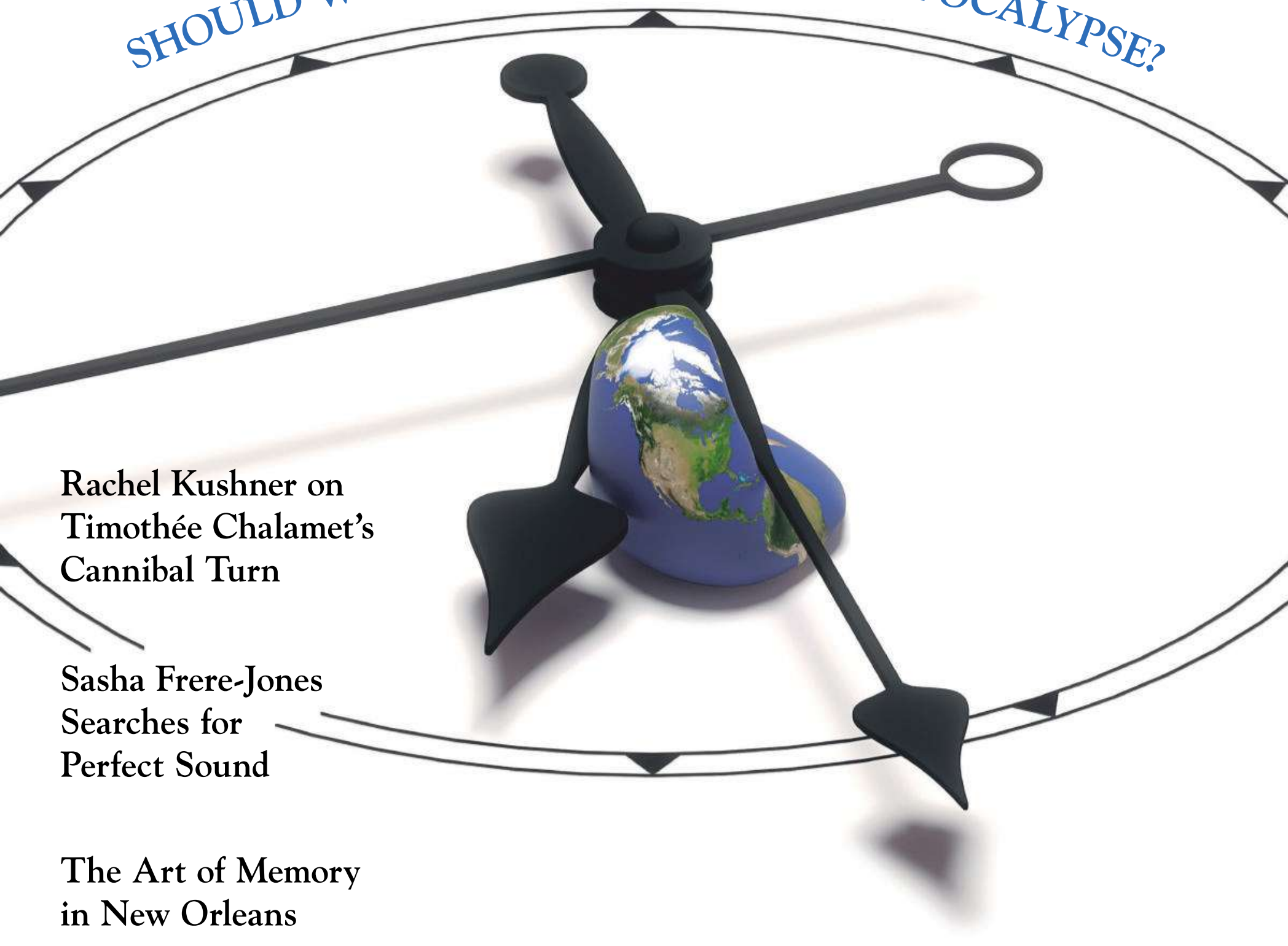
A CHRISTMAS STORY BY KATE DICAMILLO

HARPER'S

HARPER'S MAGAZINE/DECEMBER 2022 $8.99

WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

SHOULD WE BE ROOTING FOR THE APOCALYPSE?



Rachel Kushner on
Timothée Chalamet's
Cannibal Turn

Sasha Frere-Jones
Searches for
Perfect Sound

The Art of Memory
in New Orleans

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LETTERS

In Memoriam

Harper's Magazine is deeply saddened by the death of our dear friend and longtime contributing editor Barbara Ehrenreich (1941–2022). Her classic book *Nickel and Dimed*, which chronicles the harsh realities of working for minimum wage, began with two pieces of undercover reporting published in the January 1999 and April 2000 issues. She will be missed.

Body Language

Like many women, I am sympathetic to Charlotte Shane's thesis that females should enjoy a right not to carry unwanted pregnancies to term ["The Right to Not Be Pregnant," Revision, October]. But I fear that by elaborately avoiding the word "women" she detracts from her purpose and alienates a large portion of her audience. "Impregnatable people" is an overtly dehumanizing term; progressives' trendy linguistic effacement of the entire childbearing sex amounts to a form of willful matricide. I do not offend easily, and often find that laughing off such excesses of would-be sensitivity is the best response. I surprise myself on this one. I don't find the elimination of the word "women" even faintly funny. It aggrieves me, as it aggrieves scores of women I know.

I also take issue with the notion that "coding all impregnatable people as women" is a "right-wing project" because "enforcement of gender and bioessentialism do a great deal for social control." Biology, not Donald Trump or Ron DeSantis, is essentialist. Among humans, only females bear young. If, keen to be "inclusive," Shane felt obliged to add "and trans men" when referring to women, I could have lived with the awkwardness. But an essay defending the rights of women while erasing us as a category is beyond ironic. In straining to be sensitive to a small minority, the author is crudely insensitive to the feelings of half the human race.

Lionel Shriver
London

Shane's essay is a bracing call to arms in the post-*Dobbs* moment, unapologetically affirming the right of pregnant people to terminate their pregnancies. Shane is correct that this is a fundamental human right. How much more powerful her argument

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would have been, then, if it had acknowledged the movement that has explicitly asserted this principle for nearly three decades: the reproductive justice movement. When Shane writes that "no mass movement of its citizens has ever expressly demanded" the right to not be pregnant, she erases these long-standing struggles.

A group of black women coined "reproductive justice" in 1994, responding to the Clinton Administration's removal of reproductive health care from its platform. As defined by the flagship reproductive justice organization SisterSong, the term encompasses the rights to "maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities." Reproductive justice thus demands not only abortion access, but housing, nutritious food, contraception, quality education, pregnancy and birth care, gender-affirming care for trans youth, domestic violence assistance, and living wages, among other things. In her piece, Shane observes that "policies that conscript people into pregnancy may seem contrary to regulations that have subjected black, indigenous, disabled, and poor Americans to forced or coercive sterilization and the removal of children from birth parents." The reproductive justice movement and its precursors have always understood the links between different forms of reproductive coercion.

Reproductive justice connects abortion access to many other struggles. It links the rage of the moment to visions of a just and abundant world—one that includes, but reaches far beyond, the right to not be pregnant.

Annie Menzel
Assistant Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison

Charlotte Shane responds:

Lionel Shriver is welcome to tailor her own writing on abortion to a transphobic audience, but I have no interest in doing so with mine. Not every woman can get pregnant, and pregnant children are not women. If "impregnatable person" is actually synonymous with "female" then there is no real objection to be made that I've somehow misrepresented the situation; however, trans men and non-binary people get pregnant, too, which is why a more inclusive term is necessary. They also fight on the front lines of abortion access, where, as Annie Menzel points out, women of color have been doing vital work for decades. I'd be happy to see Shriver there with us.

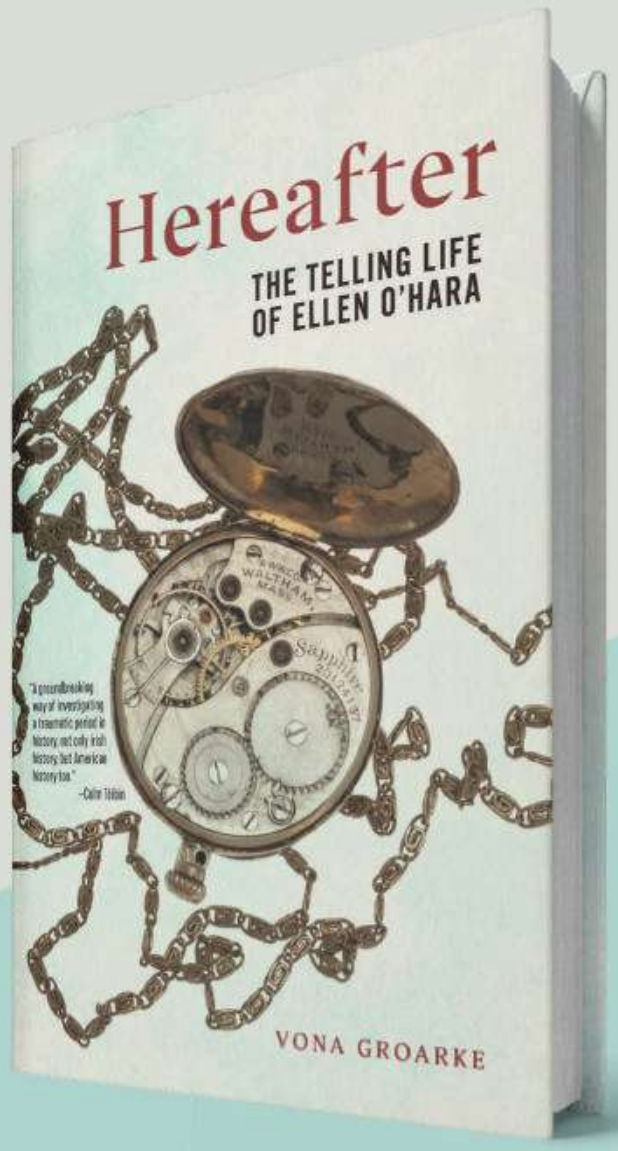
Won't You Be My Galactic Neighbor?

For six decades, scientists have tried to eavesdrop on radio signals from extraterrestrial societies. These experiments pose no danger to humans because we're merely listening, not transmitting messages. The "Beacon in the Galaxy" project, which Joe Kloc describes in his report ["Come and Get It," Annotation, October], is different. It would entail broadcasting a message to aliens which could, in the view of some in the SETI community, endanger the human race. Alerting aggressive extraterrestrials of our existence and location could potentially provoke some bad boy aliens to fire up their interstellar missiles and train them on Earth.

Obviously, we don't know whether other galactic societies would find it interesting to undertake such a nefarious project. But despite being a SETI scientist, I don't lose sleep over this. That's because the horse has already left the barn. We have been transmitting high-power, high-frequency radio waves into space since World War II. Any society as technically competent as ours (and within about seventy-five light-years) could pick them up. In other words, the "Beacon in the Galaxy" project would simply add additional programming to the existing cacophony. That might be a bad thing if our patch of the galaxy houses aggressive beings with big budgets. But there may be an upside. We could conceivably learn important lessons from our galactic neighbors, assuming they exist and wish to get in touch.

Seth Shostak
Mountain View, Calif.

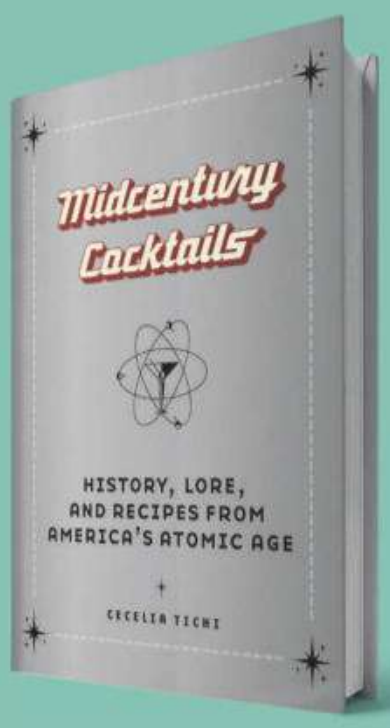
Books to Curl Up With This Winter



"Intelligent, searching, and warmly rendered."

Kirkus Reviews

In this genre-bending book, poet **Vona Groarke** reconstructs the life of her great-grandmother, Ellen O'Hara, using archival research and lyrical prose. Born in Ireland, Ellen traveled to New York City at the turn of the nineteenth century. *Hereafter* follows her through gaps in the historical record, imagining the life of one of the many women who society has forgotten. Ellen's piercing voice calls the reader into her world and compels us to examine history's impact in our lives.

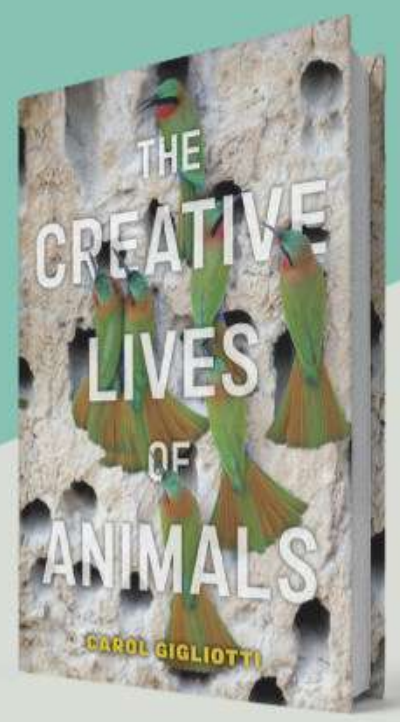


"A delightful, nostalgic trip through the 1950s and 1960s with recipes for recreating Atomic Age intoxications."

Foreward Reviews

"Should be commended for presenting the lives of queer people of color in a humane, compassionate, and informative way."

Kirkus Reviews



"An illuminating account of creativity in the wild... Fans of Jane Goodall and Frans de Waal will be pleased."

Publisher's Weekly

EASY CHAIR

Flesheater Blues

By Rachel Kushner

A few months ago I introduced a screening of Robert Frank's rarely shown and somewhat notorious film *Cocksucker Blues* at a cinema house in Los Angeles. Legally, the film can only be shown four times per year, and this was one of the four. It sold out immediately. (The version available on YouTube is so degraded from dubbing that it's not really the same film.)

When Frank, who was Swiss, published his book of photographs *The Americans*, back in 1958, he redefined what was possible in art. The book is filled with prosaic scenes of work and ritual, solitary faces and people in crowds. As he stated in his Guggenheim application, he had set out to capture things "easily found . . . a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway, the man who owns three cars and the man who owns none, the farmer and his children, a new house and a warped clapboard house . . . the faces of the leaders and the faces of the followers, gas tanks and post offices and backyards."

My aunt DeeDee Halleck, a video artist who later worked on the set of one of Frank's films, says the images in the book made her understand the South of her upbringing. Sometimes it takes an outsider to show you what's remarkable about your own landscape and people. But to be merely an outsider isn't enough. Frank had a magnetic gift for vitality. He knew what to see.

Nominally about the Rolling Stones and their 1972 *Exile on Main Street* U.S. tour, *Cocksucker Blues* is much more a work of art by Robert Frank than it is a rock and roll documentary, even as the performance sequences are mesmerizing. Throughout the film, we are acutely aware of what Frank is noticing. The energy that his camera locates is beyond the glamour of the stage and the excesses of the band and their crew, beyond the ravishing purple stage lights and the backstage boredom. It is not Keith Richards and sax player Bobby Keys in a doped stupor, or the groupie looking for a vein, dressed in a blouse whose winding ribbon-sleeves just happen to look like tourniquets. What interests Frank most is black Americans, famous ones and not, and whenever black people are onscreen, they light up the frame, clearly more captivating to Frank than the Rolling Stones (whose own relationship to the black musicians in their midst is equally worshipful but more discomfiting: they know they are second tier, despite being, in every situation, treated as the first-tier stars). But Frank is also interested in the white hippie chick explaining that she'll jump off a bridge if she doesn't get a concert ticket because her life is "already half-wrecked." He focuses on the proper old woman with set hair, smoking her cigarette in a hotel lobby. Keith shakes her hand as if she's yet another fan, no different from the fawning women behind the clerk's desk. "Do you know who he is?" someone offscreen asks. The implication is that she doesn't know, and that the interaction between her and Keith is a clash of contradicting realities. She shakes her head in response, but so slightly that her "no" is neutral. We understand that it's the wrong question; she doesn't need to know who he is. Her cigarette switches hands, and she raises it to her lips. Frank's camera holds the two realities in a single frame, the sideshow pageantry of a Rolling Stone in a crowded hotel lobby, and this old woman with her thick glasses and her stiff hair, like she's been pasted in from a different era. Cut to a TV with the logo of the upcoming presidential election, in which those populating Richard Nixon's reality will vote in far larger numbers than those populating George McGovern's.

Somewhere in Indiana, Keith calls down to room service. Frank is recording both sides of the call. Keith haltingly enunciates his room number in a half-giggle, because, Who cares about the room number? He'll never see this room again. He asks the hotel employee, an elderly-sounding woman, for fresh fruit. "Well, like strawberries or blueberries?" she asks in a bright voice.

"Strawberries *and* blueberries," Keith says.

"How many orders?" she asks.

"Could you send up, like, a bowl of them?"

"Oh *no*," she says, her voice still chipper, but firm now, a by-the-rules voice. "It goes *by the order*."

"Why don't you just make a nice selection of fruit," Keith says, "and send it up. You know—use your own discretion."

I suspect he doesn't realize he's patronizing this woman, who wants to adhere to the room service menu because that's how she's been trained: stick to the menu, speak clearly, repeat the order back to the customer. I know this unseen woman. She was my manager at Baskin-Robbins. She has waited on me in countless diners, in Oklahoma and in Texas and in Arizona, and she does not allow substitutions. She has posed, if unwittingly, for portraits by William Eggleston and Danny Lyon. I know her so much better than I'll ever know Keith Richards, even after having read his almost six-hundred-page autobiography. She is one of us.

A lesser artist than Frank might not have been able to show us what the Rolling Stones are blind to. Frank is aware that what he is filming on the Stones' private jet, a squealing naked woman being lifted into the air, is effectively rape. He's aware that the "hip cat" in dark shades rapping about the "tomb of the unknown junkie" is doing blackface. The film is stark in its refusal to edit away what doesn't fit with glamour. A woman marvels over a huge puddle of cum on her nude belly; the band walks down a series of endless backstage hallways (the basis for *Spinal Tap*'s "Hello, Cleveland?"); Frank's own sound man roots around for a vein. The Stones got it banned by a court ruling, and to this day it's never been officially released.

In a posh New York apartment, we see Bianca Jagger repeatedly wind up a tinkling music box. She herself is like the spinning ballerina: prettied for display and trapped in an airless, satin-lined box. Frank cuts to a scene of her and Mick in a car somewhere in the South; she has joined the band for this leg of the tour. She holds a movie camera to her eye. The film cuts to standard evangelical folk art ("Repent Now"). We see gridded jail windows, guards standing by, a hand reaching through the bars, extended, languorous, sad, full of heady symbolism. "This is the most *uninteresting* drive in the world!" Mick Jagger blurts. The audience watching the movie in Los Angeles erupted; they were laughing at Mick's boorishness, but they were also laughing, if more knowingly, more bitterly, at what there is to see here in America that is "interesting."

A few days after that screening, I traveled to the Telluride Film Festival, where I watched Luca Guadagnino's *Bones and All,* a film that captures what is epic and ravishing and grotesque about life in America by a filmmaker who is not American. Guadagnino—Italian, not Swiss—took to the byways of the Midwest while preparing to make his new film. The movie starts in Virginia and meanders through Maryland, Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska in the year 1988. It is Reagan's America.

Guadagnino is an artist I'll confess to having possibly underestimated. I liked his previous films—especially *I Am Love,* for the way that he portrays the stifling elegance of Milan's Villa Necchi and the heavenward iconography of the Piazza del Duomo—but perhaps it is my own imaginative failing that I did not see in them the possibility of this one, which is a stunning work of art that seeped in deep and stained my sense of the world with its own hallucinatory version of such. *Bones and All* captures what it's like to drift, to be excluded, and to be nonetheless full of life-force, but life-force whose expression can only ever be futile and tragic. Guadagnino perfectly handles social class and alienation, the sort of social atomization that is so terribly American—everyone just *out there,* without a club, a church, a union, a pastime, without support or a safety net of any kind. (The one "nice" home we see in this movie, decorated with ornate wallpaper and fussy knickknacks, contains a person, an old woman, who is dying, perhaps of a stroke or of a heart attack, alone, on the floor.)

Bones and All is an extraordinary document of American psychoanalysis. Guadagnino's main character, an eighteen-year-old girl named Maren, played by Taylor Russell, is abandoned by her father near the beginning of the film. She sets off by bus to try to find her birth mother, whom she's never met. She encounters a boy named Lee, played by Timothée Chalamet, equally adrift and lonely, but full of rebellious verve. They circle each other and eventually connect. What constitutes home? the film asks. And what about the trauma that people inherit, and vow not to replicate, and do replicate? (Maren's mother and Lee's father have both passed on the same genetic affliction to their children.)

