authorities converged on a common line: the imperial court, so useful for a peaceful occupation, was not to be blamed for the war." Bass might have stressed, however, that this was the view of MacArthur's most conservative advisers and the most reactionary Japanese authorities, and that many Japanese, including some of Hirohito's closest relatives, thought he should at least abdicate. It was the Americans who quashed that idea from the beginning.

Bass describes some of the rifts in the U.S. Administration, in Tokyo as well as in Washington, D.C. At almost nine hundred pages, his book is already very long—"necessarily so," in his opinion—but on the politics swirling around MacArthur's court he could have said more. There were New Dealers in his entourage who wanted a more radical transformation of Japan than did more conservative figures such as Henry Stimson, George Kennan, and Joseph Grew, the former Ambassador to Japan. Some of the conservatives around MacArthur were rather disreputable, to put it mildly. General Willoughby, his intelligence chief, born in Germany as Adolf Karl Weidenbach, was an admirer of Mussolini. MacArthur called Willoughby "my pet fascist." The intelligence chief, who arranged for the protection of Shiro Ishii, from Unit 731, found allies among Japanese right-wingers, including some influential figures who had been arrested for war crimes and who sought to shape Japan according to their political wishes.

Bass calls the New Dealers "retributive" and "maximalist." That's a little unfair; they were convinced that there was enough Japanese enthusiasm for civic rights to establish a more liberal democracy than had existed before, and to a large degree they were right. That Grew, Kennan, Stimson, and Willoughby were skeptical of the prospects for such a liberal democracy was partly a matter of cultural or racial prejudice. In Stimson's view, the Japanese were "an oriental people with an oriental mind and religion," and thus incapable of governing themselves. Attempts to democratize Japan, in his view, would end up making "a hash of it."

MacArthur himself, a martinet and a staunch Republican, was torn between his New Dealers and the conservatives. He compared the Japanese to "a boy of twelve" in terms of the "standards of modern civilization." But he also had a rather grandiose idea of what he saw as his historic mission to establish a Christian democracy in Japan. This resulted in a liberal constitution, trade unions, land reforms, a free press, and women's suffrage, all of which were welcomed by most of the Japanese population. In the late nineteen-forties, however, when the Communists were winning in China and the Cold War was warming up, the right-wing, anti-Communist views of people such as Willoughby gained strength. "Reds" in government jobs, trade unions, universities, and other institutions were purged. But almost all the men who had been indicted for war crimes were released as soon as the Tokyo trial was over, in 1948. One of them was Nobusuke Kishi, the wartime vice-minister of munitions and Shinzo Abe's grandfather, who escaped a prison sentence and became Prime Minister in 1957.

In short, the kind of Japanese who objected to the "Tokyo-trial version of history" soon returned to power with active American assistance, including large amounts of American cash that flowed into conservative coffers well into the nineteen-sixties. Some of the work of the New Dealers and the Japanese liberals was undone. There were no further efforts to hold the Japanese to account for waging aggressive wars and committing war crimes across Asia. Still, there was at least one aspect of the postwar Japanese constitution, written by American idealists, that could not be revised, and that was Article 9, whereby Japan was to "renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes." This was simply too popular in Japan to touch.

But the right-wing nationalists—and, indeed, many American conservatives, such as Richard Nixon—deplored Article 9 as a big mistake. The nationalists continue to see Article 9 as a humiliating assault on Japanese sovereignty, while their liberal opponents continue to see pacifism as a necessary lesson to be drawn from Japan's dismal wartime record. As a result of this conflict, views on Japan's modern history have become hopelessly tangled up with postwar politics. The more liberals point to the Nanjing Massacre, or the destruction of Japan itself, as a warning not to change the constitution, the more nationalists wish to deny that there ever was such a massacre in Nanjing, or that Japan did anything to be particularly ashamed of. This has greatly muddled Japanese foreign policy, especially in Asia. Every time Japanese leaders issue formal apologies for Japan's dark past in other Asian countries, their efforts are undercut by right-wing politicians making a show of visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, or insisting that school textbooks should be more patriotic and omit references to the Nanjing Massacre and other war crimes.

This is embarrassing, and makes it easier for China to stir up anti-Japanese sentiment. South Korea—given the increasing belligerence it faces from China, as well as from North Korea—should be a close ally of Japan's. But relations between the two countries remain troubled by Japanese right-wing denials that Korean women were forced to work in Japanese military brothels. Indeed, Japan's unresolved issues with the "Tokyo-trial version of history" get to the heart of what Bass identifies as the country's greatest dilemma today.

Japan's constitutional pacifism has always been predicated on the understanding that the U.S. would guarantee its security. Amid an increasingly hostile environment and an erratic American politics (Donald Trump), growing numbers of Japanese believe that a constitutional revision should now at least be seriously discussed, so that Japan can do more to defend itself and its neighbors. But neither Japan's allies in South Korea and Southeast Asia nor its liberals at home will be reassured by such a move as long as the country's conservative leaders refuse to face up to its past, and seek to appeal the verdict of history. ♦

*Crafting a successor to a Shirley Jackson novel is a literary act of haunting.*

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELE CASTELLANO

BOOKS

# Possession

*What happens when a novelist writes a follow-up to someone else's novel.*

BY KRISTEN ROUPENIAN

Elizabeth Hand's "A Haunting on the Hill" (Mulholland) is, the book jacket notes, "the first novel authorized to return to the world of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*." Authorized—by whom? Not by Jackson, who died in 1965, but by her heirs. "A Haunting on the Hill" is, therefore, a ghost story conjured by representatives of a deceased author's estate. It all sounds a little uncanny.