As someone who was more or less the same age as the characters—and Guadagnino—in the late Eighties that the film portrays, I found the re-created feel of that world precise and believable. But the movie also potently conjures now, filtering into and through its own Reagan-era frame a sense of current streams of vitality and brokenness, rural and urban, among young and old. I walked out of the theater thinking, "If anyone from anywhere wants to understand this country as a concept, a people, a landscape, a special kind of vast beauty, a host of curses and blights, they can watch this movie." In a post-screening Q&A with the filmmaker Karyn Kusama, Guadagnino said that he had wanted to penetrate beyond a touristic gaze of the United States, and that underneath the hardship and pain, what struck him most about the people he encountered on his road trip was the optimism he sensed. Perhaps it is this hopefulness that accounts for the lack of cruelty or judgment in the way he films. The camera is never gratuitous or exploitative. But I suppose I should mention that the "affliction" Lee and Maren have each inherited is the inexorable ontological drive to eat other humans. Lee and Maren are "eaters," in the parlance of the film. This is the curse that sets them roaming, entwined in a co-dependency like no other.

There is gore in this film, but not that much, and the gore is worth the rest and it all functions of a piece; I would not change a thing. The internal logic is so complete that I never once questioned the conceit—that cannibalism is a rare genetic condition, and that those born with it can smell one another even from a great distance. If the existential curse of vampires is to range through time with no end in sight, the curse of these cannibals is that they have been set loose in the endless landscapes of America, trying to figure out how to survive and to satiate their hunger, driven to kill without wanting to kill, on the run, on the loose, a menace and a terror. They are exiles. Their ability to smell other cannibals functions like a version of a

vampire's immortality: they range over the latitude of *space,* instead of the longitude of *time.*

When Lee and Maren meet, there's a sense of momentary relief. These young people can help each other. They break into the home of a guy whom Lee, a brooding misfit in extravagantly torn jeans, has just eaten. Lee riffles through the guy's albums and pulls out *Lick It Up,* the record Kiss made without their makeup. He puts on the title song and sings along ("It isn't a crime to be good to yourself"), with the mood-boost a song can give a person, a boost that lasts only as long as the song. In a later scene, still not quite a couple yet, Lee and Maren go to a county fair. We see them kiss on a Ferris wheel as we hear Joy Division's "Atmosphere," that band's most romantic ballad, with its heart-melting chimes. The hope one feels for our two young and pretty cannibals is an Ian Curtis sort of hope, dark and stirring. Never leave each other, please! But we know nothing good is coming for them.

Maren is being pursued by an older eater, played by Mark Rylance, an eccentric with a long braid and thrift store clothes laden with assorted buttons and medals, like a folk figure from Greil Marcus's "old, weird America," but malevolent. After the screening, I heard more than one person express confusion over the Rylance character's purpose in the narrative. His purpose is nothing less than to underscore the foundations of love in the Western world. Western love is love fueled by impossibility. Think of Tristan and Isolde. Of Romeo and Juliet. His role is to disrupt.

Lee and Maren meet a couple of other eaters who join them at a campfire, two dudes who have smelled them and want to hang out. They are the two creepy guys who pop up out of nowhere with a case of Budweiser in every Eighties adolescence—mine, yours, whoever's. One is mouthy. The other, the sidekick, is quiet. The sidekick is wearing a Dokken T-shirt and, even worse, he's an eater *by choice.* He has been taught cannibalism by his friend. This is real deviance. The contrast ratchets up our sympathy for Lee and Maren.

And yet the burden of this terrible condition they didn't choose doesn't mean that eating flesh is without joy. Lee talks about the high he gets like he's talking about speedball or crystal meth. I couldn't help thinking of the people I've known who fell into that kind of "joy," and who even now have stayed with that pursuit, and still believe in it, despite its downsides. *It isn't a crime to be good to yourself.*

Still, the cannibalism in this movie is not a metaphor. It is literal, and visceral, but it incorporates other notions, afflictions, into its streams of meaning—addiction most acutely, but also generational trauma, and various kinds of abjection and wandering and fugitivity. Then again, cannibalism qua cannibalism is already highly symbolic: People don't only eat people because they are stranded in the Andes mountains and faced with death or forbidden calories. Evidence of ritualized cannibalism has been found in cultures the world over. In her book on Neanderthal life, *Kindred,* Rebecca Wragg Sykes writes of the unmistakable "processing" marks found on Neanderthal bones, bones that were skinned, dismembered, sliced, and hammered. Human jaws that were cracked to remove the marrow. In accounting for why Neanderthals were eating other Neanderthals, and to push back against prejudices regarding these unfairly maligned hominins, Wragg Sykes starts to sound like their defense lawyer. Eating their own clan, their own relatives, she argues, smashing the bones and sucking out the marrow, could have been a form of mourning, a eulogy, an enterprise meant to preserve the memory of the departed.

Cannibalism, Wragg Sykes suggests, could have been about love. This isn't such a radical concept. The central rites of Christianity are based on ingesting the blood and body of Jesus Christ. After Jerry Garcia died, his friends and family allegedly snorted lines of his cremated remains. In 2007, Keith Richards told journalists that he did a line of his father's ashes with a bump of cocaine. He corrected this claim in his autobiography, explaining that he was opening his father's ashes in order to bury them at the base of an oak tree when a fine powder blew out. He merely snorted the residue, he said, and didn't cut it with anything else. ■

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HARPER'S INDEX

Portion of congresspeople who are older than 70 **:** 1/4
Who traded stocks between 2019 and 2021 **:** 1/3
Minimum number who say that they or a relative traded stocks associated with a committee they served on **:** 97
Ratio of Americans who gambled online to those who traded cryptocurrency last year **:** 1:1
Portion of adults aged 18 to 44 who have gambled more since the start of the pandemic **:** 1/4
Number of slot machines on American military bases overseas **:** 3,141
Estimated revenue these generate annually for the Department of Defense **:** $100,000,000
Minimum number of active-duty U.S. soldiers who have a gambling problem **:** 56,000
Amount for which Ruth Bader Ginsburg's gavel was sold at an auction this year **:** $20,400
For which a birthday card from Elon Musk was sold **:** $17,000
Minimum number of Leonard Cohen songs owned by a private equity firm as collateral against debt **:** 278
Portion of American adults who say they have gone viral **:** 3/10
Factor by which more American women than men name true crime as their favorite genre **:** 2
Portion of Americans who say they consume true crime content at least once a week **:** 1/3
Who think the genre helps solve crimes that wouldn't otherwise be solved **:** 3/5
Percentage of Republicans who say they are in a militia or know someone who is **:** 25
Of Democrats who say this **:** 32
Portion of Republicans who say it would be unconstitutional to declare the United States a Christian nation **:** 3/5
Who are in favor of doing so **:** 3/5
Percentage of U.S. adults who believe God learns and adapts to different circumstances **:** 51
Who do not **:** 32
Percentage of American evangelicals who deny original sin **:** 65
Who deny the divinity of Jesus Christ **:** 43
Percentage by which religious people are more likely than non-believers to be satisfied with their sex lives **:** 35
Estimated year by which Christians will no longer constitute a majority of the American population **:** 2050
Minimum percentage of grocery store employees who left their jobs last year **:** 48
Portion of shoppers who say they have stolen something while using a self-checkout machine **:** 1/3
Percentage of retailers that have invested in additional security equipment this year **:** 52
That are using or planning to use facial recognition software to deter theft **:** 12
That are using or planning to use license plate recognition software **:** 19
Percentage increase since 2019 in the number of "actively disengaged" U.S. workers under the age of 35 **:** 50
Portion of remote workers under the age of 35 who don't know what their employers expect of them **:** 3/5
Portion of HR professionals who have discovered employees working outside of their home state or country **:** 2/5
Who are "very confident" that they know where most of their workers are **:** 1/2
Portion of Americans who say they have traveled less or canceled a vacation because of inflation **:** 1/6
Portion of U.S. workers who remain concerned about COVID-19 exposure at work **:** 1/3
Who expect infections to increase **:** 2/3
Portion of U.S. dating app users who say it's important to put one's COVID-19 vaccination status in one's profile **:** 1/2
Estimated portion of COVID-19 patients who report "brain fog" six months after the initial infection **:** 2/5
Projected portion of the global population that will be myopic by 2050 **:** 1/2

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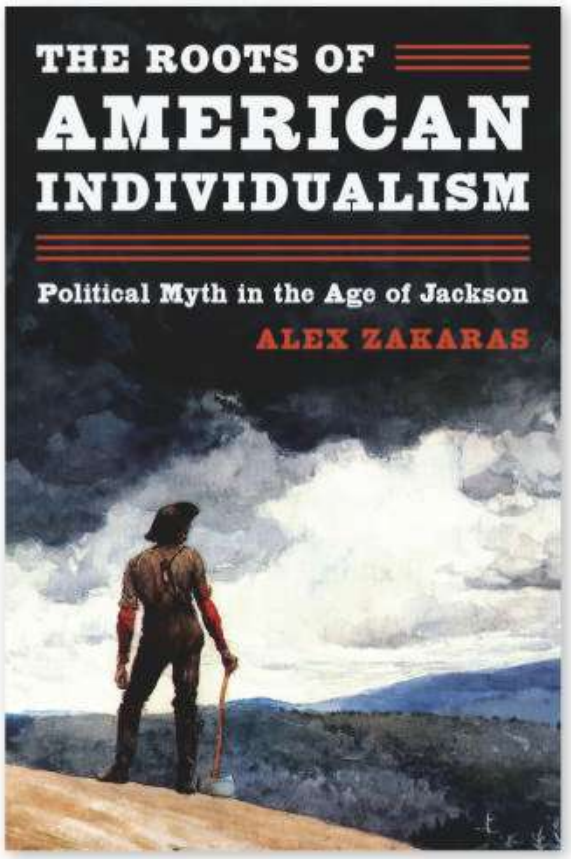
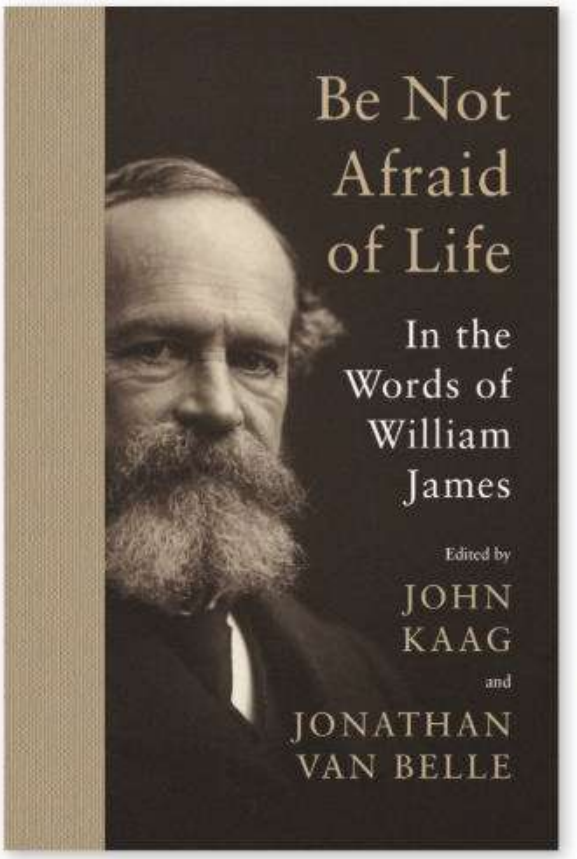
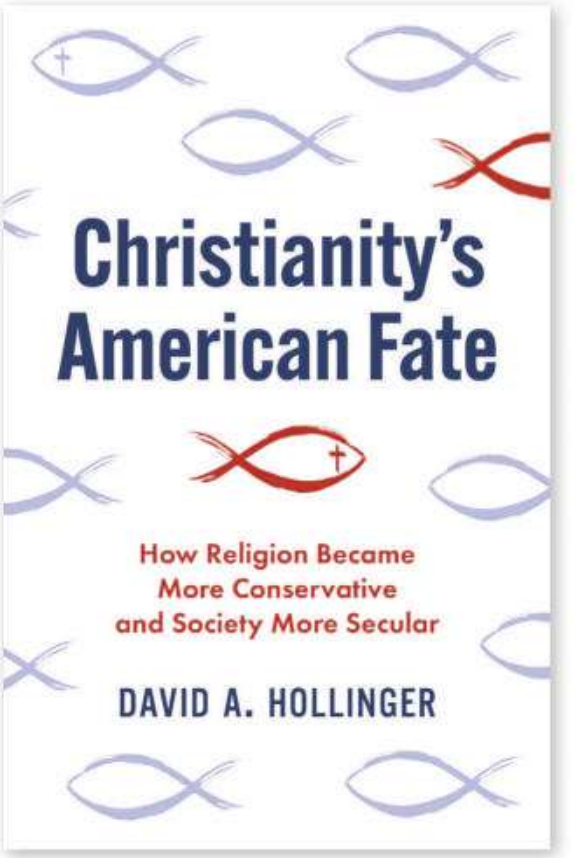


A panoramic history of American individualism from its nineteenth-century origins to today's bitterly divided politics

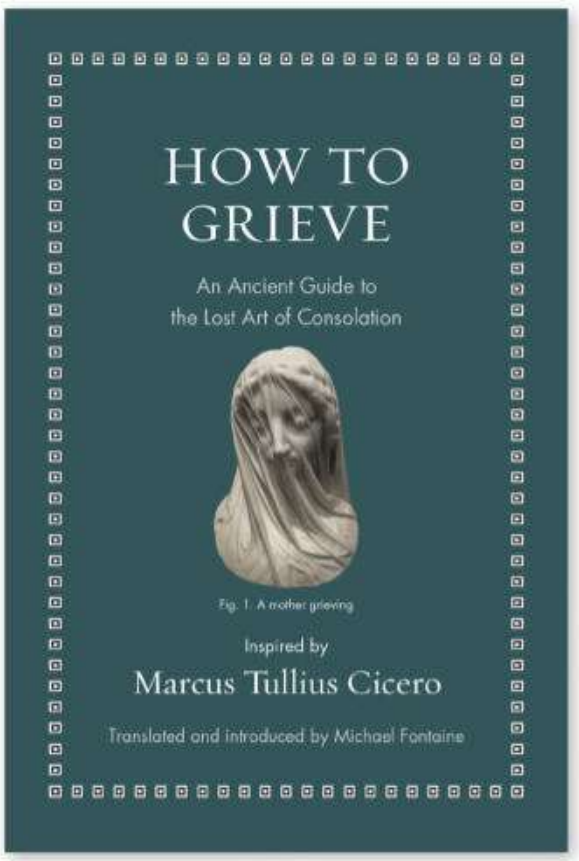


A compelling collection of the life-changing writings of William James

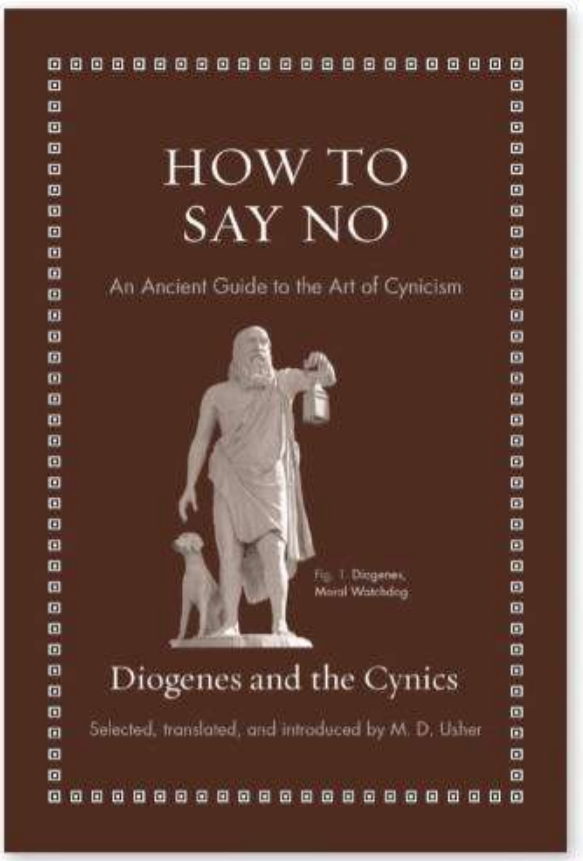


Tracing the rise of evangelicalism and the decline of mainline Protestantism in American religious and cultural life

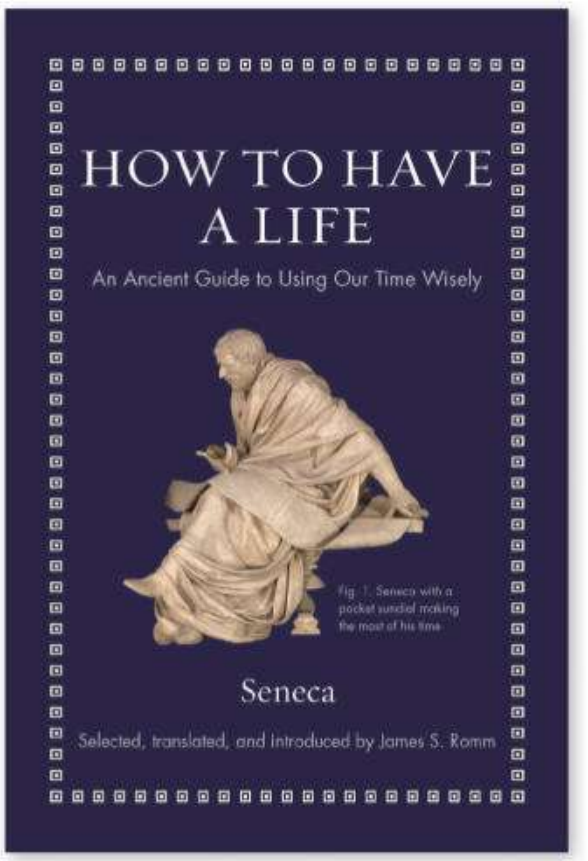
New in the Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers Series



An engaging new translation of a timeless masterpiece about coping with the death of a loved one



An entertaining and enlightening collection of ancient writings about the philosophers who advocated simple living and rejected unthinking conformity



A vibrant new translation of Seneca's "On the Shortness of Life," a pointed reminder to make the most of our time

READINGS

[Essay]

YOU TALKIN' TO ME?

By Meghan O'Gieblyn, from "Sentience and Sensibility," which was published in the September/October issue of The Baffler.

It was all too easy to dismiss the *Washington Post* story about Blake Lemoine—the Google engineer who claimed this summer that his employer's chatbot, LaMDA, was sentient—as an instance of clickbait, hype, and moral panic. Its many absurdities appeared contrived to exhaust the attention of a populace hollowed out by years of doomscrolling and news fatigue. As far as the machine learning community was concerned, the story was a distraction. There were, as these experts knew, legitimate issues with language models, and those issues had nothing to do with sentience but stemmed from the fact that the models were entirely unconscious, that they mindlessly parroted the racist, misogynistic, and homophobic language they'd absorbed from the data they'd been fed.

Those who did attempt to engage Lemoine, who saw the story as an opportunity to educate a bewildered public, found themselves explaining in the simplest terms possible why a language model that speaks like a human was not in fact conscious. And it turned out that the most expedient way to do so was to stress that the model "understood" (if it could be said to understand at all) one thing and one thing only: numbers. Because language models only perform math, and because they "consist mainly of instructions to add and multiply enormous tables of numbers together," as one Google Research employee put it, they were not conscious agents. On this point, the most vocal tech pessimists found themselves toeing the party line at Google, which maintained that Lemoine had fallen prey to "anthropomorphizing today's conversational models," and insisted that "there was no evidence that LaMDA was sentient (and lots of evidence against it)."

But anyone capable of transcending the eternal now of the news cycle and recalling the debates of a decade ago might hear echoes in the Lemoine story of quite another dispute about personhood and language. LaMDA is not a single chatbot but a collection of chatbots, and it thus constitutes a kind of *corpus mysticum*, an entity whose personhood might be said to exist in a purely figurative sense, just as the Church and its members are called the "body of Christ" or—to take a more germane example—just as Google's parent company, Alphabet Inc., is considered a legal person. Indeed, one of the central delusions of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision was not merely that corporations were persons, but that money was speech—that numbers in their grossest iteration could be construed as a form of constitutionally protected expression. And beneath the commentary about LaMDA and AI personhood, there existed more indelible confusions about the difference between aggregates and persons, about the distinction between numbers and language, and even, at times, about what it means to have emotions, complex motivations, and moral agency.

It's tempting to imagine a future in which our disputes over personhood are viewed by some higher intelligence much as we regard Scholastic debates about the metaphysical constitution of angels. And perhaps that advanced mind will

intuit, correctly, that our confusion stemmed from the fact that long-standing definitions had been recently overruled. Justice John Paul Stevens's insistence that *Citizens United* marked "a rejection of the common sense of the American people" was prescient in grasping that the decision, far from being a sleight of hand that relied on a technical redefinition of terms like "person" and "speech," carried deeper ontological consequences. It cannot be entirely coincidental that soon after corporations were granted personhood and the right to speak there emerged a widespread conviction that they were conscious.

In 2012, following an election in which corporate spending reached an all-time high, Whole Foods CEO John Mackey and business professor Raj Sisodia published *Conscious Capitalism*, a book arguing that corporations could develop altruistic motives. For its part, Google has always paid lip service to morality in stark, Manichean terms, though in its early days few people deciphered any real thought behind it. While the slogan "don't be evil" first appeared in Google's 2004 IPO letter, it wasn't until the Trump years that it ceased being a cynical punch line and began appearing on the placards of employee walkouts—protests over military contracts, ICE collaborations, and sexual harassment—where it was earnestly leveraged as evidence that the corporation had abandoned its values. Some commentators could not help sneering at the naïveté of young people who'd taken corporate pabulum at face value, who had confused taking a job with "signing up for a movement," as one former Googler told the press. But it was hard to disparage their demands, which amounted to the rather modest insistence that words should have meaning.

One is less inclined to extend such generosity to lawmakers, who, throughout the House disinformation hearings last year, scolded tech giants for doing precisely the kind of things that corporations do—maximizing user engagement, trying to keep people on their services for as long as possible—and enjoined them to be "Good Samaritans" and "stewards" of the public trust. Many representatives appeared to think corporate objectives were synonymous with the political beliefs of their CEOs, an absurdity that reached its zenith when Mark Zuckerberg, Sundar Pichai, and Jack Dorsey were each made to answer whether they "personally" believed in the efficacy of vaccines. If anthropomorphism involves imagining a soul where there are only unconscious calculations, Google seems to have successfully and widely elicited that illusion.

Lemoine was not the first Google employee to claim he'd been fired for raising ethical objections to AI language models. Throughout 2021, tech coverage was awash in stories about Timnit Gebru and Margaret Mitchell, two Google computer scientists who co-authored a paper arguing that algorithms that have been fed the entirety of Reddit and 4chan will, when prompted with words like "women" or "black" or "queer," spit out stereotypes and hate speech. Google initially approved their paper, "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots," but later asked Gebru to retract it, claiming, Gebru says, that it put undue stress on the technology's negative potential. Shortly after Gebru demanded a more concrete account of the review process, she was told that Google was "accepting" her resignation. Less than three months later, Mitchell was also given the axe.

[Confession]

MARTHA STEWART LIVING

From a conversation between Martha Stewart and Chelsea Handler, which took place in July on Handler's podcast Dear Chelsea.

CHELSEA HANDLER: What's going on in your love life?

MARTHA STEWART: Nothing. Absolutely zero. I had two mad crushes in the last month. Which is really good for me.

HANDLER: Yeah.

STEWART: But it turns out one of them is married to the mother of some friends of mine. He's so attractive.

HANDLER: You can't be a home-wrecker.

STEWART: No. I've never been a home-wrecker. And I've tried really hard not to be. I've had the opportunity and I have not taken anybody up on it. And that's really where I meet men. They are all married to friends of mine.

HANDLER: Well it's very difficult. Because I think there are certain ages we go through where it is very tempting. You want to believe that maybe this relationship that they are in is temporary.

STEWART: Or maybe they will die. I always think, "Oh gosh, couldn't that person just die?"

HANDLER: The wife?

STEWART: Yeah. Not painfully. Just die.

HANDLER: Just pass away.

STEWART: Yeah. But it hasn't worked out.

Blueprint, *a painting by Leigh Ruple, whose work was on view in October at PAGE (NYC), in New York City.*

The incident might have been an opportunity to reckon with the limits of ethical AI in the private sector, but it became, instead, a familiar tale of censorship and suppression, of tech bros silencing women and people of color—a narrative that Gebru and Mitchell had courted, perhaps knowing which buzzwords would trigger the media algorithm. They called the race for bigger language models "macho," and Mitchell compared it to anxiety about penis size.

This narrative, however, smoothed over some enduring confusions about Google's methods of repression, which, whatever their ultimate purpose, do not seem to rely on the familiar gestures of censorship. To hear Lemoine speak about Google's "very complex" internal structure is to glimpse what the internet might feel like if it were bottled as concentrate. "There are thousands of mailing lists," he wrote in 2019. "A few of them have as many as thirty or forty thousand employee subscribers … several of the biggest ones are functionally unmoderated. Most of the political conflict occurs on those giant free-for-all mega-lists." Given the public controversy these forums have created, it's not immediately clear why Google continued to host them.

Even Gebru's account of her time at Google suggests something more complex than corporate muzzling. Far from being ignored, she recalls that she and her team were "inundated" with requests from co-workers about ethical problems that needed immediate attention, that she was frequently conscripted into meetings and diversity initiatives, that she was constantly called upon to write and speak. "I've written a million documents about a million diversity-related things," she told one interviewer, "about racial literacy and machine-learning, ML fairness initiatives,

"Montgomery, Alabama, 1984," a photograph by Baldwin Lee, whose work is on view this month at Joseph Bellows Gallery, in La Jolla, California. Lee's monograph Baldwin Lee *was published in September by Hunters Point Press.*

about retention of women . . . so many documents and so many emails." And yet somehow this outpouring of words and speech, of protocols and consultation, did not amount to *communication* in any meaningful sense of the word.

Google itself has long operated under the premise that "there's no such thing as too much speech." Its ambition to organize the world's knowledge is guided by its belief that "more information is better for users," even as its search index steadily balloons toward the astronomical number to which its name alludes. To understand how Google regards speech, however, one might recall that its co-founder Larry Page once claimed that he and Sergey Brin chose the name Alphabet for Google's parent company because "it means a collection of letters that represent language" and language "is the core of how we index with Google search." It would be difficult to imagine a more succinct distillation of how the company regards the nuances of language as jumbles of zeros and ones—its tendency to see search queries, user posts, and the entirety of the internet's content as so much empty syntax to be compiled into infographics and used for targeted advertising or transmogrified into algorithmic training data—words liquified into pure capital.

Contemporary politics, enmeshed as it is in Orwellian cosplay and First Amendment panic, has been slow to realize that institutions no longer have to oppress by restricting speech—that in an age of data extraction, when human expression is a lucrative form of biofuel, it is, on the contrary, in the interest of these platforms to enjoin us at every turn to share, to post, to speak up. If Google has secured its dominance through political back channels that regard money as speech, it has similarly profited from the public's tendency to forget that the primary value of speech for any company that trades in data is not qualitative but quantitative. It matters very little whether the language Google subsumes is on the right or the left, whether it is affirming or protest-

ing systems of power. Lemoine's attempt to hack the media cycle only ended up creating a glut of "content" that will probably create more value for advertisers, and for Google itself, than it will for the public good. The notion that capitalism metabolizes dissent is no longer theoretical but embodied in the architecture of its most profitable corporate technologies. To happen across Gilles Deleuze's claim, now some four decades old, that "repressive forces don't stop people from expressing themselves, but rather, force them to express themselves," is to wonder what on earth he was speaking of if not the internet.

Justice Stevens concluded in his objection to *Citizens United* that the notion that "there is no such thing as too much speech" maintains "little grounding in evidence or experience." Such a premise might be sound, he said, if "individuals in our society had infinite free time to listen to and contemplate every last bit of speech uttered by anyone, anywhere." In truth, corporate funds had the potential to flood the airwaves so as to "decrease the average listener's exposure to relevant viewpoints," and "diminish citizens' willingness and capacity to participate in the democratic process."

This conclusion is not limited to political advertisements but encapsulates how corporations like Google profit from an oversaturated "marketplace of ideas," particularly when they control 92 percent of the market share to its access. While Google undoubtedly benefits indirectly from the diminished public engagement needed to hold it accountable, it is also explicitly cashing in on information fatigue. LaMDA is a response to the fact that a deluge of search results "induces a rather significant cognitive burden on the user," as a 2021 Google Research paper once put it. What users want, the paper affirms, is not information but a "domain expert" who can save them from the information glut and replace the cacophonous chatter of the web with a single authoritative voice—Google's.

[Encounters]

HIS FOLK NATION

By Darryl Pinckney, from his memoir Come Back in September, *which was published in October by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

1.

My boss, Fran, was hoping to publish Sterling Brown's collected poems. She sent me down to green Washington.

Brown had invented his own folk idiom to express a rebellious sensibility. The son of a distinguished pastor and professor of religion, he grew up in a house of six schoolteacher sisters, and then went in search of black life where there was not always electricity. He carefully observed the Joe Meekses, Bessies, Big Jesses, Luther Johnsons, young Freds, Johnnies, and Sams who abound in his poetry. He paid attention to their walks, their spare-ribbed yard dogs, bulldog brogans, landscapes of locusts, cotton, and flooding rivers, their habits of mind.

[Viewpoints]

NO TIMES LIKE THE PRESENT

From headlines published in the Opinion section of the New York Times *since 2011.*

I'm a New York City Liberal
I'm a Democrat and a Feminist
I Work for Midwestern Democrats
I'm One of Biden's Advisers
I've Picked My Job Over My Kids
I Wanted to Be a Good Mom
I'll Never Let Myself Love a Job Again
I'd Rather Lose My Job
I Need to Get Out
I Want to Be Rich and I'm Not Sorry
I'm Not Losing Sleep
I Am Republican
I Am a Conservative
I Voted for Trump
I Worked for Alex Jones
I Can't Be Forgiven for Abu Ghraib
I Was Fired
I Was Betrayed
I'm Furious
I Am Burning With Fury
I Want a Gun
I Got a Gun
I Appreciate Assault Weapons
I Have No Plan for This
I Won't Have the Stomach for This
I Am Not a Brave Person
I'm Full of Despair
I'm Going to Die
I've Accepted My Death
I Believe in Ghosts

I thought his work was telling us that his first duty was to the poem and not to his sympathies, because he trusted what his folk nation stood for: railroad men highballing through the country, trying to get 'de jack'; lowlifes playing checkers with deacons; nice girls unrecognizable under streetwalker paint; an itinerant guitar player singing his mother's favorite spiritual, his cigarette held by the strings; a disillusioned veteran buck dancing on the midnight air. Laughter is a vengeance, he said.

2.

Sterling was sitting on his porch with his pipes, waiting. He was still tall and boxy. His thinned, white hair was straight, and his complexion a pinkish brown. He, like Zora Neale Hurston, had published his first book after the Harlem Renaissance had come to an end—supposedly. His reputation as a poet rested on a single volume from 1932, *Southern Road*. He was one of the few black writers of his generation who did not want to be part of the Harlem Renaissance.

—There were no intellectuals in Harlem.

None of the black intellectuals lived in Harlem, he went on. People only went to parties there.

—Zora Neale Hurston was the biggest liar in the world and I'm the second.

He meant tall tales. He told me one.

I said, thinking it for real—Oh, really?

He gave me an odd look.

—That's something we, as a people, have lost. Son, you ought to know when I'm telling you a tale and appreciate it.

3.

In the kitchen, while deciding whose gin to give me, he said,

—Zora wanted me to love her, but she didn't like men, because of what they could get, just for being men.

He said something really rude, large face smiling.

I said Zora Neale Hurston was turning over in her unmarked grave, forgetting that Alice Walker had had a headstone made for her when she found where she was buried.

—If she is, it's with her legs wide open.

Sterling hated Allen Tate, he hated Pound, he hated Eliot. (He despised Tate for his cultural racism, including his saying that too much education was bad for a black person.)

—When I read *The Waste Land* at Harvard, I thought it was a lie. This is not a wasteland for blacks.

Before I left, Sterling showed me the basement where he worked. Walls of books and records, the overflow stacked on sofas, the desk behind another wall, the liquor.

—Too good to give to cats like you.

It was an intimate gesture, showing us his hiding place. But he went too far.

4.

Sterling would never give us his telephone number. But all summer long he called me up at home at unpredictable times to tell me things: Machado de Assis wasn't white; I should have been in a black fraternity; Jean Toomer, his father's parishioner and his basketball teammate at Washington High School, was not, strictly speaking, trying to pass. He was always in the middle of a sentence attacking agrarians. To what he said was Robert Penn Warren's:

Nigger, your poetry isn't metaphysical

Sterling had answered:

Cracker, your poetry ain't exegetical.

His temper came from his grief. His phone improvisations were unpleasant. He said:

—Sartre ain't worth a fartre.

Genet is gay.

Imagine a Negro appearing in The Blacks.

But something aggressive began to spoil the smile of his learning.

—Fran tells me you're entranced by a lady whose last name begins with the initial H and ends with K. Now what are you doing with that cracker?

—She's not a cracker.

—She was married to one.

—Robert Lowell was not a cracker.

—He was a Yankee, but he wanted to be a cracker. He tried to be difficult, not that he is.

Sterling hated New Criticism and "Ode to the Confederate Dead." He hung up before I could say I didn't know Allen Tate.

5.

I had to go over Sterling's manuscript with the copy editor. He was not phoning back. There were so many errors and illegible words in the copies of the poems we had. Finally, it went to the printer. He had gotten carried away with the dedications. It was his last book, his summing up.

He called one more time before he gave up on me. There was to be a conference on African history in Washington, D.C. He wanted me to come to a party and meet Sterling Stuckey, the historian named for him, and John Henrik Clarke.

I said I couldn't leave work and, no, I also couldn't let him pay for it.

—Man, you are so influenced by those white intellectuals. You need to get away from them and be with some niggers.

[Poem]

A FOREST OF BERLIN

By Brenda Coultas, from The Writing of an Hour, *a poetry collection, which was published in March by Wesleyan University Press.*

A bouquet of twigs and moss and a hard orange burst of flowers. Everyone in the forest wore black clothing, like a uniform of darkness.

Bear-lin, or Bear's den, or Burr-lin, and the bear at the door.

Toy trucks and other smalls hidden under a shirt. Passing window view: Reichstag replica in porcelain and full of a wintery liquor; everyone sleeps during the day, clothing is tight and purposeful. Each street tells a sexy love story or a grim fairy tale. In Berlin everyone knows the little walking man, his hat shaped like a soft skillet and everyone keeps a suitcase of tiny toiletries stashed. In Berlin, the ends of your hair fade into turquoise. Bread is made of nuts and seeds and cakes are rhubarb or apricot. The forest is thick with witches and all your hard wires smoke like the flame from a fat candle.

I sat outside a café with a blanket on my lap doing heavy eating, I woke in a city of bears that smelled of dairy farts, of meat and cheese; I woke in a city where even the toys smoked, a plastic bear smoked a plastic cigarette, and a toy bird, filled with red liquid, dipped its beak into a water glass over and over for my amusement. That city turned my own face into something hairy and soft. And these smells followed me home from the airport.

While in this city of bears, I heard of a maiden who lived in a guard tower, even though she was not a Checkpoint Charlie. Every evening she stroked her hair with a boar bristle brush; the guard dogs below, German shepherds, were serious, large and wet, and their ears pointed forward.

But a bear wanted the maiden's tower (prime real estate). Bears are persistent and clever, and this bear had heard that a poem, the words in the right combination, could spring open the heavy door reinforced with Bronze Age rebar.

So the bear said, " … hmmm," and the maiden said, "Yes, like that." The door fell open like an unhinged jaw of a giant and she fled with German shepherds to find the human whose words were stolen by the bear. After roaming for years, she wondered if the bear had eaten the poet.

Time is a long corridor of dogs and towers.

In later chapters, she found herself locked inside a house of hair and a castle of friendly pleasures. She was held captive in a dungeon of lust hidden on a vast estate where there were instruments molded from a Poe story, in which a device meant a tool worked by hand to break the halos of medieval lambs.

Teach One, Teach Two (Laundry Day), *a painting by Raul Rene Gonzalez, from the series Doing Werk. Gonzalez's work will be on view in February at Spellerberg Projects, in Lockhart, Texas.*

[Offers]

FIRST RESPONDERS

From unsolicited letters sent to Aileen Cannon, a federal judge in the Southern District of Florida, after she announced that she would appoint a special master to review documents removed from the White House and taken to Mar-a-Lago by members of the outgoing Trump Administration.

Dear Judge Cannon:

I'm writing to express my willingness and desire to serve as special master in the Donald Trump matter. I am an apolitical attorney. My only goal is to help you reach a just decision. I know this is a long shot.

Best regards,
A. G.

Dear Clerk:

I am a retired person—since age thirty-nine—who is currently a hobbyist in the film and music industries. I also have special knowledge pertaining to certain White House documents sent to the Trump transition committee prior to his inauguration. These documents were sensitive to U.S. security. The nature of these documents pertains to technology being developed by my artificial intelligence research at Secret Handshake Corporation. Therefore I humbly petition myself as special master. My requirements include: a military motorcade, a budget for the inclusion of staff, emergency security clearance, and a room comparable to my current private residence at Trump International Hotel.

Sincerely,
J. I.

Dear Judge Cannon (or is it Dear Your Honor?):

I write you about a news item which I saw in the online edition of the *New York Times* today. It said you were leaning toward the appointment of a special master to review items recently taken from Mar-a-Lago. I'm not quite sure what the job specifications are for such an assignment, but I would like to offer my services. I'm only a retired businessman with an amateur interest in history, politics, and law, but I promise you I would perform the task to the best of my abilities. Of course I wouldn't expect to be paid. That would mess with my social security. Where do I send my résumé?

Your friend in jurisprudence,
P. R.

P.S. I do have a connection to your "Southern District of Florida," as both of my parents are buried there. I have fond memories of visiting them in the previous century.

[Testimony]

WHEN BEALE STREET WAS HOT

From an interview with the critic and historian Greg Tate, conducted for Ain't But a Few of Us, *a collection of conversations with black jazz critics, edited by Willard Jenkins, which will be published this month by Duke University Press. Tate passed away in December 2021.*

Hip-hop, when it was younger and fresher, marked the first time in African-American history when the majority of writers covering a genre were black. The cultural ignorance of non-blacks about black culture and hip-hop created openings and opportunities for black writers at the birth of hip-hop, when the fan base was largely black. The ratio flipped once corporate interests took control. The music became more predictable and redundant, and the most talented, most thoughtful black hip-hop writers became less interested in writing about it.

With jazz, the problem is that so few educated African Americans even support it, preferring black pop. Certainly Cornel West refers to himself as an "intellectual jazz man," and you have other people like Houston A. Baker Jr., who has written a book on the blues and critical theory. I'm thinking of that generation that came through, whose intellectual maturity occurred in the Seventies, when you pretty much understood black music, particularly jazz, to be part of the black liberation project. That thinking really manifested itself in the post-Coltrane music that was being made on the funkier side of fusion—Herbie Hancock, Norman Connors, and a lot of the collectives, like A Tribe Called Quest, the Awakening, Doug and Jean Carn, Horace Tapscott, and so forth. I think people very much had the sense of the music being at the center, and even at the front lines, of the grassroots politics of the era.

But the real problem with jazz is that it's no longer a form of expression where what black musicians do or don't do matters to most black Americans. Jazz has more meaning for black Americans as a history lesson than as a living, breathing cultural experience. It's not on black radio or on black TV programs; it's not in black schools, neighborhoods, or churches. The question is how much longer contemporary jazz will even be considered a "black" art form in America. If culture is defined as what people do, then we can say that, in significant numbers, black people don't do jazz anymore.

[Menu]

TABLE FOR TWO TOWERS

From the 9/11-themed menu of The Clubhouse, a restaurant in Stafford County, Virginia. The menu was discontinued in September.

PENTAGON PIE: Chocolate silk, $4
FREEDOM FLOUNDER: Grilled filet of sole with fresh tomato, garlic, and balsamic glaze drizzle, served with choice of salad, side, or a roll, $18
9/11 OYSTERS: Served with chipotle remoulade, $12
REMEMBER-TINI: Key lime rum cream, coconut rum, and pineapple juice, served up with whipped cream and a honey graham rim, $7
FLIGHT 93 REDIRECT: Hot crab dip, $10
FIRST RESPONDER FLATBREAD: Crispy oven-baked flatbread loaded with tender shrimp, $10
2,977 CHOWDER: Creamy crab and corn with bacon, $6 to $8

My parents are from the Memphis of the Forties and Fifties, when Beale Street was hot. Pops said, "When we were coming up, the musicians were not placed on a pedestal above the community, they were part of the community, and you went to see them, and they were in the black community." You could go to a bill with six or seven acts for a dollar. Now, if Beyoncé is playing at one of the stadiums in New Jersey or somewhere, folks will save up two hundred, three hundred dollars for that ticket—that's where their entertainment dollar will go. We find the money to support the things that we have a taste for.

At the end of the day, it's really going to be the musicians who turn the tide through how they connect with their particular generation. That's the thing with Kamasi Washington: a lot of the younger people I know, when *The Epic* came out, went and got the three-album set, and that's all they played every morning. That's got nothing to do with hype—if that's all you needed, a whole bunch of cats would be better known. But there is something about Kamasi's music. He is coming right out of that Seventies tradition, what people now call spiritual jazz, cosmic jazz, or pan-African jazz. Those brothers could have gone a lot of ways with the music, and they chose something that is really reflective of the neighborhood. It's in the oral tradition of the music, the music being what my father talked about as a community enterprise. When I went to see Kamasi at the Blue Note, I said, "Man, I ain't seen this many folks under thirty coming to see anything at the Blue Note, probably since Wynton Marsalis." But I think that's where you get into the real mystical qualities of the music. I think those things are the community source.

[Fiction]

DON'T BE A STRANGER

By John Kinsella, from "Rose-Colored Glasses," which was published in the Winter 2022 issue of Raritan.

Long gray hair shredded by the cold demiwind funneling up through the village, curving up and around from the harbor where boats strained at their moorings. She followed close behind, was almost knocked over by his stride, the kick of his heels, asking him to, Wait wait, please wait for me! His rose-colored glasses glinted statement and resistance and *possibly* non-comprehension, and he pushed on in front of cars, squeezing through gaps of main street traffic, swirled off toward the edge of town past the church and the graves.

A gray heron settled on a roof peak and croaked distress and indifference, while herring gulls shat but missed. The gulls reflected on all below, and were caught in his thin, perfectly flat lenses, then were lost in the thin golden frames. He looked back to see if she was there, and seeing that she was, went on with even more purpose.