Isn't that the case, though, whenever we try to resurrect dead writers? In the past decade, a resurgence of acclaim has fully established Shirley Jackson as the queen of dark literary fiction, and there is no surer sign of an author's success than the arrival of a new generation of writers eager to channel her spirit, rereading and reimagining her work. So much for the death of the author. These days, it seems, fan-fiction writers start posting their rewrites the moment a book leaves the printer—sometimes over the author's vociferous objections.

Yet not a few literary classics, too, are constructed as revisions of previous ones, typically works in the public domain. Think of how Jean Rhys revised Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre" in "Wide Sargasso Sea," excavating a Caribbean backstory for that madwoman in the attic. Or how J. M. Coetzee broke apart "Robinson Crusoe" and rearranged the pieces to write "Foe." Or how Peter Carey pillaged Charles Dickens to create "Jack Maggs," with its title character based on the escaped convict who, in "Great Expectations," turns out to be Pip's secret benefactor.

Historically, though, such literary incursion into another writer's territory has involved competition, rebellion, even hostility. The connection to the earlier work can be oblique and entirely tacit, and it's notable that some of the greatest novels in the form have been written by authors bound to their predecessors in a postcolonial relation. In these cases, a defiance of authority is the literary catalyst. One can hardly imagine Chinua Achebe petitioning the heirs to the copyright to "Heart of Darkness" for permission to fill in the hazy areas on Joseph Conrad's map.

By contrast, the more docile "authorized" novel has typically been reserved for juggernaut copyright-protected characters, like Ian Fleming's James Bond or Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne—publishing ventures that have proved so profitable for so many people that it would be absurd to let the income stream be disrupted by a minor detail like a writer's death. The result can be disconcerting. I remember, as a teen-ager, plucking a V. C. Andrews novel off the "New Books" shelf at the library, and realizing, a few chapters in, that something was . . . *off*. I later discovered, in what felt like a very V. C. Andrews twist, that Andrews had died years before, and the book I'd been reading had been written by someone else (a man!). If I'd squinted, I could have seen that the name "V. C. Andrews" on the cover bore a tiny superscripted ®, for registered trademark. In a way, we'd both been betrayed: I'd been tricked by a cleverly packaged counterfeit, while she'd been sold out by heirs who thought she could be replaced by someone else. To love someone, after all, is to believe that the person possesses some quality that makes her unique. That simulacrum Andrews novel left me feeling as if I were a kid bereft after the death of my puppy and my parents were blandly offering to buy a replacement.

These days, the more sophisticated literary estates may be less likely to hire ghostwriters to imitate a deceased writer's work; instead, they authorize established writers to continue the work (and share cover credit) under their own names. The premise of a seamless transition, in which the original author slips

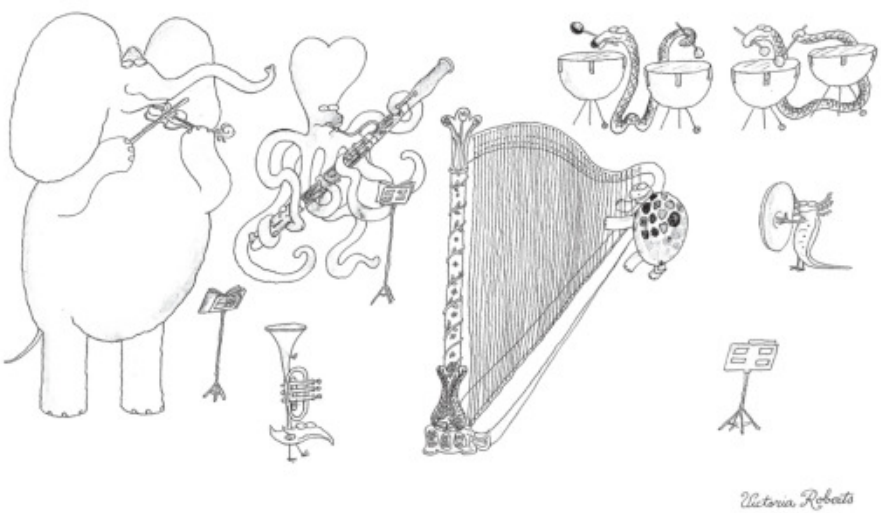
off into the afterlife unnoticed, has been replaced by a Frankenstein-like chimera of the living and the dead. In this vein, we get Sophie Hannah writing for Agatha Christie, Sebastian Faulks writing for Ian Fleming, Brandon Sanderson chosen by the heir of Robert Jordan to continue the unfinished fantasy series "The Wheel of Time." (On a loftier plane, Sandra Newman's "Julia," out this month, is an authorized "feminist retelling" of George Orwell's "1984.") Such collaborations tend to be respectful, reasonably successful, and positively reviewed, but there often is, nonetheless, something unnervingly lifeless about them. Like all the undead, the books' resurrected protagonists are free to perform only a few limited actions, shadowy repetitions of actions they took in life—solving mysteries, spying on behalf of England, channelling the One Power. It's hard to read them without imagining those unseen authorities peering over the writer's shoulder and wondering about the limits of their good will.

The shiver that arises when creativity is touched by the cold finger of authority has nothing to do with the individuals involved. As a screenwriter working on an adaptation of a Shirley Jackson novel, I've had some contact with the folks from the Jackson estate, and (I swear) they've been great. But the creation of official sequels and spinoffs is inevitably haunted by questions of agency, power, and control. To join Elizabeth Hand on her journey to Hill House is to be reminded of the slippery dominance of genius, the way it both establishes and breaks its own rules, tempting then trapping those who dare to follow them. Faithfully adhering to the rules doesn't guarantee success, yet breaking them will inevitably invite accusations of failure and betrayal. Each reader who arrives at "A Haunting on the Hill" hoping to return to the original Hill House will feel disappointed in her own way, although the shape of her disappointment will speak more to the nature of her loyalty to Jackson than to the qualities of the new book. Perhaps unsurprisingly, "A Haunting on the Hill" is least successful when Hand directly imitates Jackson, most successful when she draws on her own talents—and becomes truly fascinating when Hand lets those anxious whispers about authority and influence take over the tale.

The premise of Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House" is that four strangers come together in order to conduct a paranormal investigation of Hill House, which has a reputation for being haunted. The premise of Hand's "A Haunting on the Hill" is that four friends come together to rent Hill House in order to spend some time workshopping a play. The house is, unequivocally, the same one, as is clear from its name, its location (the town of Hillsdale), and its layout. That Hand can be so explicit about this is one of the privileges of full authorization—she doesn't need to waste any time filing off the serial numbers. The chronology, too, is the same. There are passing references to the events of "The Haunting of Hill House": "The woman whose husband built the place was killed when her carriage ran into a tree. That was in 1880. Then another woman was killed about sixty years ago when her car ran into the same tree. Same thing happened again with another woman in the eighties. They finally cut the tree down." The middle woman is Eleanor Vance, the protagonist of "The Haunting of Hill House"; by dispensing with her so swiftly, Hand establishes that the house is the real star of the show. But there is a palpable discomfort there, too, in how those events are waved away, sandwiched between two other deaths and then dismissed with a joke. "That doesn't sound haunted . . . sounds like bad driveway design," remarks the narrator, a forty-something playwright named Holly Sherwin, who's hoping to revive her flatlined career with a spooky play titled "Witching Night."

In Jackson's novel, Hill House is associated with so many deaths and disturbing occurrences that the only reason to spend the night there is that you seek to encounter a ghost. By the time Holly and her friends show up, decades later, the body count has only risen, which is why it's the perfect place to develop "Witching Night." But then we run into that horror-movie dynamic wherein the people on the screen are oblivious of what's screamingly apparent to the people in the audience. Over and over, the characters encounter unambiguous horrors, and somehow dismiss them. "Haunted?" one character says. "No one has ever seen a ghost here, if that's what you mean." Later, she says, "People project their own explanations onto it. Old houses can be noisy." Meanwhile, the guests watch hares run out of the fireplace, and supernatural doorways materialize beside their beds. "Nothing here is *obviously* wrong," they say, as the obvious wrongness continues to mount.

All this is approached with a sly comic sense, and yet the reader realizes that the situation is a compulsory feature of the author's authorized project, the requisite premise for revisiting Hill House—and so a dead hand on her narrative imagination. The strange flatness of the characters in these moments arises from the fact that they're operating in a world where the rules have been set by the departed. Characters can ask *whether* they




*"You don't choose your instrument. Your instrument chooses you."*

should go to Hill House and *why* they should stay at Hill House and *how* Hill House works the way it does, but it's an exercise in futility when they do. Those questions can't be answered within the novel, because the answer lies outside it, in the requirements of an authorized effort to haunt "The Haunting of Hill House." Only when the characters take a break from those imponderables can they be free to act within Hand's imagination—and only then does the book come to life.

Hand has a gift for the sensuous, evocative detail, and her descriptions are often simultaneously seductive and spooky: small, wealthy upstate towns are populated by "people who distilled rare liqueurs from echinacea and comfrey, or made syrup out of white pine needles, or wove intricate rings and brooches from your own hair," while a character with a flair for the gothic enjoys "psychotropic herbs, Victorian toy theaters, obscure Eastern European horror films, and social media accounts belonging to dead Hollywood starlets." Hand deploys this descriptive talent to especially strong effect when she evokes Nisa, Holly Sherwin's girlfriend. Nisa is an actress and a singer; she's also crafty and duplicitous, eager not just to contribute to the workshopping of Holly's play but to claw credit away from Holly whenever she can. All the participants in the workshop are prone to moments of sharp-elbowed competition and jealousy, but Nisa in particular is a self-centered nightmare, a crisply drawn near-parody of a theatre kid, given to bursting into song whenever she is not the center of attention. Hungry for success, she continually subjects Holly to the pitiless assessments of the untried young.