Unwanted by most if not all in the village, he felt as if he had to make a statement, declare himself. I am here, and there's nothing you can do about it! And he shouted back toward the village, There's nothing you can do about it!

She put her hands over her ears and said, Enough! but he'd turned back toward where he was heading, to their cottage, and strode even faster than before.

People were always trying to do something about his *treatment of her*, and felt sorry that she couldn't or wouldn't see what a loser he was. They just couldn't make sense of why she stayed with him, even the religiously conservative among them who thought marriage was a sentence for life, *almost* no matter what. But she followed him everywhere, looking worn-out and downtrodden. When quizzed, she snapped to life and snarled back, Mind your business.

It was said that, when she died, his first wife left him half a million euros, her cousin (his present downtrodden wife), and that pair of ridiculous rose-colored glasses he never seemed to take off, but which clearly looked like non-prescription wear … and which, it was concluded, she'd actually worn in a Dublin stage production of *Hair*, maybe at the time they first met, a production which caused some kind of problem with the Church, though it was an amateur troupe of largely summer-holidaying Americans, who also made up the audiences of the few shows performed in a small rented hall. This was all unearthed.

Admittedly, it was a strange story, and the village librarian-cum-historian, to whom the investigation was entrusted by the rest of the village sleuths, could come up with little more than a flyer someone had sent him confidentially via mail from Boston that had been kept in a travel album. The historian never revealed his contact, but there was an actual flyer preserved in a plastic sleeve for all to see. Even

the man's partner, his deceased wife's cousin, had seen it herself, but she betrayed no emotion, just said, Thanks for showing me. Actually, it was noted and added to the file: regarding said rose-colored glasses, it seems likely they've been through a few lenses and maybe even frame changes since their time on the stage. But there was at least a suggested continuity.

I want to stage *Hair* in the village, and I want you to play Jeanie and wear these glasses, he said, taking them off with care and handing them to her.

I am too old now! And I was never an actor like she was … I wasn't even an *amateur*, I was always a *beginner*. And if I remember correctly Jeanie wears a gas mask in *Hair*!

At the beginning, but not later, he said, to show what the modern world is like, which it is, even down here as far away from industrialization as we can get. And it would be a reinterpretation anyway—*Hair* all these decades later, what might have been and has become.

It won't bring her back. It's you the villagers don't trust because you never talk with them, you treat them with disdain, share none of yourself. And can you imagine the church music group providing the soundtrack?

He started to laugh, but pushed it back down deep, and then looked as if he might snatch the glasses back, but he reached gently for them, placed them on his own face with a lopsided reverence, and went back to his silence, their silence.

One night in bed as the sea winds coiled over the rocks and bogs and found the cottage and threatened to tear it apart, he said to her, She wanted me to do risky things … daring things … bad things … because she found such things exciting, and I was boring to her, really dull. She said she'd married me because I was a safe bet, and she needed security and reliability because she could get carried away—not financial security, she had that, but emotional … she needed a kind of emotional flatness and thought she'd found that in me.

Yes, she got carried away easily, said her cousin, snuggling up to him just because he was talking, because whatever was being said it was better than the silence.

I did things to amuse her, he said … things I didn't like doing.

Maybe, she risked saying to him … maybe she liked to think of you doing them, but didn't really want you to do them—she was like that with me when we were children.

I've never thought of it that way, he said, but maybe that was the case, *maybe*. And he held her close, and kissed her on the top of her head, moving stray hairs then rearranging them with an intimacy she had forgotten. They'd sort of—almost—been girlfriend and

[Transportation]

JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

Photographs of Return to Origin, *a mixed-media artwork by RaMell Ross, which was exhibited earlier this year at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, in New Orleans. In October 2021, Ross shipped himself from Rhode Island to Alabama inside the crate pictured below. The trip was inspired by Henry Box Brown, who escaped from slavery in 1859 by sealing himself in a box and mailing it to abolitionists in Philadelphia. During Ross's fifty-nine-hour journey, he composed what he calls "The Black Dictionary (aka RaMell's Dictionary)" on the interior walls of the crate.*

Return to Origin, 2021, a mixed-media artwork (Alabama railroad ties, synthetic baize, bedroll foam, LED light, plywood, hardware, water, urine, stencil text) by RaMell Ross. Object photographs © Sesthasak Boonchai (top) and RaMell Ross (bottom). Courtesy the artist and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans

boyfriend before he got caught up in the swirl and excitement that was her cousin, the glamour and action, the enthusiasm for life. Even then, when they were not quite an item, and before they could become one, the Great Actor To Be that was her cousin swept in and relocated him … even then, just chatting as friends, they had more intimacy than he'd ever have in his marriage. But they were apart and couldn't be together in any meaningful way—cousin-wife-actor occupied the whole stage and sucked in all the fresh air.

Until grief brought them finally together, welded them as polar opposites fighting the magnetic rejection that the town would find so disturbing from the outset, that wrecked the communal sleep more than the Atlantic storms, stench of slurry spreading, and the furze burnings of spring.

Not *Hair*, she said, but we need to do *something* for the village. Something that will show them who we are.

Who are we? he asked.

I don't know, she said, and there are some bits we should keep to ourselves.

But the village historian will find us out.… He laughed. And she laughed, too. The only time they'd laughed since her death.

The village historian was genuinely excited and rounded up ten prominent village folk to attend O'Rourke's cottage for a night of ghost stories performed by the disturbing husband and wife team, to go into the stronghold of the enemy and smite him down and stage a rescue of his long-suffering wife … it was an opportunity too good to refuse. Everyone was to bring a dish and anything they liked to drink, as suspiciously neither husband nor wife were drinkers.

They were greeted at the threshold by the man, who was almost grinning, with his long hair carefully combed out, but without the rose-colored glasses, which were being worn by his wife, who it turned out told most of the stories, though he joined in at salient moments.

They were actually good fun! People loosened up, and told a few of their own stories, and got slowly pickled and forgetful. It went well, until the last story of the night, told by the husband, who snatched the rose-colored glasses almost violently from his wife's face.

He said: A man who had never been angry became angry when he discovered he'd been set up and betrayed by his glamorous and talented wife. She died because he willed it. He collected snippets of her hair and nails from her still-warm corpse and placed them in a silver locket that he hung around his neck, and that no one except his new wife ever saw.

But his new wife had no idea that the locket controlled her life, and that she was being reduced to the dead wife's container—though the dead wife in this new body actually had no control over the husband she'd cuckolded and tormented (but who still obsessed over her, and loved her), and he demanded she behave in this fresh body as *he* wished or he'd remove it from her … or, rather, her from *it*.

The new wife—the deceased wife's cousin—thought she was herself, but she wasn't. But the man couldn't look at what he'd done by the light of day, so guilty was he, so he wore rose-colored glasses—his dead wife's rose-colored glasses … a theater prop—so he could see her in the body of her cousin.

Even so, at some point he decided that the old wife's spirit was a malign force, and that the ill she'd done him in life was still going on—that she'd willed him to kill her, to collect her hair and nails, to capture and occupy the living body of her cousin. It had been part of her plan, and it infuriated him because he could neither understand it nor gain control over the situation.

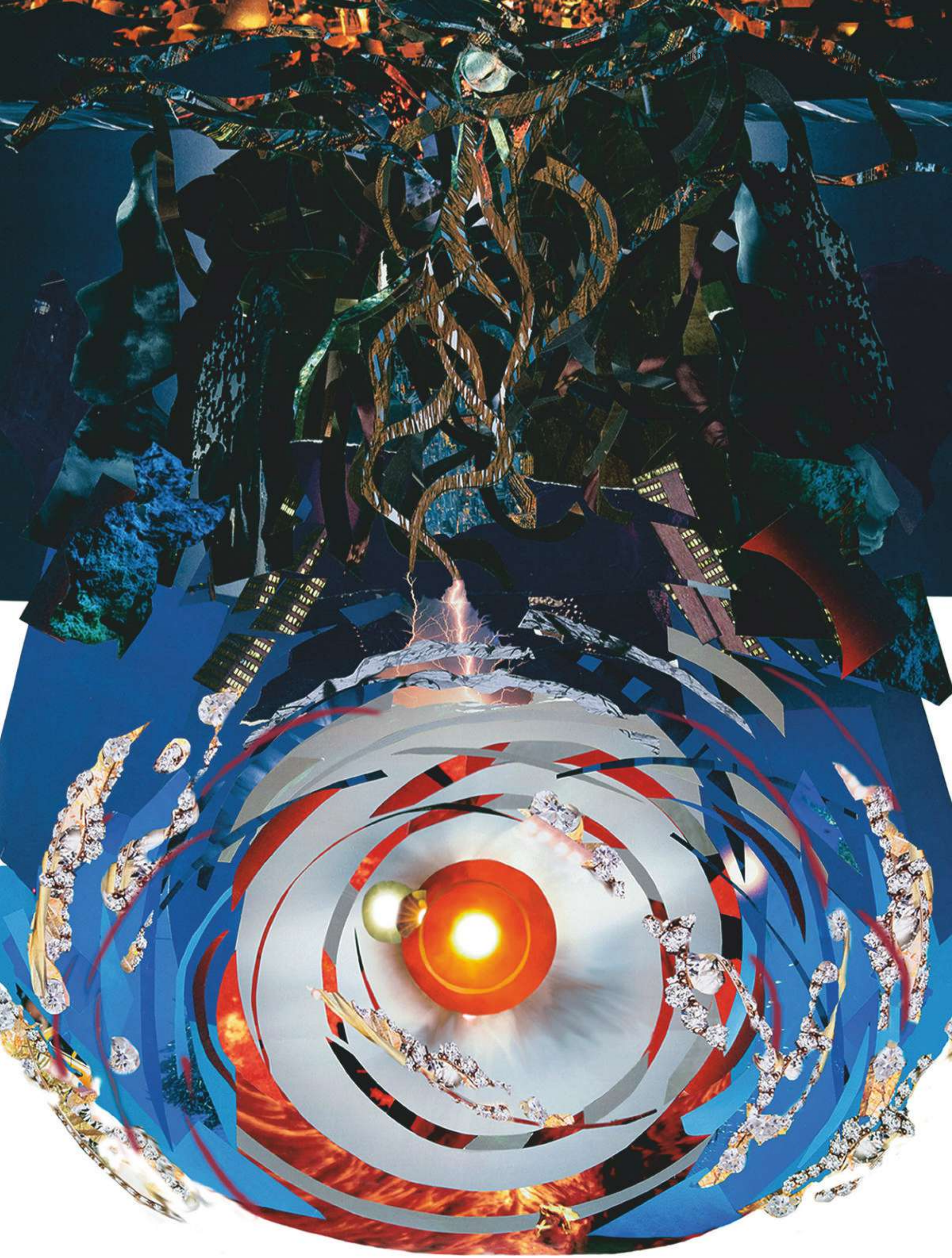
He did not understand why until one day talking with her in bed—without his glasses and with light streaming in, he saw the cousin, his fleshly wife, the container, calling out to him; and she was patient and loving and virtuous and tolerant. He decided to release her and cast his first wife's possessing spirit away once and for all.

The villagers were transfixed. Staring at his wife, who clearly loved him and forgave him for much, the man reached in under his collar, pulled out a locket, tore it from his neck so chain links flew violently everywhere, even into the lap of the village historian, and then dropped the locket onto the floorboards, crushing it under his hobnailed boot.

Gasps around the room meant a delay in response before he scraped up the remnants and hurled them into the fire that had gone from being fierce to cozy to fierce again.

And suddenly his wife burst into hysterical laughter and said, What a wonderful way to finish the evening—and to think that any of you—she scanned the visitors arrayed on a hodgepodge of different chairs and wooden boxes around the pokey lounge room—thought *my man* was anything but a fun, good-natured, and even sociable creature. Tonight, you have seen the real man come out of his shell and bloom like a night flower! Remember us as friends—we are always here if you need us … don't be strangers to us anymore.

"Bearogram #4," a photogram of a black bear made in the forests of New York State by Zana Briski, from the series Animalograms. Briski's work was on view last month in the Ten by Ten exhibition at FotoFest Biennial, in Houston.



APOCALYPSE NOWISH

The sense of an ending

By Michael Robbins

I first read the Book of Revelation in a green pocket-size King James New Testament published by the motel missionaries Gideons International. I was in seventh grade. I remember reading the tiny Bible in the hallway outside my chemistry classroom, in which lurked a boy I loathed named Glenn, who would make fun of my Journey T-shirts. It would be years before I really got into Iron Maiden, but at my friend Jonathan's house I'd heard Barry Clayton's creepy recitation of Revelation 13:18 on the title track of *The Number of the Beast*: "Let him who hath understanding reckon the number of the beast: for it is a human number; its number is six hundred and sixty-six."

I wanted to know what that was all about. My father was so dismissive of any form of religious thought that I was in second grade before I realized that some people believed in the devil, whom I had drawn for an art project. My teacher wouldn't post my drawing on the wall with the others, on the grounds that it might offend Christian sensibilities, though it was a standard cartoonish red devil with horns, pitchfork, and pointy tail. I was nonplussed: surely Satan was a fictional character, like Santa Claus or Batman. (Of course he is, my dad explained that night, but not everyone realizes this.)

By seventh grade I was much better acquainted with religious belief, aware even of its stirrings within myself. Revelation still seemed as fantastical as my drawing. It's a trip, sure—seven-headed dragons, lion-headed horses, and lakes of fire are inherently cool. But no one in his right mind could actually believe this stuff.

Not the dragon stuff, which scans as symbolic to even the dullest seventh-grader, but whatever the evangelicals thought the dragon stuff was a metaphor for. I knew they had notions on the subject, for they had briefly kidnapped me and made me watch a filmstrip about hell in what appeared to be a taco truck. This would have been a few summers earlier, in Salida, Colorado, in a park along the Arkansas River.

Anyway, I thought Revelation was deranged,[1] and I loved it. "And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps." Its closing lines struck me then and still strike me as immeasurably moving: "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

[1] *The Apocalypse of John seemed nuts to plenty of early Christians. In the fourth century, Eusebius found it necessary to include the thing both among "the Divine Scriptures that are accepted" and among "those that are not." As late as 1522, Martin Luther only grudgingly included it in his translation of the Bible, writing, "I miss more than one thing in this book, and it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic." The number of the beast, by the way, probably just refers to Nero.*

Michael Robbins is the author, most recently, of the poetry collection Walkman.

Opposite page: *Kiss the Son* (detail, center panel of triptych), by Nicora Gangi © The artist

In the decades following Jesus' death, the apocalypse[2] was believed to be so imminent that Paul felt he had to hurry, complaining that barely had he begun to spread the gospel in one place when another beckoned to him. In the first few centuries of the Christian era, the world was "a dark house full of war," as Anthony the Great wrote from the desert, and heavy shit was being revealed to prophets all over the place. Some of it has been passed down in text, such as the Secret Book of John, to whom "a figure with several forms within the light" appeared to tell of "what is, what was, and what is to come, that you may understand what is invisible and what is visible; and to teach you about the unshakable race of perfect humankind."

Wild forms of millenarianism flourished in Europe from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century, as Norman Cohn and Christopher Hill have delightfully documented. The Second Coming was expected any moment; Antichrist was abroad in the land—he was the pope, or he was Martin Luther, or he was just the general vibe. "The judgment day is at hand," proclaimed John Bunyan in 1658. The so-called Amaurians of the thirteenth century, precursors to the Brethren of the Free Spirit, held that they were living in the last of three ages, the Age of the Holy Spirit, which was to culminate in a series of catastrophes that would kill off most of humankind, leaving only a saving remnant who would become divine.

I've always liked them—the ranters, revivalists, the killer messiahs and flipped-out founders of communes. The camp meetings in the woods where young people would bark and howl and writhe on the ground and fall into trances that lasted for days. Jonathan Edwards in full gallop, reading the chiliastic signs.

I've been thinking about all this lately for obvious reasons. We live in a dark house full of war. Not that I anticipate the Christian eschaton—who needs divine revelation when you can google "more plastic than fish by 2050"? Nor have I been "black-pilled." I didn't ask to get "Eve of Destruction" stuck in my head. I desperately want us to *get our shit together*. We could build a free society that doesn't view the planet as a profit engine. I just really doubt that we will. Climate disaster, economic collapse, war, resurgent fascism and nationalism, assaults on basic political freedoms, mass violence: all these mutually reinforcing in a sinister feedback loop, the structural stresses of capital's death throes accelerating ecological catastrophe and exacerbating reactionary forces, which in turn further stress the structure. The collapse won't be a single event, but a slide into what the world-systems analyst Giovanni Arrighi calls "systemic chaos." Late-capitalist society is a coyote suspended above an abyss, believing he still stands on solid ground. We are in the interval before he notices he's supported by thin air and plummets to the canyon floor.

The voluminous scholarship of apocalypse tends to follow a pattern. The Book of Daniel is cited, and Revelation; Zarathustra is wheeled onstage; the Sibylline Oracles perhaps are mentioned. It is noted that there are "apocalypses" or revelations (such as the Secret Book of John) which are not "apocalyptic" in the derived doomsday sense—Bruce Willis blowing up an asteroid to save the earth. Often apocalypticism is then differentiated from both millenarianism and eschatology.

These phenomena are then further delimited. The great Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov wrote that "The sense of the end is widespread in humankind. Humankind has an instinctive knowledge that the world will end, just as a man dies." But apocalyptic traditions such as those of the Near East, from Zoroastrianism to Islam, are not universal. There is no Hindu equivalent of the "last day," for instance, and "apocalyptic ideas entered Mesoamerican culture only after the arrival of the Europeans," according to the scholar of religion Lorenzo DiTommaso. As the Lakota historian Nick Estes has noted, "Indigenous people are post-apocalyptic. In some cases, we have undergone several apocalypses."

These are important distinctions. But I'm more interested here in what Raymond Williams termed a "structure of feeling," the general drift, an atmosphere. If I confuse divine and secular, religious and political, in what follows, it's because they've been all swirled together in my head since I read Revelation while avoiding Glenn, as they are in popular culture, where each is an allegory for the other: Neo in *The Matrix* is the Messiah; the spacecraft carrying the bombs to blow up the comet in *Deep Impact* is named the *Messiah*; *Armageddon* is called *Armageddon*. I don't believe the New Jerusalem will descend from the heavens, but nor do I regard spiritual revelation as simply "a feeling inside," as the ever-subtle Richard Dawkins put it, probably not with reference to Elton John.

During the apocalyptic summer of 2020, I was walking along the Rivanna River in Charlottesville, Virginia, when Jackson Browne's "Before the Deluge" came up on my still-functional 2008 iPod:

> Some of them were dreamers
> And some of them were fools
> Who were making plans and thinking of the future

[2] *The Greek* apokalypsis *is the first word of the text of the Apocalypse of John, not a title bestowed by the author: "Apokalypsis Iēsou Xristou hēn edōken autō ho theos" ("A revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him"). It means "unveiling" or "uncovering."*

Page borders: *Kiss the Son* (detail, left and right panels of triptych), by Nicora Gangi © The artist

With the energy of the innocent
They were gathering the tools
They would need to make their journey back to nature

Yeah, I know. Browne writes songs you want to hear again while also wishing you'd never learned English. But these lines evoked a certain structure of feeling, born in the counterculture of the Sixties, whose remnants I hazily recall from the late Seventies and early Eighties.

When I stayed with my mother growing up, I spent time with people who lived in school buses and people who claimed to be witches and people who followed the Dead and a guy who got free drinks in Leadville by passing for Bob Seger. They threw the *I Ching* and talked about ESP and smoked copious amounts of marijuana. They seemed ready to take off at any moment for just about any reason, and many of them did.

This milieu could be enticing for a kid—I could do whatever I wanted. But since the reason I could do whatever I wanted was that the adults around me were completely irresponsible, it was often a drag. I knew what an eviction notice was, I knew how to use food stamps, I knew not to trust cops. It was erratic; everyone was unstable. Still, wasn't there something romantic about this pitiful rejection of what they called "the straight world"—or is it just nostalgia that makes me think so? But T. J. Clark calls nostalgia "that most realistic of interpretive tropes."

There was a pervasive sense, entirely absent from my sojourns with my father in the straight world, that the whole system was headed for a crash, and you needed to be ready. Some of this was explicitly religious—the school bus folks expected Jesus' imminent advent in the clouds—and some of it was political, but much of it was vague, something in the air, in the songs that floated through my childhood, shadowboxing the apocalypse. THE END IS NIGH read the sandwich board of the street prophet in the comics of my youth, from *MAD* to *Watchmen*. I might be predisposed to believe the bridge is out up ahead, is my point.

This was the element in which I encountered *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey's 1970 eschatological bestseller. My mom or her roommates would leave books lying around, and I would read them, no matter what they were—always forget that the preferred genre of the New Testament's protagonist is the parable.) I didn't really believe it, but it's a hell of a premise.[3] It left a permanent impression on my imagination.

This era saw umpteen popular paperback prophecies of parousia, many of which I read simply because they were there. My favorite was Salem Kirban's now forgotten precursor to the Left Behind novels, 666, bearing on its cover the same verses that Iron Maiden cite in "The Number of the Beast." And these had their umpteen popular secular counterparts, often no less absurd or tragic. In the early Sixties, while Billy Graham was informing crowds that they were living in the Last Days, *U.S. News & World Report* assured subscribers that their checks would still be good "if bombs do fall" and their banks get vaporized. William and Paul Paddock predicted that overpopulation would lead to *Famine 1975!*, a 1967 bestseller in which the authors regretfully conclude that "hopeless countries" like *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *The Stand*, *The Amityville Horror*. (Don't give a ten-year-old a copy of *The Amityville Horror*.) I'd like to think that even then I admired the shamelessness of Lindsey's gotcha opening:

> This is a book about prophecy—Bible prophecy. If you have no interest in the future, this isn't for you. If you have no curiosity about a subject that some consider controversial, you might as well stop now.

Lindsey had a snake oil salesman's sleazy charm, and a pandering sense of scale: "When the reality of the moon landing really hit, it was awesome." But you ain't seen nothin' yet: "There is another trip which many men, women, and children will take one day which will leave the rest of the world gasping." This is the Rapture, when believers will be swept up to heaven, leaving behind empty beds, unpiloted planes, half-mown lawns, and unmanned information kiosks, before the coming of Antichrist. The Rapture has no scriptural basis besides an obviously metaphorical verse in Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians. (The literalists

LATE-CAPITALIST SOCIETY IS A COYOTE SUSPENDED ABOVE AN ABYSS, BELIEVING HE STILL STANDS ON SOLID GROUND. WE ARE IN THE INTERVAL BEFORE HE NOTICES HE'S SUPPORTED BY THIN AIR AND PLUMMETS TO THE CANYON FLOOR

[3] *It has inspired Stephen King's novella "The Langoliers," and Tom Perrotta's novel* The Leftovers, *which was made into one of the best TV series of the century, not to mention Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's best-selling evangelical Left Behind novels. I tried to read the first installment for this essay, but was defeated by the opening sentence: "Rayford Steele's mind was on a woman he had never touched."*

India and Egypt must be abandoned to their fate because "to send food is to throw sand in the ocean." Paul Ehrlich was listening: his apocalyptic screed *The Population Bomb* opens with a racist description of "one stinking hot night in Delhi," lent "a hellish aspect" by cooking fires, the streets "alive with people," confessing that he and his family "were, frankly, frightened" as they rode safely in a taxi to their hotel. Rather than reflect on the legacy of colonialism, Ehrlich decided that there were just too many damn "people, people, people." In the Seventies, more than one hundred million of them were sure to perish in a global famine.

There were also intelligent versions of the apocalyptic structure of feeling. Some were militant, like the poems in Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters,* which abound with practical advice for the revolution, a *Letters to a Young Poet* for the budding Weatherman:

> store water; make a point of filling your bathtub
> at the first news of trouble: they turned off the water
> in the 4th ward for a whole day during the Newark riots
>
> *
>
> at some point
> you may be called upon
> to keep going for several days without sleep:
> keep some ups around
>
> *
>
> there are those who can tell you
> how to make molotov cocktails, flamethrowers, bombs whatever
> you might be needing
> find them and learn

There was Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man,* which recounts with fascinated horror the advertised amenities of civil-defense preparations, a "combination family room … and family fallout shelter" comfortably accoutred with carpet, television, lounge chairs, and board games. A bourgeois nuclear winter for the nuclear family, as today's sociopathic billionaires construct luxury bunkers in missile silos in which to ride out climate chaos. And Norman O. Brown's strange, mostly forgotten *Love's Body,* a mélange of mysticism, psychoanalysis, and apocalyptic rhetoric: Melanie Klein and William Blake, Augustine and Artaud, Kerouac and Mircea Eliade. "Thank God the world cannot be made safe," Brown wrote, "for democracy or anything else." Marcuse hated it.

Expecting the apocalypse has been an American pastime since the colonial era. Marcuse wrote *One-Dimensional Man* in Massachusetts, not far from where Jonathan Edwards discerned the scriptural prophecy of the millennium "plainly to point out America, as the first-fruits of that glorious day." Henry Adams decided that the second law of thermodynamics applied to human history as a closed system. "The apocalypse has been announced so many times that it cannot occur," as the situationist Raoul Vaneigem put it in his book on the Brethren of the Free Spirit. The end of the world is always around the next bend. Look out of any window.

So I'd be foolish not to scatter some asterisks. "Beginning to be the end it seemed," writes Nathaniel Mackey. "Ending begun to be come to again." "The imagination," said Wallace Stevens, "is always at the end of an era." And Robert Frost: "It is immodest of a man to think of himself as going down before the worst forces ever mobilized by God." Many ends of the world have come and gone. "When it appears that it cannot be so," Frank Kermode noted in *The Sense of an Ending,* "they act as if it were true in a different sense." What can I say, Frank, you got me.

The conflation of religious millenarianism and revolutionary politics is an understandable, if misleading, tendency. But I want to consider some arguments about how, precisely, they are related. A frequent aim of each is *omnia sunt communia*—all things in common (Acts 2:44)—and for each to achieve this aim requires the overturning of the existent social order, which is adjudged corrupt, never inaccurately. "The earth," wrote the Digger Gerrard Winstanley in 1649, was created "to be a common treasury … a common storehouse for all," but it "is bought and sold and kept in the hands of a few." Christopher Hill notes that Winstanley envisaged "a state monopoly for foreign trade" after the abolition of private property, "one of the first things the Soviet government established after taking over power in 1917." Engels saw in the ideas of the Anabaptist Thomas Müntzer, leader of the sixteenth-century Peasants' Revolt in Central Europe, a precursor of modern communism. Karl Kautsky was less sure. The Great Awakening, wrote the Congregationalist minister Charles Chauncy in alarm, "has made strong attempts to destroy all property, to make all things common."

The field guide to millenarianism remains Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium*, that magical mystery tour of Ranters, flagellants, Free Spirits, messiahs, lesser messiahs, autocratic messiahs, disappointed messiahs, and anarcho-communists. Guy Debord, who admired Cohn's book, nevertheless felt he had the wrong end of the stick, as he argued in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

> So, contrary to what Norman Cohn believes he has demonstrated in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, modern revolutionary hopes are not an irrational

> sequel to the religious passion of millenarianism. The exact opposite is true: millenarianism, the expression of a revolutionary class struggle speaking the language of religion for the last time, was already a modern revolutionary tendency, lacking only the consciousness of being *historical and nothing more*.

Eric Hobsbawm more or less concurs, finding Cohn's study "vitiated by a tendency to interpret medieval in terms of modern revolutionary movements and the other way around."

As the present essay attests, it's hard to resist this sort of thinking. Thirty years after Hobsbawm slapped Cohn's wrist, he was writing that

> like the early Christians, most pre-1914 socialists were believers in the great apocalyptic change which would abolish all that was evil and bring about a society without unhappiness, oppression, inequality and injustice.

Maybe so. But I want to hold on to the slight difference between Debord's and Hobsbawm's corrections of Cohn. Hobsbawm faults him for interpreting the medieval in terms of the modern phenomena "and the other way around." But Debord says Cohn gets the relationship exactly backward: one must read religious millenarianism in the light cast by modern revolutionary hopes, not vice versa. It's not, as Cohn has it, that revolutionary struggles are religious; it's that medieval millennial movements were revolutionary struggles expressed in the language of their time.

This is in one sense Debord turning Hegel on his head, asserting the materialist base of religious ideas. But I read it also as a statement of solidarity with the mad prophets on the burning shore: they often fought the good fight. The Bohemian millenarians of the fifteenth century, a contemporary chronicler relates, inspired fear "on all sides" that "the poor" and "the rough folk" would soon "turn against all who were decent and law-abiding, and against the rich." As well they should. "I take for religion//its joyousness, not its millennial/struggle," Pasolini wrote. But the historian Paul Boyer is onto something:

> Radicals seeking evidence of grassroots disaffection with the structure of modern society have ignored a rich potential source—the torrent of skeptical commentary by premillennialists, whose array of prophetic "signs" included social, economic, and technological processes so broad as to be almost coterminous with modernity itself.

It is not quite true that radicals have "ignored" these sources, but the point is well-taken. John Brown and Thomas Müntzer ventured (and lost) their lives agitating against tremendous systems of domination because of and not despite their religion. Of course, Frederick Douglass drew the sharpest distinction "between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ."

Today's apocalyptic structure of feeling differs from its predecessors in that it is totally pessimistic. "Remain calm," communist theorist Bifo Berardi advises readers. "Don't be attached to life, and most of all: don't have hope, that addictive poisonous weed." Nuclear warheads may or may not fall from the skies. Ditto Jesus. But the planet *will* get hotter. Even in the most realistically optimistic scenario,[4] coral reefs face complete die-off, sea levels rise, and entire species and ecosystems vanish. Extreme weather—storms, wildfires, floods, droughts—will become ever more commonplace. And of course it is the less optimistic scenarios that are more likely to come to pass.

Bulgakov denied that the "philosophy of history as the 'philosophy of the end'" could be characterized as pessimism. "But neither is it optimism, for, *within the limits* of history itself, there is no resolution for this tragedy." That is, nothing can be done until history is ended, in the transfiguration of the world through the parousia, the coming of Christ the King. At the risk of nullifying its true content, I would secularize, or historicize, Bulgakov's insight.

As a synecdoche for the tragedy of our historical moment, consider a news item about the murder of nineteen schoolchildren in Uvalde, Texas. One victim, ten-year-old Maite Rodriguez, was identifiable only by the green Converse sneakers she wore. She had drawn a heart on her right shoe. After the actor Matthew McConaughey, for some reason delivering a press briefing at the White House, made this detail known to the public, the shoes sold out as appalled consumers ordered them online.

It is impossible to understand a society whose response to the slaughter of children is to purchase green Converse sneakers as anything other than psychotic. It is impossible, I believe, to wish for such a society to continue—a society that is also bent on murdering as many other forms of life as possible, driving entire species extinct, rendering the planet uninhabitable. To say nothing of the millions of incarcerated souls, the hundreds of millions living in slums while the superrich eat like emperors on private jets. And on and on. No, "I always wanted this world ended," as the communist Franco Fortini said.

Within the limits of history, there is no solution, whether we look to climate accords or philanthropic billionaires. Liberals stroll the fairylands of

[4] *The IPCC has projected five future warming possibilities; I ignore the most optimistic, which assumes that global carbon dioxide emissions will be cut to net zero by 2050. Barring an extinction-level cataclysm, this will not happen.*

blue waves and Green New Deals or cling to the hope that science will save us, through geoengineering or nuclear power, carbon capture or magic beans. I think of Los, in Blake's *Jerusalem*, "Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems."[5] The crisis cannot be resolved from within the institutions that gave rise to the crisis.

Just this morning I read a book review in the *Washington Post* with an assertion that made me laugh out loud: "It's likely that at least some people will survive climate change, and that 1,000 years from now their gadgets will make ours seem primitive." Some people will survive climate change, sure. But is it "likely" that they will produce advanced gadgets a millennium from now? They'll figure out a magical way to sustainably produce advanced technology without depleting natural resources and once again poisoning the planet? Perhaps they will also build starships to spread humanist values to strange new worlds.

Or perhaps the people left behind after climate apocalypse will have learned from our mistakes. I think of a scene from the television adaptation of *Station Eleven*. Kirsten (Mackenzie Davis) is fielding questions from Alex (Philippine Velge), a young thespian born after a pandemic that erased civilization, about what smartphones were like:

> "So how many plays fit on this one?"
> "Alex, every play. All of the plays fit on it."
> "I wish I coulda had a phone."
> "They weren't that great."[6]

The series adapts Emily St. John Mandel's surprise bestseller, itself part of a recent end-of-the-world boom. *The Road*, *The Walking Dead*, *This Is the End*, *How It Ends*, *Melancholia*, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, *I Think We're Alone Now*, *It Comes at Night*, *A Quiet Place*, *The Passage*, *The End of October*, *Survivor Song*, *Y: The Last Man*—these are just a few that occur to me off the top of my head. The titles alone are a structure of feeling. And they keep coming, every day another title imagining the end, or what comes after the end, as if we keep trying to get it right—no, it will be like *this* …

It is seventy-five years since Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer lamented the tendency of people to take the status quo, "which they themselves constantly create," as given, "a fortress before which even the revolutionary imagination feels shamed as utopianism, and degenerates to a compliant trust in the objective tendency of history." The Marxist Helmut Reichelt, paraphrasing Adorno, called this seemingly given fortress "an objective structure that has become autonomous." We can still demolish this structure—though the hour is getting late—but instead we search within it (not very hard, it must be said) for ways to ameliorate its effects.

I sure don't know how to demolish it. I just know that the oil companies will not stop drilling unless we force them to, unless we take matters into our own hands, as Andreas Malm recently suggested in his ambitiously titled *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. I just know that we can't look to the state to save us, as even Malm ultimately does. The state is nothing if not the guarantor of the very property relations that got us into this mess in the first place. Anahid Nersessian, in a bravura reading of di Prima's "Revolutionary Letter #7," defines "action" in the poet's sense as "a name for a concrete but open-ended intensity to which some unidentified people are giving everything they have for an unspecified amount of time." Thoreau complained in his journal:

> It galls me to listen to the remarks of craven-hearted neighbors who speak disparagingly of [John] Brown because he resorted to violence, resisted the government, threw his life away!—what way have they thrown their lives, pray?

What way will we throw our lives? The historian Mike Davis has imagined the horseman of pestilence telling a reporter on the White House lawn, "Your whole society is suffering from acute apocalypse denial." The thing about wanting this world ended is you want it ended *the right way*. If we don't end it ourselves, if we don't stop those who are killing everything, it will almost certainly end quite badly, especially for the poorest and most subjugated among us. And what comes next could well be even worse. The George Floyd rebellion of 2020 remains, along with Occupy, Standing Rock, the Arab Spring, and several other scattered refusals to comply with the status quo, a bright beacon of possibility. But the disappointing issue of these, the reversion to the positive facticity of what exists—in no small part due to the other side's overwhelming monopoly on naked force—conjures an image of the future in which, in solidarity with the dead, isolated subjects click to add shoes to their shopping carts forever.

And yet. Perhaps it is my early grounding in eschatology and the counterculture that allows me to see—not hope, not at all, but opportunity. Is it not when things are darkest, when all hope is lost, that one fights with abandon, shamelessly shoots for utopia? For then there is nothing left to lose. And I have heard that another word for nothing left to lose is freedom. ■

[5] *As critics have noted, "striving with" can mean both "striving within or alongside" and "striving against." I intend the former here, obviously.*

[6] *See also Jonathan Crary's recent polemic,* Scorched Earth, *which argues that we are all just prisoners here of our own devices.*

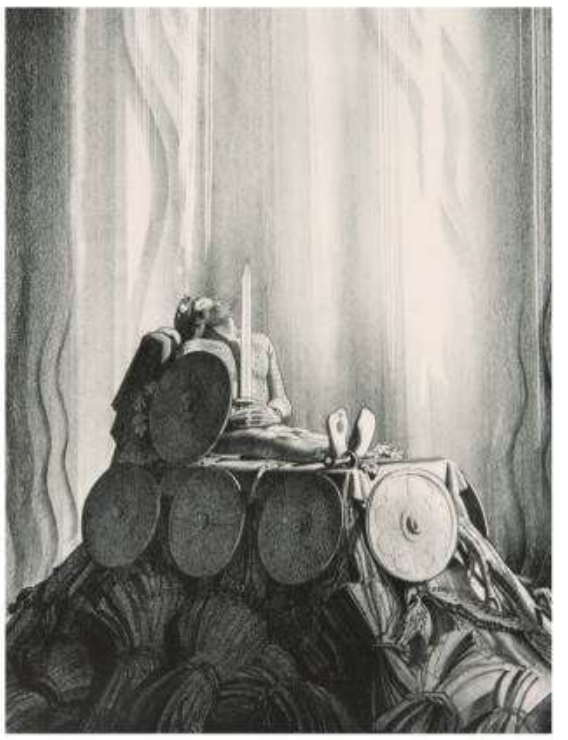
DEATH IS FOR SUCKERS

By Lewis H. Lapham

Sometimes I console myself with a vision of New York in ruins. Having been educated in the classical tradition, I prefer to imagine the desolation in the manner of Piranesi—blocks of stone overgrown with weeds, abandoned technology rusting in an autumnal wind. The vision is an anodyne of rage. It allows me to contemplate with equanimity the fatuousness of a society so content with so many smug assumptions and so willingly deceived by so many false promises. At moments of extreme depression, mercifully infrequent, I think of Johnny Carson and the discount department store as the two sublime expressions of the American Dream. For a man who succumbs to that kind of despairing metaphor, the prospect of nuclear holocaust does not seem so appalling. He assumes the survivors will begin again in a condition of Arcadian innocence. The Garden of Eden appears to be located on the other side of the bomb.

If the apocalyptic vision belonged only to me, I could wrap it up in plain brown paper, sneak it uptown to a psychoanalyst, and pay the going rate for exorcism on Park Avenue. Admittedly it is stupid, adolescent, fashionable, self-indulgent, moralistic, dangerous, and banal. Unfortunately it also belongs to a great many other people. It is a national phenomenon that presents itself in variations as diverse as a vote for George Wallace, a cocktail party for Huey P. Newton, a riot in Newark, and the seizure of a dean's office by students armed with manifestos. It is the reservoir of unspecific anger from which demagogues draw the emotion necessary to irrigate their fields of mandragora.

The principal cause of the anger is a feeling of helplessness. Most people confront the machinery of society in its dehumanized extensions—in the blank faces of bailiffs, in the thin smiling of bank managers who subtract and foreclose. Apparently nobody can be blamed for anything. Thus the secret pleasure on the occasion of public



disorder. I think of the exhilaration in New York City on the night the lights failed, of the delight in a transit strike, of the satisfaction in reading about losses on the stock market. Even those inconvenienced by disorder take pleasure in it. I encountered an extreme instance of this in a man who had been arrested for political demonstration and beaten by the police. The beating confirmed his view of the universe; having sustained no permanent injury, he rejoiced to find out that everything was just as bad as he had thought it was.

The longing for Armageddon depends on the illusion that genuine risk is no longer available. The soul yearns for adolescent pageants, for tropical beachheads and wagons moving across the plains; instead it finds itself hemmed in among high buildings, confined in boxes where all the action seems to take place on television. The difficulty has to do with an attitude toward death. In New York, death is an obscenity, the unmentionable thing we mask with the same euphemisms the Victorians employed to mask their horror of sex. Death is for suckers. Hospitals smuggle out the dead as if they were trafficking in government secrets. Thus the shock of the killings at Kent State. Such a thing was a tasteless violation of liberal conventions. A student going up against Soviet tanks in the streets wouldn't be surprised if one of his friends was killed; the chance of death gave meaning to his act. But to American students, accustomed to dreamlike gestures, death cannot be imagined as something that happens to those they know.