Nisa's casual disregard for boundaries, and her slick contempt for anyone with the temerity to age or fail, make her a genuinely unsettling presence in the house. Shortly after the group arrives at Hill House, Nisa goes rummaging through the belongings of an older actress, appraising her wardrobe, sniffing her perfume, and putting on her lipstick. "Older women shouldn't wear dark lipstick, anyway," she thinks, smiling at herself in the mirror and closing the tube. Later, the actress returns to her room and discovers that, mysteriously, the top of the lipstick has been bitten off: "She could clearly see the imprints of tiny teeth—a rat? A mouse? Too small for a person for sure, and who would bite off a lipstick? A child, maybe, but there were no children here." That rat-like nibbling perfectly encapsulates Nisa's tiny, needling violations of those around her. The competition between older and younger women, and the high stakes of the battle for control of one's artistic territory, is a recurring theme in the book. Every time it arises, the story takes on a pleasurable metafictional richness. Hand brilliantly captures the discomfort of someone's being at once too close and too cruel to a vulnerable artistic project, the sense of violation that arises when someone moves too boldly into your creative space. One can almost hear Hand channelling Jackson's ghostly whisper, as the young woman blithely appropriates what belongs to the older woman: *What are you doing here? Get out.*

The authorized novel is far from the only way we try to resurrect the literary dead; adaptations for film and television surely count, too. (Mea culpa.) "The Haunting of Hill House" has been haunted before; five years ago, Netflix aired a very free adaptation of the novel in ten episodes, and previous decades saw two feature-film versions. Still, the stakes are different when a novel inhabits the world of another novel, while aiming to be a wholly freestanding work. That the new novel is tethered to an already cherished one is part of the appeal, and part of the problem. The tether can be a tourniquet.

This theme takes center stage in the most frightening set piece in Hand's novel, the answer to the mystery of why Holly's playwriting career stalled. (All Hand's characters, it must be said, are burdened with backstory—part of the contortions required to keep them at Hill House.) The story is brief, bizarre, and electric, and almost seems torn from a different book. Jackson's particular skill was to suggest that, whatever she chose to depict, far darker horrors were lurking beyond the margins of the page. But Hand enjoys showing the monster, and this is the one section where she truly sets herself free.

As a promising young playwright, we learn, Holly once spent the night with a woman named Macy-Lee, who, drunk, told her a story about sleeping with a ghost: "A real good-looking one . . . real smooth skin, like a polished rock." Nine months later, she gave birth to a ghost baby: "This slimy gray thing, cold as ice, but . . . pulsing. . . . all these tiny wriggly fingers were wrapped around a kind of face. Only it had no eyes or nose—it was just a jelly blob with a mouth, and this ropy string attached." With evident relish, Hand recounts the gruesome details of Macy-Lee's offspring, as it bites through its own umbilical cord, then slithers off into the woods. The scene itself is a kind of monstrous offspring; unlike the bulk of this mostly well-behaved book, it resembles nothing Jackson would ever have dreamed of writing.

Holly saw Macy-Lee's story for the brilliant monologue it is. She incorporated it into her play, and achieved overnight success—only for Macy-Lee to return, furious and vengeful, accusing her of exploitation and theft. The resulting scandal derailed Holly's career: "My long creative silence had been fueled by fear, that I wouldn't be able to write something as good as that one play—and also a subdued grief. For Macy-Lee, and also for myself, the young artist who'd been so vulnerable, poised for a flight that never came."

There is a bleakly compassionate acknowledgment here that no matter how much we may crave permission to cross the boundary into someone else's story, or reassurance that we can retain control over our own, the landscape of writing remains treacherous. Its rules are inchoate. Perfect obedience is impossible, but violation nonetheless results in pain and punishment. In that sense, no novel is ever truly authorized—the control of a story slips from every writer's hands, if only when her grip is loosened by death. Now that Hill House has joined the canon, some will enter with permission, while others will sneak in uninvited—but writers will always wander in and out of one another's stories, peering in the mirror, and running their fingers through the accumulated dust. ♦

*Sivan presents a different kind of hypersexuality: sweet, hungry, tinged with love.*

POP MUSIC

# Horny on Main

*Troye Sivan's songs of desire.*

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

From a particular vantage, it's easy to assume that modern life is lonesome, aesthetically horrifying, and extremely uncool: energy drinks, vape pens, virtual reality, twenty-four-hour news, online banking, Bluetooth, airport sandwiches, omnipresent social anxiety. Believing otherwise—engaging in any sort of willful hedonism, or submitting to the notion that pleasure is a serious pursuit and joy is still abundant—has come to feel nearly irresponsible. (Fun? In this economy?) Much has already been made of the phenomenon of young people having less sex, and struggling more with depression; it's natural, some days, to worry that we have collectively lost touch with a fundamental sense of exuberance.

But then there is the video for "Rush," the first single from the Australian pop star Troye Sivan's third LP, "Something to Give Each Other"—it is, as they say, horny on main. A gaggle of exceedingly hot and barely dressed young people are having a good-ass time at a party. The activities range from classic (at one point, a shirtless Sivan is hoisted over a keg of beer) to mysterious (a young man lowers a lit cigarette lighter toward his nether regions while shooting Sivan a come-and-get-it look). Everyone present is physically exquisite, a casting choice that earned Sivan criticism for not better representing the full spectrum of both the queer community and the human body—a fair critique, perhaps, except there is nothing about the "Rush" video that feels tethered to any reality I have ever known. It's difficult to imagine these people doing anything quotidian or ugly, like breaking down an Amazon box or unloading a dishwasher. The song itself is a slight but propulsive club banger, named for a popular brand of poppers (hits of liquid nitrite, huffed from a small plastic bottle, typically used during sex) and featuring a beefy, Village People-esque chanted chorus ("I feel the rush / Addicted to your touch"). On the verses, Sivan sings in an airy falsetto. "Man, this shit is so much fun," he coos. "Pocket rocket gun."