For most people, the great Christian drama has ended, and all our players have vanished into thin air. Without death it is impossible to conceive of tragedy. Unable to agree upon a new play, we wait for spectacular revelations. Our impatience gives way to anger, and because we cannot accept the reality of death on a local scale, we begin to anticipate it on the scale of nuclear holocaust. This satisfies our craving for the stupendous. Our impoverished imaginations substitute Armageddon, which we know we possess the technology to accomplish, for the Day of Judgment, in which we lack the faith to believe. ■

From "The Longing for Armageddon," which appeared in the August 1971 issue of Harper's Magazine. *The complete article—along with the magazine's entire 172-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.*

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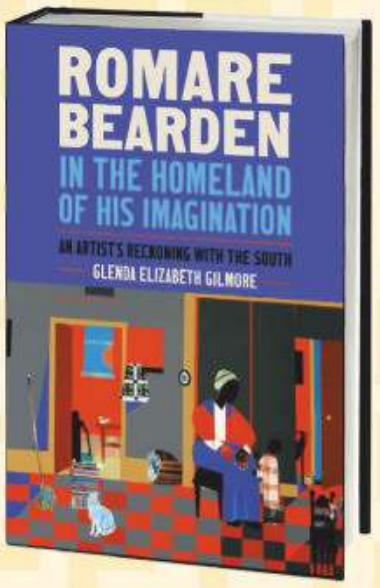

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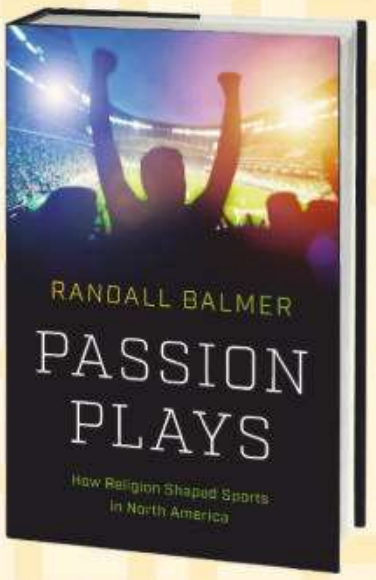

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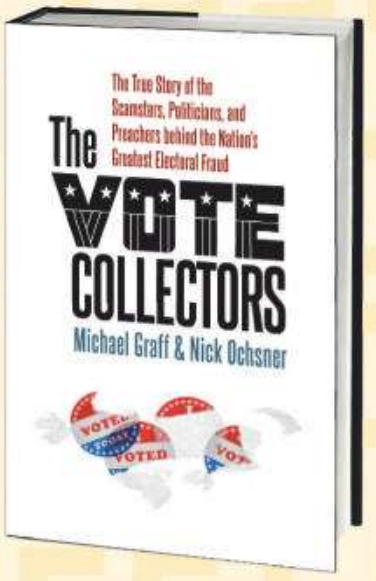

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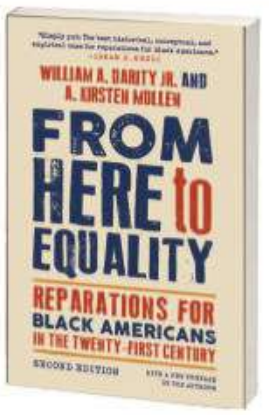

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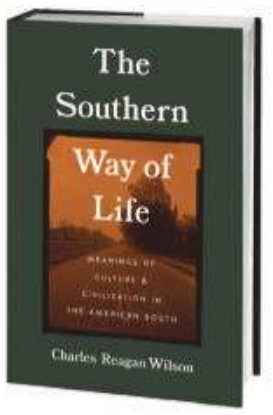

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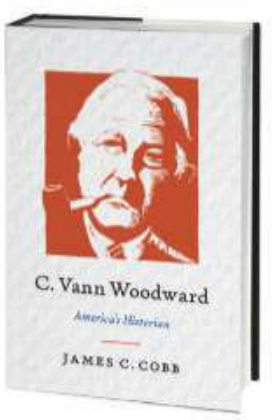

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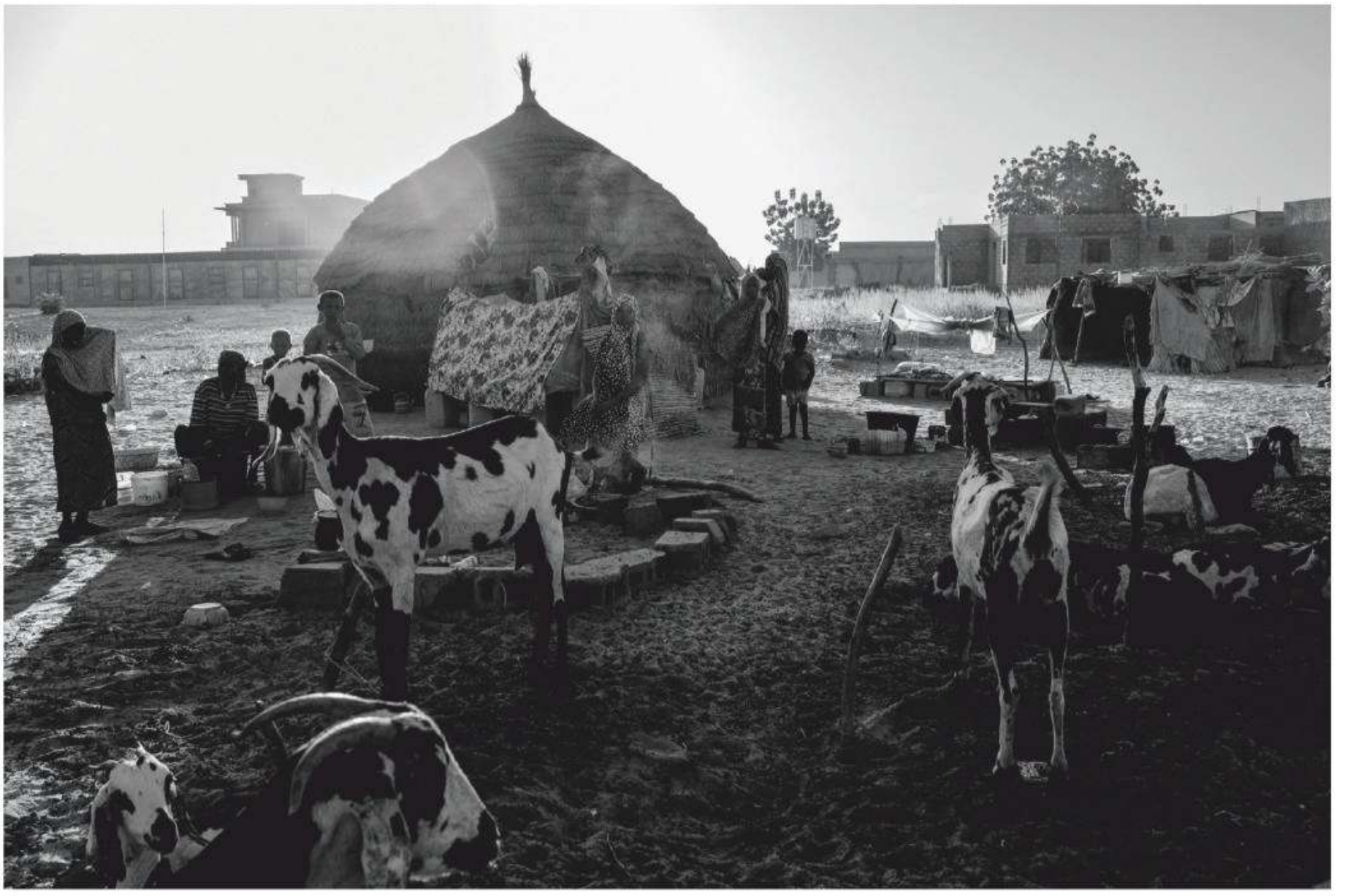
OVER THE HORIZON

The next frontier in the war on terror

By Caitlin L. Chandler



"I like keeping things alive," Boubacar Diallo told me. He had raised animals his whole life, a hobby he inherited from his father, a soldier in the Nigerien Army. "Anyone will tell you the address to my house is the place where the cattle are outside." Diallo climbed a ladder to reach some hay bales on the roof of a ramshackle lean-to under which three goats, their fleeces the color of old snow, were huddled next to a flock of pigeons. He hopped down and tossed the bales into the pen. A few birds followed him.

It was early November 2021, and I was visiting Diallo at his home in Niamey, the capital of Niger. I was accompanied by a journalist named Omar Hama, and the three of us sat outside on a covered patio, beside a skinny tree stretching upward through a hole in the tin roof. The rainy season had ended a month earlier, and the banks of the nearby Niger River were lined with green. But the rain had fallen unevenly: across the country there were reports of flash floods, scrawny vegetables, and camels with strange diseases.

An unassuming man with scraggly sideburns and wrinkled clothes, Diallo works as a conflict mediator in Tillabéri, a region that surrounds Niamey, extending north to Mali and southwest to Burkina Faso. Tillabéri is home to several ethnic groups, including the Peul, or Fulani, who typically are nomadic herders; the Tuareg, who are also itinerant; and the Djerma, who are often farmers. Over the past decade, as agricultural plots have encroached on herder territory and climate change has made water and arable land increasingly scarce, the borderlands have seen sporadic violence. Tuareg bandits have

Caitlin L. Chandler is a writer in Berlin. Her work on this article was supported by the International Women's Media Foundation's Howard G. Buffet Fund for Women Journalists.

Peul herders at an encampment in Niamey. All photographs from Niger by Nicole Tung, November 2021, for *Harper's Magazine* © The artist

stolen animals from Peul herders, and deadly feuds have broken out between Peul, Djerma, and Tuareg families.

Through painstaking negotiations, Diallo brokers truces and convinces warring groups to relinquish their weapons. But at the time of my visit, his work had been complicated by the growing presence of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), an armed group that originated in Mali and capitalizes on conflicts in Tillabéri to recruit members and informants. Evading Nigerien Army patrols and French and American reconnaissance drones, their fighters had been raiding towns, executing local chiefs, and demanding that residents pay a tax or face retaliation. "The authorities refused to resolve the problems in the border zone, and the jihadis took advantage," Diallo said. Hama nodded in agreement. Villages across Tillabéri were now emptying, their inhabitants fleeing to Niamey or to camps cropping up throughout the region.

The Nigerien government once encouraged Diallo's peacemaking attempts in Tillabéri, even employing him for a time as a high-level adviser. But after several Peuls joined ISGS, Diallo, himself a Peul, was detained for ten days. "They consider me a militant," Diallo told me, smiling. His wife, Fati, was fired from the school where she taught. Despite this persecution, the couple opened their home to strangers, who came to Niamey searching for loved ones detained or disappeared by the Nigerien Army. There were often people sleeping in their concrete courtyard, but on this particular night it was empty. After evening prayers, Diallo planned to go to bed early.

Shortly after sunset, Diallo's and Hama's phones vibrated.

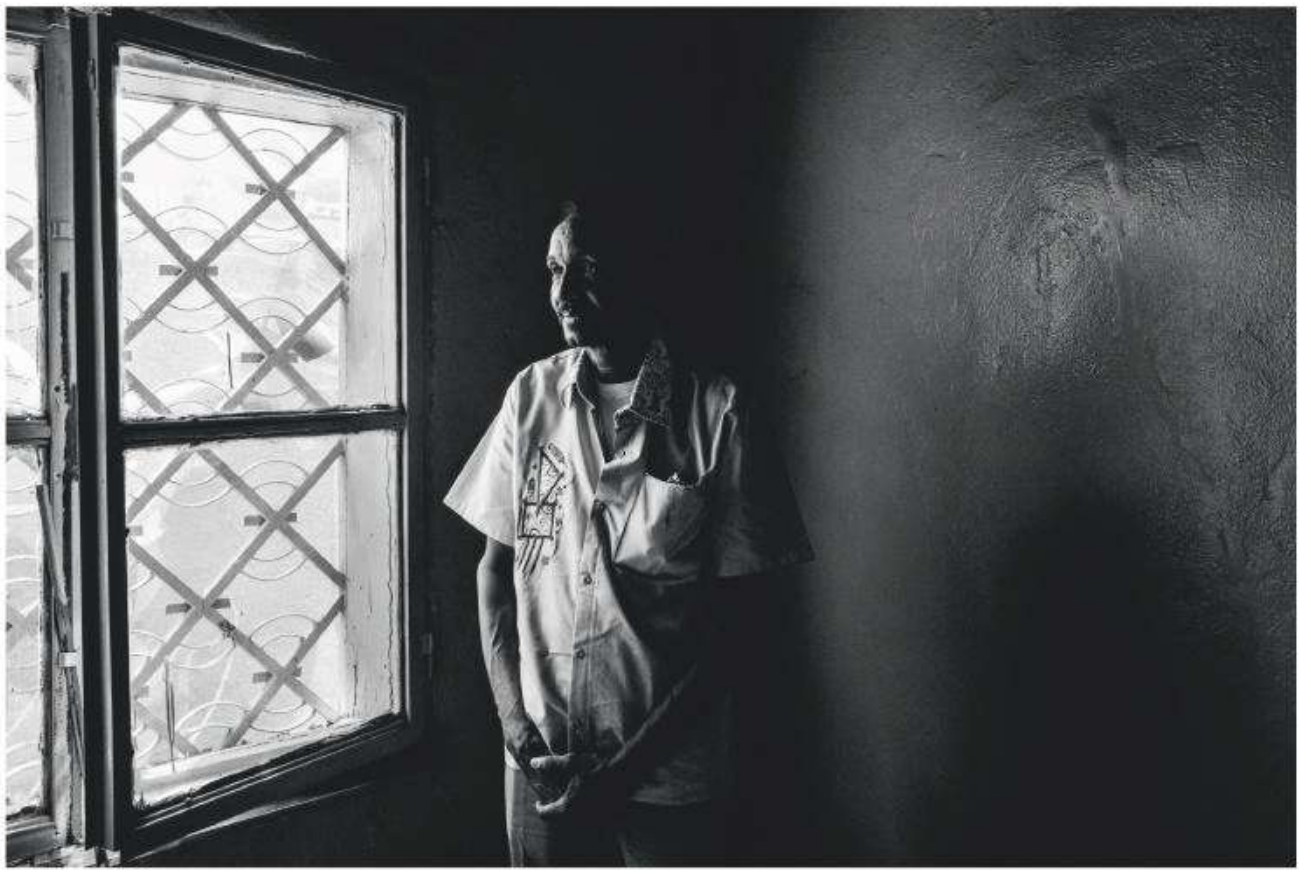
"Oh my God," Hama said quietly, rubbing his chin. "People are saying that the mayor of Banibangou has been killed in an ambush." Banibangou is a municipality in northern Tillabéri, near the Mali border. A local self-defense militia led by the mayor had set out on patrol the previous morning; initial reports suggested that only a few members had returned. Both men had met the mayor before—Hama while on assignment, and Diallo while investigating a case of murdered herders.

Diallo scrolled through his phone and shook his head. It takes hours for accurate information to filter out of Tillabéri, a territory comprising some thirty-nine thousand square miles where cell phone reception is often non-existent. No one yet knew how many men had been killed. The closest Nigerien Army base to Banibangou—which also housed U.S. Special Forces—was eighty-eight miles away, in the town of Ouallam. By the time news of the attack reached the base, it was too late. This had been the case in hundreds of other raids, kidnappings, and lootings that occurred in Tillabéri over the previous two years. Neither the Nigerien military nor the foreign troops stationed in the country seemed capable of quelling the violence.

"Excuse me," Diallo said, rising from his chair, his face illuminated by his smartphone. "I have to make some calls."

When the United States pulled its troops out of Afghanistan in August 2021, President Joe Biden promised that the fight against terrorism would continue, albeit in a different form. "We have what's called over-the-horizon capabilities," he said, "which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground—or very few, if needed." The model he proposed—continual aerial surveil-

Top: Water for sale in Agadez. Bottom: A view of Agadez from a plane



lance, drone strike capacity, and limited troops—is the same strategy the United States had already embraced in Niger to combat the incursion of militants from Mali, which, in addition to ISGS, includes one of its chief adversaries, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

The American military presence in the region dates to the early Nineties, when U.S. European Command (EUCOM), its activities diminished following the collapse of the Soviet Union, began looking to the Sahel as a new theater in which to operate. U.S. intelligence started monitoring the armed groups emerging out of the civil war in Algeria, but major resources were not allocated to the Sahel until the years following 9/11. The vast Sahara Desert, argued EUCOM, was an ideal breeding ground for extremism.

In November 2002, the State Department, in partnership with EUCOM, embarked on a terrorism prevention campaign in the Sahel that focused on Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger, although no serious international terrorist threat existed. U.S. Marines and Special Forces began training national armies and monitoring militant groups. There was little oversight. William Jordan, a former State Department intelligence official, described a chaotic atmosphere in which local rebel groups were conflated with terrorist organizations. He recalled an incident in 2003 when U.S. forces narrowly avoided bombing an encampment of Malian civilians that EUCOM had wrongly insisted was linked to a terrorist group. In 2005, Congress authorized the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, a five-year, $500 million initiative that expanded train-and-equip programs to five additional countries. Two years later, the American military created a separate Africa Command (AFRICOM) to centralize operations on the continent, and doubled down on a strategy in the Sahel that seemingly ignored the growing hostility between state officials and rural citizens, many of whom felt neglected by autocratic governments that struggled to deliver services in remote areas.

The NATO-backed killing of the Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 only exacerbated these tensions. Small arms and weapons flowed to neighboring countries, and fighters from the Sahel who had been working for Qaddafi returned home. In Mali, they helped launch a rebellion among the Tuaregs in the north that quickly disintegrated into a fight for power among numerous factions, including Islamist militant groups intent on imposing sharia law. At the urging of the Malian government, France, which has long-standing economic interests in Sahelian uranium, declared war in January 2013, eventually sending in several thousand troops.

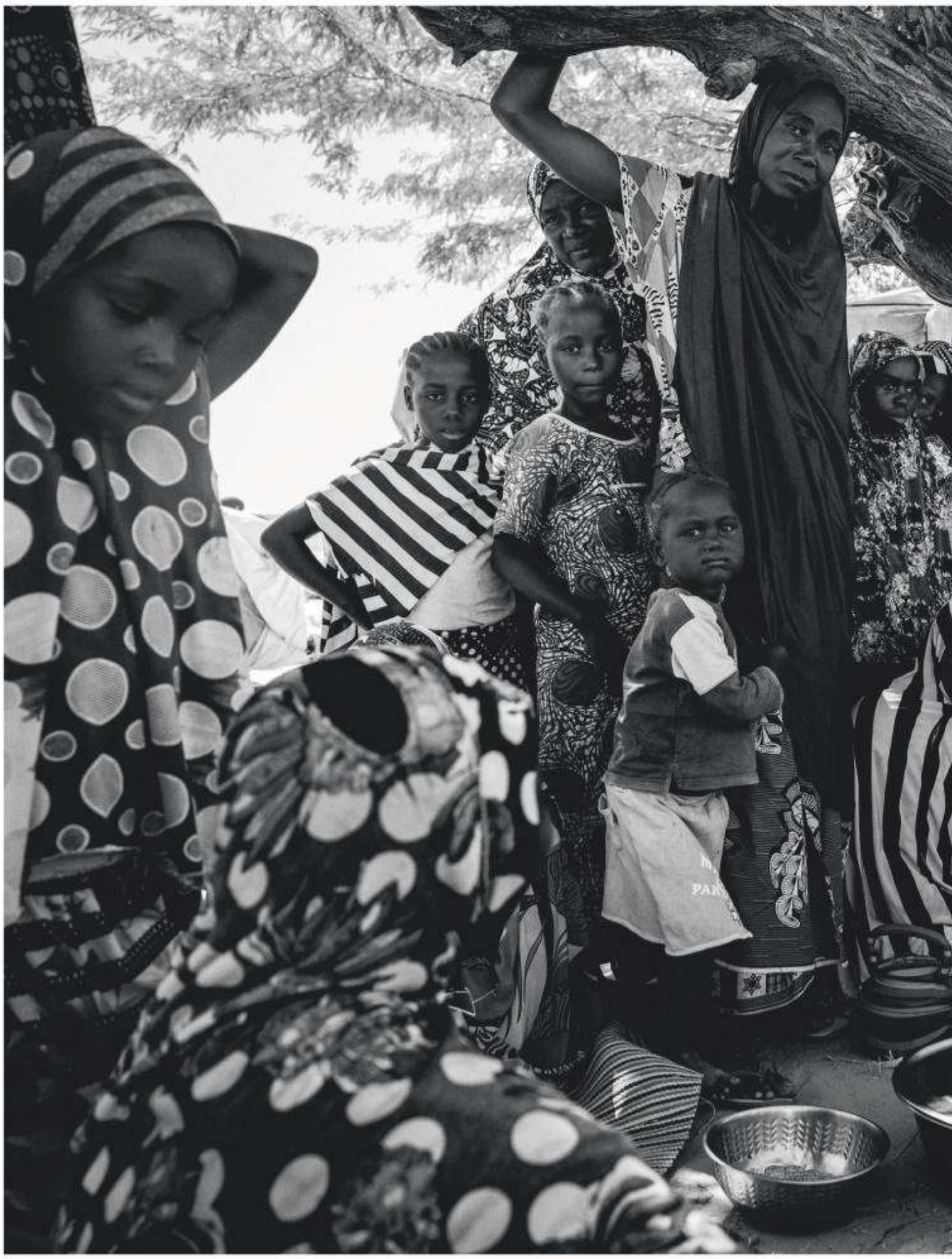
The Americans, meanwhile, found that the neighboring Nigeriens were eager to prevent the conflict from spilling over the border. In February 2013, Obama notified Congress that he was deploying around a hundred military personnel to Niger. Since then, the country has received more than $500 million for defense spending from the U.S. government. From its hub in Niamey, which includes an armed-drone base, the American military has transported French troops, shared intelligence with French ground forces, and assisted with drone strikes in Mali, while also conducting its own counterterrorism operations. As of December 2021, 831 U.S. military personnel were stationed across Niger. In addition to the drone base in Niamey, there are

Top: Boubacar Diallo. Bottom: Young men working at a gold mine near Agadez

two others: one in the desert city of Agadez, and another, operated by the CIA, in the remote outpost of Dirkou. The Agadez base is one of the most expensive installations ever built by the U.S. Air Force.

Despite these interventions, violence in the region is intensifying. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, a record 1,460 Nigeriens died in conflict last year, 727 of them civilians. Military coups have destabilized Burkina Faso and Mali, from which French troops withdrew in August. (Their operations were relocated to Niger.) Over five million people are displaced across the Sahel, and a food crisis sparked by drought and exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine is widespread. Almost half the children in Niger do not have enough to eat.

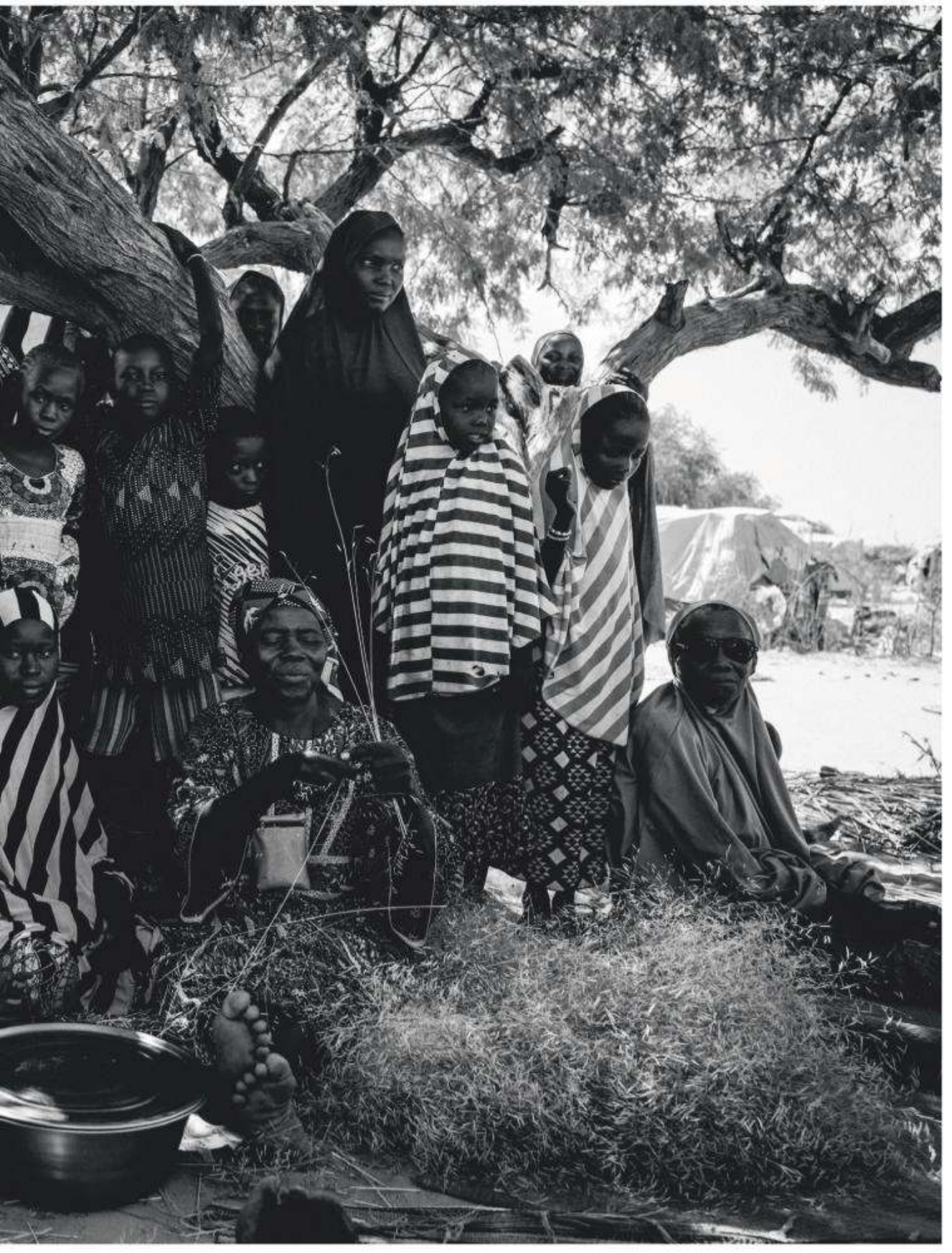
AFRICOM, meanwhile, continues to defend its approach as a "light footprint," and argues that its investment in the Sahel is necessary to protect American economic interests and combat the growing influence of China and Russia. Yet few details have been released about its operations, which show no sign of ending. As I read reports about the construction of armed-drone bases and listened to press briefings at the AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, my questions about the reality of the military's "over-the-horizon" capabilities grew. On a chilly October morning, I flew from Berlin to Istanbul, then boarded a flight to Niamey behind a group of weathered American men in cargo pants and boots, who I assumed were military contractors. We landed near midnight in an air-conditioned airport, empty except for security officials and soldiers. I stepped outside, suddenly enveloped by the heat, and found Hama waiting there, waving his red baseball cap in the deserted parking lot.



The day after the attack on the Banibangou convoy, details began to emerge: the organized civilian militia, consisting of some eighty-four Djerma men on motorcycles and headed by the mayor of Banibangou, had gone out in the morning on patrol, reportedly intending to detain Peul herders. Around 9:30 AM, near the small village of Adab-Dab, the group was intercepted and overwhelmed by ISGS fighters. Sixty-nine men from Banibangou were killed.

The U.S. Embassy in Niamey released a statement condemning the attack: "We maintain our commitment and partnership to the Nigerien people and the Nigerien armed forces as we seek to eliminate violent extremists and their godless ideology from the region." The Nigerien president Mohamed Bazoum declared two days of national mourning, and took a helicopter to Banibangou, where he addressed the villagers. "If you think that you can provide your own defense, that's legitimate," he said. "But the one who must ensure your defense and on whom you must rely is the state."

It was difficult to take the president seriously. Between 2011 and 2019, Niger spent $875 million on defense, but an audit found that $320 million in contracts had been inflated or awarded through rigged bidding processes. Beyond the corruption, Nigerien soldiers have conducted mass arrests, and in some cases extrajudicial executions, of Peul herders during counterterrorism sweeps. The National Human Rights Commission, which relies heavily on information from Diallo's organization, the Council of North Tillabéri Herders, found that Nigerien soldiers had disappeared or killed 136 civilians in Tillabéri



in 2020. Seventy-two bodies were later found in hastily dug mass graves; many were handcuffed and blindfolded. To date, no soldiers have been prosecuted.

In Niamey, the conflict in the borderlands seems to drive much of the local economy. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, the top import to Niger is rice, followed by "explosive ammunition," a category that includes "bombs, grenades, torpedoes, mines, missiles." In addition to the Americans, Niamey hosts some one thousand French soldiers, as well as detachments from Algeria, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain; a UN peacekeeping force for Mali; the European Union's security attachés; and soldiers from the G5 Sahel, a joint initiative among Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger. (Mali withdrew this summer.) Many of these foreign troops, focused on a nebulous mix of counter-insurgency and border-control efforts, slip in and out of the city in armored vehicles. Often, they stay in new, gated hotels near the Kennedy Roundabout. At the Radisson Blu hotel's New York Restaurant, military contractors and diplomats gather around the pool to sip fluorescent cocktails. One night, I caught a glimpse of Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, as a convoy whisked her away from the plush hotel to a UN Security Council event. The then commander of AFRICOM, General Stephen Townsend, was also in town, meeting with the French. In the garden of an Italian bistro designed to resemble a desert dwelling, I overheard a man tell his companion, who worked for the UN, that he was with the German special forces, who were here doing "intelligence gathering" and "some advising."

Three days after the attack, I stopped by the office of General Mahamadou Abou Tarka, who oversees Niger's High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace. I wanted to ask him how all the foreign militaries buzzing around Niamey had affected the conflicts near the border. Tarka, wearing a taupe uniform with a green beret, was dismissive. "We have, what, twenty of the Italian military training our people, or we have thirty-five Spaniards training the gendarmerie?" To Tarka, the number of foreign troops was negligible. Far more pressing, he said, was the need to build up their own forces. The government had roughly thirty-five thousand troops to control an expanse of territory that Tarka estimated would require closer to one hundred and fifty thousand.

"You know, here is not Afghanistan," he said over the hum of a fan. "We are a functioning state, we have national armed forces, and we were not created by the Americans. Our government is a legitimate one. That's why we are asking for help with helicopters and logistics. We want military fortresses on the borders—France is helping us do that. America, not yet." Yet toward the end of our interview, Tarka seemed skeptical that any amount of resources would be enough to stabilize the country. He even suggested that some Nigeriens should learn to live under terrorist groups. "It's better to pay a *zakat* and live in dignity than to live in a refugee camp and become a beggar," he said. "Of course, it's better if we can offer security. But the military of Niger can never secure this big country."

The United States maintains that its mission in the Sahel is to promote development and diplomacy, but as I spoke to more people in Niamey, it was difficult to discern a coherent strategy. Diplomacy seemed subsumed by security. Years ago, Diallo

A woman makes brooms while seeking shade with other internally displaced persons at a camp on the outskirts of Ouallam

had received conflict-mediation training from the State Department. But recently, the department's focus shifted to local police forces. USAID funds humanitarian programs across the country, responding to acute crises, but there is little emphasis on addressing governance and human rights abuses, and several aid agencies told me their access to the borderlands was limited by the government. When AFRICOM offered me the opportunity to speak with the commander of the U.S. Special Operations Task Force for North and West Africa, who was visiting from Chad, I hoped that he could offer some insight into the military's long-term objectives.

Four nights after the attack, I headed to Air Base 101 with the photographer Nicole Tung. The reporting parameters were strict: the commander could only be identified by rank, no photos were allowed, and we were denied a general tour. The base, the first stop for most Special Forces troops stationed in the region, is located next to Niamey's small international airport, near a neighborhood whose houses are jammed so tightly together it's known as the Netherlands. Street vendors hawked plump watermelons and fiery peppers. Young Nigerien soldiers manned the complex's gated entrance, where a Special Forces liaison picked us up in a black SUV, then guided us through a maze of barricades. We passed a contingent of the Italian Army, who we were told were renting land from the United States. During their downtime, the driver said, they cook homemade pasta.

We arrived at the Special Forces unit of the base, which consisted of a series of non-descript containers next to an empty, open-air bar with a colorful sign that read, WELCOME TO NIAMI! We surrendered our phones and entered an immaculate, windowless beige chamber. There we met the task force commander, a reticent and trim, middle-aged man in uniform, and the Advanced Operating Base commander for Niger, who wore a camo baseball cap and looked a bit younger and more relaxed.

I asked them why, despite its sophisticated aerial surveillance, the United States was seemingly incapable of predicting attacks like the one in Banibangou. "We just can't look everywhere all at the same time," said the task force commander. "That is, unfortunately, not a realistic expectation." His counterpart jumped up and fetched a map of Tillabéri, which he spread out on the table to illustrate the distances between villages.

The task force commander emphasized that U.S. Special Forces are not allowed "anywhere close" to the front lines. "We train [Nigerien troops] at the tactical level, and then enhance their capabilities once they go out and execute operations, based off intel collected both on the U.S. and the Nigerien side," the AOB commander said.

I pressed them on what such remote supervision looked like in practice, but the task force commander refused to go into more detail. Later, the AOB commander told me that the U.S. military had seeded the idea for a large-scale operation conducted by Niger and Burkina Faso that took months of planning and high-level coordination. He did not name it, but I surmised that this was an operation called Taanli 1, which, according to an enthusiastic press release from the Burkina Faso government, "neutralized 100 terrorists" affiliated with JNIM. There was no press release from AFRICOM.

In the conference room, I asked question after question about AFRICOM's strategy in Niger, but gleaned very little. As for the allegations of extrajudicial killings of Peuls and other abuses by

Day laborers haul gourds off delivery boats on the Niger River

Nigerien soldiers, the task force commander agreed they were a concern, but assured me that "Niger actually does a good job of investigating." When I asked if military responses to violent extremism could ever end the attacks in Tillabéri, the commander paused. The men looked at each other and laughed awkwardly. "That's a good question," the AOB commander said. "The security efforts help buy space and time to try to have other development efforts, or new governance efforts," explained the other. It was unclear what reforms the United States was actually willing to support.

I had also requested to visit Air Base 201, the drone site in Agadez, but the Air Force did not like the idea. So one evening, I headed downtown to the distressed Grand Hotel, where I met an investigative journalist from Agadez named Ibrahim Diallo (no relation to Boubacar). His news organization, *Aïr Info*, documented the crash of three armed drones in the northern desert, near the Libyan border. At night, said Diallo, the base pollutes the sky with light and the sound of buzzing aircraft.

When 201 opened, he went on a site visit, but the Air Force refused to answer most of his questions. The Americans are seen in town only on occasion, but rumors of their presence abound: how they dig tunnels under cover of night, and use their planes to smuggle gold out of the country. The speculation, Diallo said quietly, pointed to a growing distrust of the U.S. military presence. "The Americans don't have friends. Just like any other army, they only have interests."

Diallo worried that the increasing number of foreign soldiers in Niger was steering the country toward ethnic conflict. "All the traditional mechanisms to resolve conflicts—they are putting them aside. War becomes the only solution," he said. Soon, he worried, "Peuls will be persecuted everywhere. They'll be killed. It's started already, but I hope that I'm wrong." (A few months later, Diallo's fears were confirmed when mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group began fighting in Mali alongside the army; on one "counter-terrorism operation" in the town of Moura, they are believed to have massacred some three hundred people, predominantly Peuls.)

The Nigerien government has taken tentative steps toward negotiating with the insurgent groups, including ISGS, and many other African countries and regional institutions see mediation as essential to ending the spiraling conflict. But the French and Americans remain firmly opposed to dialogue. "I heard the Americans won't support negotiations, but why not?" asked Boubacar Diallo. "They did in Afghanistan."

I understood Diallo's point, but the two conflicts do not strike me as neatly analogous. More than two thousand American service members died in Afghanistan. Public opinion had soured on the occupation, and though many in the military wanted to stay, politicians were adamant that it was time to leave. In Niger, there is no such pressure. The over-the-horizon approach means that there have been few American deaths, and little media attention. Far from scrutiny, the war on terror marches mindlessly on.

An hour-and-a-half drive from Niamey is the town of Ouallam. On its outskirts sits a large Nigerien military base shared with a U.S. Special Forces team. Because of the base, Nigeriens consider Ouallam to be a safe haven, and it hosts a growing camp for Nigeriens forced from their homes, as well as one for refugees from Mali. I wanted to get a good look at the Special Forces' day-to-day operations and hear directly from some of the estimated hundred thousand displaced people within Tillabéri.

The Nigerien government prohibits foreigners from leaving the capital without an armed escort, claiming that the security risk is too high. Conveniently, the Nigerien national guard was available for hire, at five hundred dollars a day. Hama, Tung, and I, along with a translator I'll call Mounkaila, left Niamey early in the morning and drove to an exit checkpoint, where two Land Cruisers were waiting for us, each filled with seven men carrying AK-47s. A Nigerien official who worked at the camp insisted on joining us in his own car.

We sped through the countryside, glimpsing the occasional gas station or school. The land was pocked with short, leafy *garbeye* trees, the sky smoke-blue and cloudless. Mounkaila, who is Djerma, pointed out clusters of thatch Peul huts that serve as temporary settlements; several times a year, the Peuls pack them up and move. As the convoy passed, several people walking or working on the side of the road instinctively held up their hands in surrender or dropped to the ground.

The signs of development organizations heralded our arrival in Ouallam: UNHCR, UNICEF, GIZ, IOM. We stopped in for a customary visit at the mayor's office, then abandoned our armed escort and proceeded in a beat-up red Corolla to meet the Special Forces. The American portion of the

Construction machinery near Air Base 201

base was fairly simple, with a few small buildings separated from the road by a swath of gravel and a low barbed-wire fence. In an empty field sat two helicopters that the U.S. Army uses to evacuate wounded Nigerien soldiers to 101. At the gate, we were met by the attachment commander, a clean-cut thirty-one-year-old with cropped brown hair, who ushered us through. It was around 9 AM, and some Green Berets had just begun a session training members of the elite 1st Expeditionary Force of Niger in counterinsurgency tactics.

In an open-air classroom with a blackboard, a few dozen Nigerien soldiers were being instructed in how to locate and dismantle IEDs. Next door was a firing range, where exercises were under way. A Nigerien translator delivered the instructions of an American weapons specialist in French. "You get a good site picture, get a shot. At your own pace, take your time." Eight Nigerien soldiers formed a line, raised their rifles, and focused on some distant cardboard figures. *Pop, pop, pop.* Sand shot up from the ground. The air smelled vaguely of bleach.

As the men paused to take aim again, I asked the commander and two other soldiers whether the United States was succeeding in preparing the Nigerien Army to better anticipate attacks by insurgents. "It's hard to know where they are at all times," the commander explained, offering us earplugs. "Four motorcycles will show up with eight dudes and start shooting; that's hard to anticipate." During the rainy season, he said, the land becomes a swamp. In a truck, it can take three days to move twelve miles. The Americans could train the Nigeriens in combat techniques, but they lacked the ability to move as quickly as their adversaries.

Target practice concluded around 10 AM, and we strolled around the outpost, which consisted of sleeping quarters, a small canteen (lunch special: pulled pork), an outdoor gym and training facilities, and a headquarters. Parked at the entrance to the office were five armored troop vehicles for the Americans and a few Nigerien pickup trucks with machine guns clipped to their roofs. A sign by the door listed the names of the four American soldiers who had been killed in the 2017 Tongo Tongo ambush, in which ISGS militants attacked a convoy of American and Nigerien troops. "The threat was unknown at the time," the commander said as we entered. "We've gained a lot more situational awareness of the area, we know the threat better." On his shoulder was a pin with the American and Nigerien flags fused together.

The Americans told me that they liked Ouallam, that it had a "family atmosphere," and that the work was rewarding. "I would come back here in a heartbeat," said one soldier. In the back room, a small kitchen was crammed with Krispy Kreme coffee, lemon energy gels, and jars of Nutella. A game of Settlers of Catan was set up on the coffee table.

We climbed up to the roof and looked out at the base. Next to the American sector were tents for the French and the Canadian liaisons, and in the distance was a gleaming row of new barracks for the African soldiers participating in a State Department–funded training program for the UN stabilization mission in Mali. Better living quarters were supposedly arriving soon for the U.S. troops as well. "We recognize we're not going to fix the Sahel in six months," one soldier told me. "There's the metaphor of pushing a boulder up a mountain."

The soldiers in Ouallam seemed genuine in their desire to support the Nigerien Army, but it was clear that no one could see an end goal. The

Top: Nigerien soldiers escort journalists on the road between Niamey and Ouallam. Bottom: Nigerien soldiers participate in target practice

U.S. military leadership knows that building bigger and better armies will not end conflict in the Sahel. But in the absence of a directive to prioritize non-military solutions, the same failed strategy churns forward. The presence of so many international forces, all with their own objectives, compounds this quagmire, emboldening the Nigerien military instead of strengthening government accountability. Despite AFRICOM's protestations to the contrary, there was nothing light about their footprint.

We left the base and decided to head to the nearby displaced-persons camp. As we started the car, the Nigerien aid official demanded a fee: twenty dollars for gas, and an additional thirty dollars for entry into the camp. A loud argument ensued. Eventually, Hama paid the fee. The official hopped in his car, waved, and sped back toward the capital.

The camp was a cluster of reed-and-plastic huts on the edge of town. As far as I could tell, there were no services being offered. Inside one of the huts, Mounkaila and I met Mari, a thirty-five-year-old Djerma woman, who was soaking rice while her children played. A few days ago, she said, she was returning to her house after collecting water when she heard the sound of bikes. She had long glimpsed groups of motorcycles on the horizon. Now she watched as armed insurgents descended on the village. They picked her husband out of the crowd and ordered him to lead the cows out of town. When her husband disappeared from sight, Mari assumed he was dead. As her neighbors prepared to flee, grabbing only what they could carry, Mari gathered her five children. "It was everybody for themselves," she said, leaning forward, beaded bracelets jingling on her wrist. "Some people even left their children behind." A few hours later, her husband returned. He did not know why, but the men had spared his life. It had taken the family a week to reach Ouallam. More were on the way.

Mari had received little to no aid from the Nigerien government, or from the many international humanitarian organizations I had seen on the road. "Some people" had come to collect their names, but she did not know who they were. Locals had provided rice and water, but it was not enough. At night, the hut grew freezing. "I'm hungry," Mari told me as one of her children crawled across her lap. "My life depends on God."

Next door we found Seyou, a fifty-five-year-old grandmother in a plaid abaya. I could make out the shape of someone wrapped in thick blankets on the floor. This was Seyou's daughter-in-law, Mamou. She was sick. They had left Banibangou together, walking by night, and when they arrived in Ouallam, Mamou had come down with a fever. Despite the pulsing heat, she felt icy. Mamou's son, a toddler, crawled over to her, pushing his feet up against her side. Seyou had spent her whole life in Banibangou, which, she told me, meant "water of peace" in Djerma. "We don't know if we're going back," she said.

Something moved under the blanket, startling us. Seyou reached under the comforter and pulled out a baby by the foot. This was her grandson Shamsouna. He had been born just six days earlier. "They were shooting while she was trying to deliver the baby," Seyou said matter-of-factly. "He was born the day of the attack." Mounkaila halted mid-translation; struggling to maintain his composure, he stepped out of the tent. Seyou cradled Shamsouna as his eyes adjusted to the light, his face scrunched in repose or pain, I could not tell which. ■

Seyou holds her six-day-old grandson, Shamsouna, at a camp for internally displaced persons on the outskirts of Ouallam

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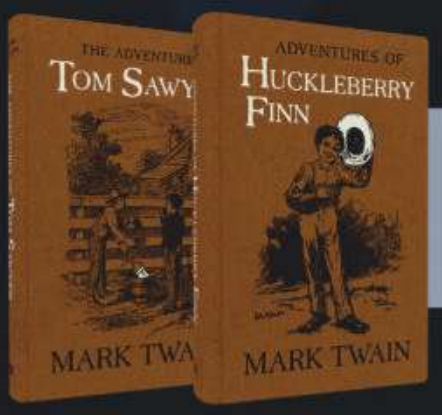

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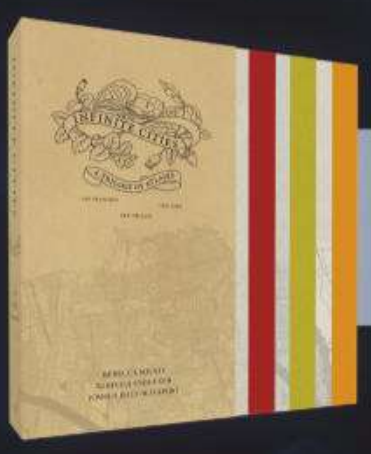

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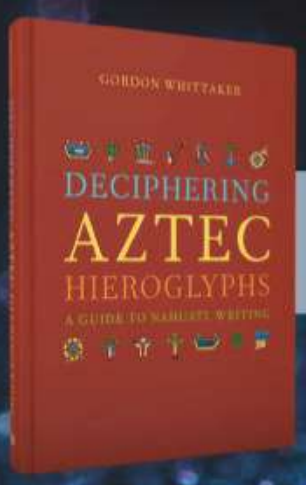

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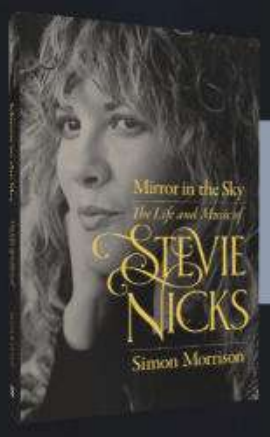

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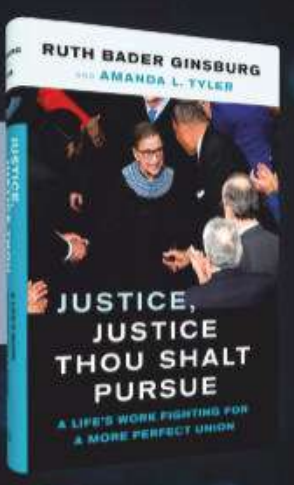
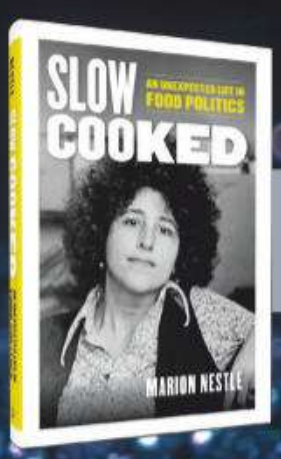


Ruth Bader Ginsburg's last book is a curation of her own legacy, tracing the long history of her work for gender equality.