Sivan, who is twenty-eight, was born in South Africa and brought up in Perth, Australia. He began his music career in 2006, appearing on telethons and on the Australian version of "Star Search," but he first gained broader cultural purchase on YouTube, where, as a teen-ager, he began posting chatty, amiable videos about his life. Even then, his delicate features and genial confessionalism seemed predestined for broadcast. In 2013, when he was eighteen, Sivan released a video titled "Coming Out," in which he announced that he's gay. It's a charming clip—elegant, tender, vulnerable. Sivan seems nervous (he speaks quickly, almost breathlessly) but also self-assured and unafraid. "It will get better for everyone, but I'm also here to say that my message is: it can be good right from the start," he says. "You can have a completely smooth sail out of the closet." Early in the video, Sivan explains why he's going public: "I feel like a lot of you guys are, like, real, genuine friends of mine, and I share everything with the Internet." Though that sentiment might seem deeply alarming to anyone over the age of thirty, it explains some of Sivan's savvy as a performer: he understands how to stoke parasocial intimacy with strangers. He has been doing it for more than a decade now. (There was also a bit of business strategy embed-



ILLUSTRATION BY ROCHE CRUCHON

ded in the choice to come out via YouTube: Sivan was about to sign a record deal with EMI Australia, and hoped to preëmptively thwart any executives who might suggest that he keep his sexuality more private. "I wanted it to be out so that they couldn't tell me to stay in the closet," he told *The New Yorker* in 2019.)

In 2015, Sivan released his début album, "Blue Neighbourhood," which peaked at No. 7 on the *Billboard* album chart; it was followed by "Bloom," in 2018, which hit No. 4. Earlier that year, Sivan performed on "S.N.L.," and later he talked about the ghastliness of gay conversion therapy on the "Tonight Show." The success of "Bloom" solidified Sivan's position as a queer icon (the title is a semi-coy allusion to anal sex), but the album also presented a different version of male hypersexuality: sweet, hungry, tinged with love, never aggressive. "Something to Give Each Other" continues Sivan's exploration of lust, and how to manage the tension between what our bodies desire and what our little hearts can bear. "I see love in every space / I see sex in every city, every town," he sings on "Honey." Sivan's voice can be feathery, so light it almost evanesces. "I don't know how I'm gonna tell you what you really mean," he worries. "I could speak, or just let my body explain."

The single "Got Me Started" is built around a jaunty sample from "Shooting Stars," a 2009 song by the Australian electronic-music duo Bag Raiders. The sample features a Stylophone, an analog synthesizer, not much bigger than a paperback book, that was invented in the late nineteen-sixties, and is played by tapping a stylus on a metal keyboard. (David Bowie famously used one on "Space Oddity"; it can also be heard on Kraftwerk's "Pocket Calculator.") The sound of the Stylophone is retro and sort of wonky; its presence here feels in conversation, somehow, with a scene in the video in which Sivan leans against a post and confesses his feelings into a dusty landline telephone. (A vague longing for a semi-recent past, in which we were not quite so attached to our devices, seems endemic to a generation that has never known the freedom of being unaware of what everyone else is doing.) The video for "Got Me Started" is less carnal than "Rush" but still visually intoxicating. The sharpness and the charisma of the choreography, by Sergio Reis and Mauro van de Kerkhof, feel indebted to Britney Spears's "I'm a Slave 4 U," from 2001, and Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation," from 1989; it's been a while since it was this enjoyable to watch people dance. Both videos were directed by Gordon von Steiner, a young filmmaker who has previously shot campaigns for fashion houses such as Dior and Versace. Von Steiner has a keen eye for a particular kind of beauty. His palette is modern, saturated; Sivan and his dancers look gorgeous but a little alien in the greenish, arched, predawn light. Lyrically, Sivan is still grappling with his own appetites. "Boy, can I be honest? / Kinda miss using my body / Fuck it up just like this party did tonight," he sings.

It's tempting to describe Sivan's passions as youthful, and certainly there are aspects of his life that seem exceptionally sensual, but much of what he sings about on "Something to Give Each Other" has to do with the very basic, very universal problem of reconciling want and need. My favorite track on the new album is "How to Stay with You." It's got a wiggly, nineteen-seventies feel, with a skronky keyboard line and unexpected bits of saxophone. Sivan's voice is a little deeper here, with a hint of night-after grit. It is decidedly mid-tempo, though in the context of Sivan's œuvre it feels almost like a ballad. The lyrics reminded me of the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice," a song, from 1966, about wishing, desperately, that the timing of a relationship were better. What happens when you meet someone who seems right in the important ways—"I feel like my brother might like you," Sivan sings—but the circumstances are vastly misaligned? "I'm a little bit fucked on this," Sivan sighs. It's a relatable sentiment for anyone who has tried and failed to align his ambitions. Sivan knows at least one surefire way to soothe *his* soul: dance it out, while the world keeps burning. ♦

THE THEATRE

# Epic Proportions

*Two new intergenerational sagas explore the American legacy.*

BY HELEN SHAW

Once upon a time, I would have told you that the sweetest words in the English language were "ninety minutes, no intermission." How my heart would leap when I'd hear them! Ninety minutes seemed to promise so much: a zippy evening, a comfortably short time in the theatre seat, and a certain well-machined efficiency in the text itself. Playwrights clearly loved one-acts, too; for the past decade or so, intermissions in new dramas were scarce.

But now we're hungry for *duration*. We want heft; we want scope; we want structural unpredictability. In a single early-October week in New York, you could see two new dramas, "The Refuge Plays," by Nathan Alan Davis, at Roundabout's Laura Pels Theatre, and "Zoetrope," by Javier Antonio González, at Abrons Arts Center, each one clocking in at around three hours. We call long playgoing experiences "marathons," assuming there's some kind of mental stamina required, but, actually, the opposite is true. Attention molds itself to the container it's offered, and these generation-spanning, epic shows—big containers—give our pressured minds time to relax.

Davis wrote his occasionally wobbly "Refuge Plays" by expanding a one-act about a modern-day, tight-knit family living in a two-room house off the grid in the deep woods of southern Illinois. (This act, which opens the play, is the most diffuse; the later acts move faster and show more muscle.) In Arnulfo Maldonado's rough-hewn set, the house is a mossy cabin, lit with lanterns, set among tall, shadowy trees. "It feels like church, or something," a newcomer to the house says, awestruck, as ghosts and living family members slip out from the forest and through its porous rooms.

At first, the materfamilias seems to be the widow Gail (Jessica Frances Dukes), who swears that she is the one holding up the "rope" of the family, which consists of her mother-in-law, her daughter, and her grandson. "It's just that ain't none of 'em capable of holding that rope with me," she grumbles. Her dead husband, Walking Man (Jon Michael Hill), appears and tells her that she's about to die, too. "Did we do the right thing? Stayin' out here? Tryna keep ourselves a step to the side of the world?" Gail wonders. As she accustoms herself to her fate, Walking Man's spirit orders his seventeen-year-old grandson, the innocent Ha-Ha (JJ Wynder-Wilkins), to go to a nearby town, pick up a girl—any girl his age—and bring her back. (I guess the cabin, with its limited sleeping options, has a one-out, one-in policy on women.) Ha-Ha's grandfather wants the boy to have a baby, and soon, so that Walking Man's still living mother, the ancient Early (Nicole Ari Parker), will have something to be joyful about.

In the house and its surrounding clearing, death doesn't divide the five generations of family members from one another; rather, the departed, wearing white and beaming beatifically, keep turning up to matchmake and interfere. The household is a tiny self-sufficient community, and, in ways that can accidentally seem creepy, these affectionate ancestors get involved when the population needs new blood. (We later hear that Early's dead parents guided Gail to the house, years ago, when Walking Man needed a mate, and Ha-Ha's new friend Symphony seems supernaturally dazed when she turns up.) Subsequent acts show us the tying of this familial knot: Part 2 takes place in the nineteen-seventies, when Early and her Second World War veteran husband, Eddie (Daniel J. Watts, nicely judging each line), are finishing the house with their grown son, Walking Man; Part 3 flashes farther back, to the fifties, when Early, clutching an infant, comes to the clearing and stakes her initial claim. The traumatized but steel-nerved Early, in retreat from a world that

*In "The Refuge Plays," the departed keep turning up to matchmake and interfere.*



ILLUSTRATION BY KATI SZILÁGYI

has done great violence to her, turns out to be the wellspring of the family's survival. Even at her most vulnerable, ghosts fear her, car engines obey her, wild animals fall under her hammer.

It's unclear whether Davis is aware of how much grimness imbues his fable—if everyone stopped smiling and joking and cooking breakfast, the plot would be indistinguishable from horror. My uncertainty stems from a lack of tonal control: the production, directed by Patricia McGregor, is frequently clumsy; some of the actors seem unconfident onstage, and Davis has given all of them a difficult balancing act between the setting's gothic mood and their characterizations, which must career from rural fantasia to rollicking family banter. Yet there's still some enjoyment in watching a yarn this tangled. Davis is best when he's oblique, dropping clues about other stories on the core tale's periphery, such as a magical cigarette lighter (which is never explained) and a villain who may or may not be dead. These untidy ends are more provocative than the moments of exposition. Oddly, therefore, the show's length is its strongest feature: all those hints accrete in the watcher's mind, prompting our imaginations.

Both Davis and González use the dramatic epic form to look at the work and the damage of generations: in "The Refuge Plays" and in "Zoetrope," presented by the scrappy Caborca Theatre, plots spanning decades show children fulfilling their elders' prophecies, and also, more specifically, how U.S. military action results in lasting wounds. (In "Refuge," Eddie has eight bullets in his legs; "Zoetrope" takes place mainly in Puerto Rico, where characters speak passionately about—yet never get closer to—independence.) But, where Davis's writing is wandering and muddled, González's beautifully manicured bilingual saga displays a spectacular literary control: it's a conservatory garden of theme and image, precise in every textual detail.

In 1951, Inés (Laura Butler Rivera and Yaraní del Valle Piñero alternate in the role) and Severino (Kevin Emilio Pérez or González himself) are married in Lares just before Severino goes to New York to seek his fortune. He doesn't find it there, nor does he find his way back to his wife, and he dies in the arms of his New York lover. Inés, abandoned, raises a child, Claudio, who, decades later, will follow his father to New York, eventually starring in a movie about his father's life.

The play's title refers to an animation created by two rapidly alternating pictures—the Claudio and Severino figures, played by the same actor, make up one of the text's many flickering double images; another is Puerto Rico as both colonized territory and imagined free republic. In a vividly drawn milieu in Lares, Inés leans on her sister, Francisca, an acid-tongued, pants-wearing iconoclast who has been tormenting the hidebound local priest Padre Aurelio (David Skeist) since she was ten years old. During my favorite of the play's mirroring scenes, Francisca (I saw the stupendous Kairiana Núñez Santaliz) and the padre sit side by side, sniping at each other in a confessional—both severe, both elegant—as they discuss whether God or the apostate truly loves the lost.

The production, directed by González, takes place on several projection surfaces as well as on the stage: first, cameras project live footage onto tall, freestanding walls, so that we seem to be seeing a rough-cut film of the play we're watching; second, translations of the Spanish and the English text appear on a high supertitle screen. This screen exists in the world of the play: when the Spanish-speaking Severino doesn't understand a vulgar English saying he's been taught by U.S. soldiers, he figures it out by reading the supertitles. It's an ambitious and sometimes beautiful design, but the Abrons Arts Center space—which can skew a bit school-auditorium-y—diminished it, washing out the projections and making some of the performances feel unnecessarily far away.

My memories of the tartly funny, hugely romantic "Zoetrope" are also doubled and superimposed: I saw it twice in two weeks, with different ensembles—many of the parts had been multi-cast as a precaution against COVID. I saw it the first time not intending to write about it; the second time I was taking notes, which made me feel, strangely, like part of the show. González, who has a genius for puzzle structures, nests images of self-conscious writing in his scenes: a playwright listens to the sisters talk about their family history and thinks of putting them in a play; a boy dictates a confession of love to an amanuensis who slowly realizes that the message is for her; letters are sent but opened by the wrong recipient. Language in "Zoetrope" keeps leaving one place and arriving at another, changed. Certainly, I wasn't always reading González's complex, multivalent text clearly—I caught some political gestures but not others—and, if it were still playing, I'd go back a third time. That, to me, is the mark of a true epic: you get to the end, and you want to begin again. ♦



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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by E. S. Glenn, must be received by Sunday, October 22nd. The finalists in the October 9th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the November 6th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST


“ ”

.....

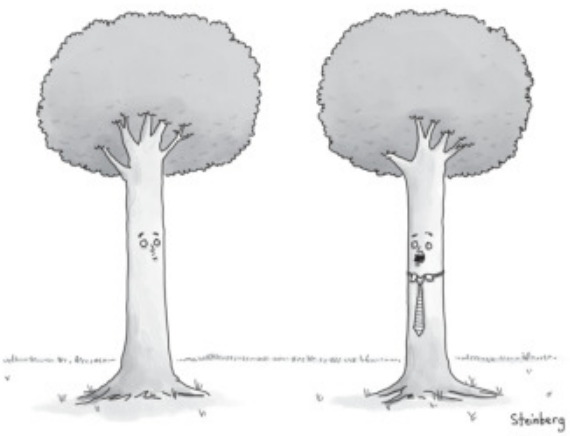
### THE FINALISTS

*“You're probably wondering how I asked you here today . . .”*
Eric Law, Methuen, Mass.

*“What's a bathroom break?”*
Christopher Jones, Oakland, Calif.

*“Yes! Cheese snacks shaped like little humans!”*
Larry Richmond, Corcoran, Minn.

### THE WINNING CAPTION




*“A bow tie? And look ridiculous?”*
Noel Baebler, Richmond, Va.

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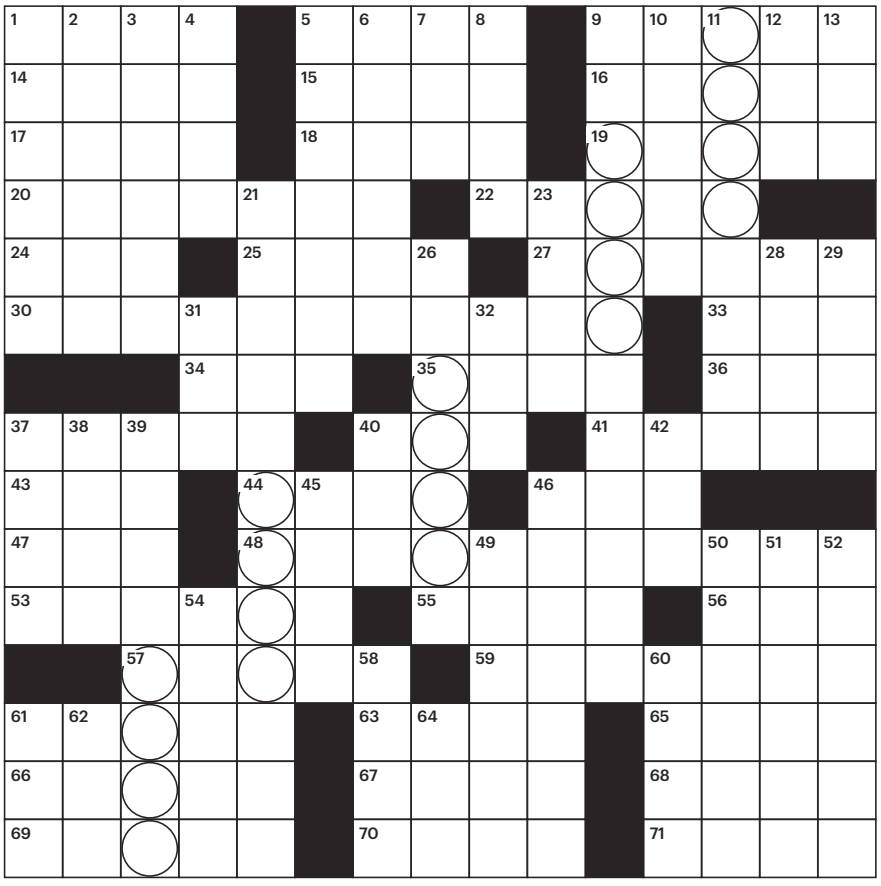
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

# My Interest Is Piqued

*A themed crossword.*

BY EMILY CARROLL



## ACROSS

1 William Wallace, for example
5 Jambalaya ingredient
9 Play, as an Autoharp
14 Colorful Hindu festival
15 Image on a phone
16 Pose demonstrated by a yogini
17 Getting little rainfall
18 Oversee
19 Sell out, in a way
20 Playful punch
22 Best-selling 2023 memoir
24 12-Down, in English
25 Style of earring
27 "Turn on a fan in here!"
30 Outstanding work
33 N.Y.S.E. news
34 Letters before an alias
35 Parks whose story is told in Faith Ringgold's book "If a Bus Could Talk"
36 2023 role for Ryan Gosling
37 "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" director Frank
40 Was on TV
41 Neighbor of a Norwegian
43 Furious feeling
44 Completely engrossed
46 Nuptial vow
47 ___-J (indie-rock band whose name is a keyboard shortcut for the symbol Δ)
48 Test that may require factoring polynomials
53 Immature egg cell
55 Prevent from leaking
56 Reggie Watts's hairdo, for short
57 Joaquin's "Walk the Line" co-star
59 The Sharks and the Jets, e.g.
61 Errant golf shot
63 Big ___ (nickname of the Baseball Hall of Famer David Ortiz)
65 Oodles
66 LaBelle known as the Godmother of Soul
67 Notion
68 "Road to ___" (opening number of "Hadestown")
69 Leading the pack
70 Succotash bit
71 Quaint British exclamation

## DOWN

1 "Shabbat ___" (Saturday greeting)
2 "*La vida mas fina*" beer
3 Polarizing pizza topping
4 Lunar effect
5 Singer featured on the Iggy Azalea hit "Black Widow"
6 Frozen treat
7 Swindle
8 They may be loose or tight
9 "There Will Come Soft Rains" poet
10 Russian dynasts of old
11 Step taken by the Federal Reserve to manage inflation . . . and what's illustrated by this puzzle's circled squares
12 Game with Skip cards
13 The measure of all things, per Protagoras
21 1984 movie that Netflix's "Cobra Kai" is a sequel to
23 "___ or it didn't happen"
26 Perpetrators of copyright infringement
28 Persuasive piece in the paper
29 Strengthen, as muscles
31 La Brea gunk
32 Extremely long time
37 "Toodle-oo," in Tuscany
38 Folk musician Guthrie
39 Transportation for Persians and Afghans?
40 "World of Warcraft" or "Final Fantasy," for example: Abbr.
42 Sorrow
45 Contents of some kegs
46 From Shiraz or Tabriz
49 Dated device for a doctor
50 Curious cases for Mulder and Scully
51 Pigmented circle
52 By and large
54 Gossip
58 Awe-inspiring
60 When doubled, a Hawaiian fish
61 Relaxation destination
62 "A likely story!"
64 "Much ___ About Nothing"

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B | O | N | G | ■ | B | O | A | T | S | ■ | M | O | T | H |
| A | L | O | E | ■ | R | A | B | A | T | ■ | E | P | E | E |
| J | A | P | A | N | E | S | E | L | A | N | T | E | R | N |
| A | F | A | R | E | W | E | L | L | T | O | A | R | M | S |
| ■ | ■ | S | H | O | E | S | ■ | T | E | S | L | A | S | ■ |
| R | E | S | E | N | D | ■ | N | A | P | E | S | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| A | L | I | A | S | ■ | A | I | L | E | D | ■ | L | A | B |
| F | I | N | D | ■ | P | R | M | E | N | ■ | R | I | S | E |
| T | A | G | ■ | C | O | M | B | S | ■ | B | A | T | H | E |
| ■ | ■ | ■ | N | O | W | A | Y | ■ | B | A | N | T | E | R |
| ■ | S | E | E | M | E | D | ■ | C | A | R | O | L | ■ | ■ |
| T | H | E | A | F | R | I | C | A | N | Q | U | E | E | N |
| H | A | R | R | Y | B | L | A | C | K | S | T | O | N | E |
| E | D | I | E | ■ | A | L | I | T | O | ■ | O | N | Y | X |
| N | E | E | D | ■ | R | O | N | I | N | ■ | F | E | A | T |

*Find more puzzles and this week's solution at* **newyorker.com/crossword**

# RALPH LAUREN

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