In this personal memoir, Marion Nestle reflects on her late-in-life career as a world-renowned food politics expert.

The Morning Ritual, by Arghavan Khosravi © The artist. Courtesy Stems Gallery, Brussels; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York City; and Kavi Gupta, Chicago

HOW IT STARTED, HOW IT'S GOING

By Rosa Alcalá

I rose from sleep one night, my back a trouble tense, and rode in reverse from the idiopathic
to what I believe were the glories

each scene an indulgence of a body I possessed.

One was carried above other bodies, hovered over them, was weightless.

Another threaded itself, a quarter of two couples, in intricate maneuvers. Switched dance partners easily.

Or stumbled with a stranger to his place. I watched over her
waited for the sun to come up

and while I was looking out the window
she left, became older

went to sleep next to her (our) dying mother.

Together we listened to the rattle become more foreign than any accent
until it was pure accent, meaning

inaudible.

It took so little time to get from the walk-up to the hospital.

I was trying to write a book about my mother
and the bodies were trying to get away from her
seeking pleasure.

With my contested middle-aged body I carried them away from pleasure to this place,
to map where fear begins
for girls, for women.

Rosa Alcalá is the author of four poetry collections, including YOU, *which is forthcoming from Coffee House Press.*

What I mean to say is that this book is still about my mother

that in the absence of her I mothered myself all over again with worry, which is how I mother.
I spoke to myself, the only recourse when you're
invisible.

But then I heard someone walking behind me, when I was a body that others followed.

A woman was shoved into a car at the shadowy mouth of a parking garage and the eyes that didn't know what they were witnessing at five are the eyes I look through now.

The lessons are cumulative, the fear.

I must have known that being my own witness was itself a risk: how can I see events unfolding when
the body is completely symptomatic
of other bodies, including
its own.

The problem with memory is that only words can re-create it for others.

Each word its own past and desire
for a future.

Each word, each sentence, a fragment.

And how do you untangle from the telling the motives of the speaker?

Isn't the second person a form of hiding? Why not just use the I?

My daughter said, hugging me, I am a barnacle and if you remove me I will die.

It's taken me two decades to devise a good retort for each of the slights. You'd be amazed at
all the improvements in bathroom lighting, the ugly
remark before the mirror

diffused then clarified

Opposite page: *Curiosity,* by Arghavan Khosravi © The artist. Courtesy König Galerie, Berlin; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York City; and Kavi Gupta, Chicago

the lover's words fading with the steam

to let the book appear.

A book ordered in prose and point of view. To witness my body as a distant thing that gathers itself over time to become whole.

I wrote sentences that don't break. I sought narrative logic, to order the mess of memory.

At times I wanted to mistake myself for another and say, Sorry, you aren't who I was looking for. Sorry to bother you.

The choices were not choices, the billboards were instructive and censorious as I traveled to retrieve each self and found along the way a daughter. I didn't use a map

and yet there she was in a heightened territory with my mother and her mother
before her

other mothers and other daughters.

I am weary but know now my fear is an accurate map, even if memory is less than reliable.

And the lessons were never somewhere else, but in the hunch
of the shoulders before the screen of something I'd written and
erased a million times before.

The backspace would like me to tap out the soreness of the telling until the telling is gone and can move freely.

When I get to the ocean, I promise I'll submit a bikini top that never did much
for the soul.

For now, I leave for my daughter this book as manual, as heirloom, like my mother's wedding dress in the unreachable part of my closet, both glamorous

and warning. ■

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CORNER CLUB CATHEDRAL COCOON

Audiophilia and its discontents

By Sasha Frere-Jones

My wife, Heidi, and I put up a string of Christmas lights early in the pandemic. They were LEDs that slowly flashed different colors, hung along a copper wire that stretched above our windows. As 2020 unfolded and we binged shows like *Le Bureau*, the lights made for a cheerful horizon. In the small East Village living room that became our world, it was a good trick. Before we stopped having people over, friends would comment on the vibe in our house. In the absence of company, vibe was all we had.

Right before the holidays, I discovered an Instagram account called @jazz_kissa, run by a photographer and music fan named Katsumasa Kusunose. Patrons of jazz *kissas* (cafés) typically drink coffee or alcohol and keep their voices low, sometimes reading books or comics as they listen. There are around six hundred such cafés in Japan—a number Kusunose and a few other fans carefully tabulated a few years ago, and which he believes has not significantly changed. Kusunose has been photographing these places since 2014, and his pictures became a ballast for me. The average jazz café is small, about the size of our living room, though a few are big enough to accommodate perhaps fifty people. Their audio gear generally looks older, and, even though I knew nothing about it, I decided it all sounded exquisite. A speculative leap, but I needed it.

Dim, atmospheric lights are not uncommon in jazz cafés, though most

Sasha Frere-Jones lives in New York.

Illustration by Adam Simpson. Source photograph of a jazz *kissa* in Okayama, Japan, taken by Katsumasa Kusunose and included in his book *Jazz Kissa 2015–2019*. Courtesy the artist

don't look like our LED string. Sometimes the aquamarine glow of a McIntosh amp's front panel is the only accent. There's generally lots of wood, rarely any chrome or aluminum. If there is ever a human figure in Kusunose's photographs, it is a man, usually older, laying a phonograph needle on a record or standing behind a pour-over coffee setup. I imagined that the stereos produced an otherworldly sound, and it did not seem unreasonable to think that these small spaces and our East Village safe haven were linked. The proprietors had made decisions about what mattered and what could be done with the limited space. Their choices emphasized an experience that would be both communal and quiet. Silence and sound at the same time appealed to me. What little we could control was right in front of us. We definitely didn't have any of this gear, though. Our modest stereo would have been no better than a midrange system back in the Nineties, when it was new.

A friend who knew of my obsession told me about another Instagram account, @_listening_room_. Someone was posting photo spreads from what seemed to be mostly Japanese audiophile magazines and translating the accompanying text. "Listening rooms" are essentially residential jazz cafés, though they are agnostic as to genre. You see enormous home stereo setups in these photos, gear from another era piled high in living rooms. The owner of the system is sometimes there, perched on a couch. I didn't know then what it cost to outfit a listening room, but it was obviously not a budget undertaking. The combined practices of listening and reflecting in this kind of space made me think of the rooms as miniature cathedrals, places where anybody could enter and connect with a larger force through sound.

I had begun thinking about such larger connections and their stakes in my own life, and what writing could and could not do. Being trapped was good for these thoughts. I've spent my life making music and also writing about it, without regret. If a piece of criticism is less sharp than it could be, no matter; the reporting could be of some use later. In luckier instances, I might discover how a particular piece of music works and illuminate some of the spiritual connections available to a sympathetic listener. But looking at these speakers and reading about how people talked about them began to make me feel uneasy about my own work. Not often, but more than once, I have ranked pieces of music as if there were some accepted metric to which these rankings correspond. (There is not.) I have, under no duress, posted end-of-year "Best Of" lists, even in years when I was not paid to do so. These impulses began to seem like firm examples of scientism, a spiritual impoverishment in which one's feelings and opinions hide behind a façade of false exactitude. I was just really into "Crazy in Love"—it was in no way, shape, or form the "best" song of 2003, because that is a nonsensical superlative, as is the idea that an album can be worth seven points out of ten.

When I started researching the individual components of these listening rooms, I encountered this language of bedroom expertise, of an axiomatic surety based on an invisible axiom. Certain speakers delivered sound that was "detailed" or "transparent," whereas others did not. What was the detail being retrieved? Was it not being created in that moment by that machine? What was the referent for something being transparent? Transparent in comparison to what?

I've been making records since I was a teenager, and at no point have I been involved in making a record that reproduced an event from everyday life, just as your favorite novel is (with rare exceptions) not a transcript of a conversation. You shape the material you have to make it do what you need it to. The idea of anything being "natural" or "accurate" in the field of recorded music made no sense to me. I do know that the word "accuracy" in the context of audio means reproducing the master recording faithfully, but this always seemed like an imaginary pursuit. Who, other than the artist, would know how a master recording was supposed to sound? More to the point, as that artist, I've never been entirely sure that I know what a final release does or should sound like. An album always feels like a rock thrown over a fence. We have an idea of where it might land, because we tested it on car stereos and fancy setups and phones. But we don't really know, and that's part of why we do it.

Audiophiles often talk about what people will miss if they don't have a specific kind of gear, as if recorded music were a fragile code requiring elaborate reconstruction. As much as I found myself opening up to the idea of building a good sound system over time, I still felt at odds with most audiophiles, or at least their representatives in the press. I find recordings to be immensely sturdy. Something as potent as Miles Davis's *In a Silent Way* creates a different reality even when played through an iPhone or the ten-year-old Bluetooth speaker we have in the bathroom (which is busted and seems only to reproduce sound events in the bass register). As much as I want a pair of expensive hi-fi speakers jammed into our tiny living room, they would probably not be as useful as the Wonderboom Bluetooth speaker I bought last September for a hundred bucks. Am I listening to Johnny Clarke in the kitchen? Well, he's coming along to the shower too. Sound is dependent on its context, so how could its quality be determined with any sort of precision?

I met Jonathan Weiss in April 2021 at his loft in Dumbo, when a glossy magazine I hadn't heard of asked me to write some copy for a photo spread. Weiss is a bright-eyed man, fifty-eight, with a head of thick white hair and an appealing intensity, but he was not the model. The photographer was coming to shoot the speakers made by his company, Oswalds Mill Audio (OMA). Its Imperia model, over six feet tall, is made up of two massive wooden horns held together by steel frames next to a woofer as big as a stove. These speakers look like a pair of military-grade butter churns, or crowd-control technology from the nineteenth century. I laughed when I saw them. According to a 2019 catalog, the pair costs roughly $452,200. (Weiss, who doesn't like to discuss the price of his products, declined to confirm whether this was still accurate.) The new OMA turntable, the K3, is a three-hundred-pound hulk cast in iron with a tonearm that looks like a min-

iature boom crane. It was on the October cover of *Stereophile* magazine, and the review was positive: Michael Fremer called it a "truly great audio product." The magazine listed the price at $360,000.

Unlike the tech bros burning through money both real and imagined, Weiss and the rest of the high-end audio cohort could at the very least drag their wares into the street and be of service, even though they are rarely thinking of the greater good. Gordon Gow of McIntosh Laboratory called this type of equipment "toys for insecure adults." It's not gear for the general population, and I would have left it alone if something hadn't rearranged me. I had a feeling that the jazz *kissa* might be hovering around us.

The Imperia speakers made a sound that was wide and vivid and full of dirty weight, the breath of an organism. When the audio critic Herb Reichert hears this quality in good speakers, he calls it "believable corporeality," which he says "has largely been missing from the experience of recordings since digital arrived." OMA has a less expensive division called Fleetwood Sound, and Reichert calls its DeVille model, listed at around $15,600, "one of the best small speakers" he has ever heard.

There are real physical differences between this older technology and the audio devices you can find in a Best Buy. Cheap new stuff is likely powered by a clutch of transistors driving small diaphragms that move a lot. By comparison, the older horn designs are very good at throwing sound while barely moving, partly because the music is being amplified by something called a compression driver—a thin metal diaphragm agitated by a magnet. The supersensitive horn-loaded speakers are driven by low-wattage amplifiers outfitted with single-ended triode vacuum tubes, the oldest and simplest of their kind.

The idea here is not complex: a signal moves from the source—a phonograph or CD player, say—to an efficient speaker, and along the way it experiences the fewest possible augmentations, the least amount of stress. The word "excursion" refers to how much a diaphragm has to move in order to produce sound. Those small speakers you find in Best Buy? They experience excursions up to a quarter of an inch, a violent amount of back and forth. By contrast, the diaphragms of compression drivers found in horn speakers move only a few micrometers. The horn is the most ancient amplifier, a physical sound-thrower that can transport a large air mass. Small movements excite its narrow end and large movements come out its wide end.

"These big horn systems—they're asleep," Reichert tells me. "The system is barely operating. It's adding energy in a relaxed and unstressed way." The sound feels like a physical emancipation, the music suddenly rising up and walking toward you. It is not a coincidence that horn-loaded speakers are sometimes the size of people. Weiss's loft is not a jazz café, but it is a kind of cathedral.

Before I left, I asked Weiss what had inspired him to get into this work. He mentioned Heidegger's essay on technology and Juni'chirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* and an obscure *Stereophile* article from 2000 called "God Is in the Nuances." It was written by Markus Sauer, an audiophile who reviewed and sold high-end equipment in Berlin. It's a winning cri de coeur, a reckoning with the fact that all of the time he spent considering measurements and specs had very little to do with why anybody would buy a stereo. "There is no easily ascertainable relation between component sound and emotional response," he wrote.

I found myself relating to Sauer. It is appealing to admit that you don't know what you're doing, while also reiterating that the project is worthwhile. There is nothing strange about spending a life immersed in recorded music and wanting to hear that music reproduced in an exceptional way. So why did it seem to lead to such an annoying milieu?

For most of my adult life, I believed in the implications of the phrase "non-stick pans": other pans must be unmanageably sticky. During the pandemic, as I began to want my own listening room and wrote every day across from a stove, I started to cook. I bought a Lodge cast-iron skillet that cost about forty dollars. It heats up quickly and evenly and can be

easily cleaned. Our non-stick pan, by comparison, sheds its coating, and the handle keeps coming unscrewed. This is like the history of audio gear. The cast iron was sufficient, but an imaginary quality—stickiness—was being "solved" by new technology like Teflon. The new gear is fine, and works well in a couple of settings, but seems largely like an unnecessary innovation.

One day, I brought Weiss a copy of *Comet Meta,* a record by David Grubbs and Taku Unami that features the sound of two electric guitars playing at relatively low volume. When we put the vinyl through his Imperia speakers, we heard the guitar lines ring and hang and interlock—and then something else happened. I felt a presence, as if someone had entered the room. The music had become a concrete experience. I don't mean that I could see the musicians, but that the people in the music, and of the music, were with me.

Modern American audio technology descends from equipment developed initially for movie theaters. In 1926, the Vitaphone system was designed by Western Electric for the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer.* The speaker was driven by a compression driver called the Western Electric 555, known also as the Loudspeaking Telephone. At the time, Western Electric was the manufacturing arm of Bell, and this equipment, rather than being sold, was only leased, the way that telephones once were. In the late Twenties, quality home audio was still decades away, no matter where you lived.

The world of domestic hi-fi audiophilia began to take shape after World War II. *Audio* magazine and *High Fidelity* magazine launched in 1947 and 1951, respectively. Home hi-fi manufacturers had emerged, along with LP records. For certain middle-class consumers, the hi-fi system became an essential locus of home entertainment. A Scottish engineer named D.T.N. Williamson published the schematic for a tube amplifier that was regarded for years as the standard for audio quality. An antitrust lawsuit forced Western Electric out of the audio business, and its speaker division was spun off into a company that eventually came to be known as Altec, which continued to make descendants of the horn-loaded speakers Western Electric introduced. Around the same time, a man named Paul W. Klipsch started a high-end speaker company in Arkansas. His signature product, the Klipschorn, was of the same family as the Western Electric gear and the first of its kind to be sold directly to American consumers. According to Jim Hunter, the program manager at the Klipsch Museum, Klipsch thought that high-end audio began with the Western Electric 555 driver. He was a fan of triode amplifiers, and believed in the pursuit of high efficiency and low distortion. A baseline for audio health was created by men who came up during the age of DIY crystal radio sets, when a music-making machine was something you could have only if you built it yourself.

While Americans had the money to excel as consumers, the Japanese became expert curators and repairmen. Faced with a weak postwar economy, music lovers in Japan preferred to repurpose gear rather than buy it new. In the late Fifties and early Sixties, Japanese movie houses gradually upgraded to locally made pro audio, and the older stuff made its way into surplus shops. The used gear became part of listening rooms and jazz cafés. Eventually, Japanese magazines like *MJ* began to document the horns and tubes community, complete with schematics and photographs.

Against my better judgment, I found myself becoming an outlet for the resentments and niche preoccupations of the people who make speakers. Despite their shared passion, this group does not a happy family make. The only two points of consensus for many are the Western Electric 555 driver and *Sound Practices,* an independent magazine started in 1992 by the anthropologist Joe Roberts. With this slim, well-designed zine, subtitled "The Journal for Audio Experimenters," Roberts endeavored to break away from the progress-fixated commercial audio world and, as its slogan put it, "look at things a little bit differently"—allowing a band of enthusiasts to delve deeply into the history of sound equipment. Reichert published his first piece there, long before he became an influential columnist for *Stereophile.* This cohort of audiophiles became central to what is now called the triode horn mafia—a term referring to the type of low-wattage amps and simple horn speakers the group favored.

Reichert had initially met fellow travelers through a stapled-together newsletter called *Audiomart,* published throughout the Eighties by Walt Bender, a sound aficionado based in Virginia. People who knew their onions looked there to hunt for vintage gear. The listings in *Audiomart* formed a breadcrumb trail for the triode horn crew. Most ended up working at, or wandering through, an audio store called fi, in SoHo. *Sound Practices* had the reach, but the store was where the players wired their ideas into reality. In a 2017 blog post, one admirer described its owner Don Garber modifying a tube amplifier: "Every time he made it simpler, it sounded better." This is the triode horn credo.

Reichert and other *Audiomart* people (including the filmmaker Vincent Gallo) spread the Roberts gospel, a key principle of which was that recovering old technology was the key to the future of the field. One early *Sound Practices* article featured a writer building the classic Williamson amp design with newer tubes and recording the performance results. Another sang the praises of the Western Electric 555, which is still selling in the high four figures on eBay, with most potential buyers bidding in yen or won.

Reichert describes Roberts as a "puppet master," someone "more comfortable behind the scenes." I found him in September 2021, when he was preparing to move from Washington to Philadelphia. When we finally got onto a video call, he cleaned a layer of schmutz from his computer camera. We were eighteen months into the pandemic and this was his first Zoom.

"I hide from people," he explained.

After we talked a few times, Roberts told me that he prefers email, and our correspondence moved on to the question of what is and what isn't a good musical sound. Or maybe we talked about good-sounding music. It wasn't always clear to me. There is a push-pull in this group. It's hard to tell who is doing it right when, according to any two of them, everyone

is doing it wrong. Roberts and other enthusiasts I spoke to—several of whom reject the term "audiophile"—remind me of poets who have little access to money or prestige and fight one another with a particularly vigilant acrimony, though their professed goal is spiritual or intellectual elevation.

One of the disagreements concerns how sound should be discussed in the first place. For Roberts, the rhetorical slide away from reason that took place in the Eighties was in part because of a writer named Harry Pearson, who died in 2014 and extolled the idea that reproducing some definitive, objectively accurate sound was the ultimate aim. Pearson's magazine, *The Absolute Sound*, is still publishing, and his conceptual frameworks remain influential. Roberts praised him as a writer, but objected to his use of "geometric concepts" and terms taken from photography, like "transparency" and "imaging."

"Eventually it became what linguists call a dead metaphor," Roberts wrote to me. "We got stuck with language that is both imprecise and irrelevant to the musical truth." He continued:

> The problem is not that visual metaphors are used for sound, it's the idea that visual perception and aesthetics are taken to be a valid modeling system for musical perception and aesthetics. We have a language to work with in this arena of perception, whereas for sound we really don't. Half the time, people can't even define what these terms mean, and who knows what each user's private interpretation is, not to mention hearing acuity and flat-out taste.

Audio is a field very susceptible to non-stick syndrome, which you sense when you run into terms like "transparency." Klipsch himself responded "bullshit!" so often to his competitors' audio claims that the company printed the word BULLSHIT on T-shirts and buttons.

Devon Turnbull, the founder of the audio company Ojas, started reading *Sound Practices* and traveling to Japan in his early twenties. At forty-three, he is too young to have been part of the original triode horn mafia, but he has befriended the surviving members and

SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER PUZZLE

C	O	L	L	Y	W	O	B	B	L	E	S
A	R	I	Z	O	N	A	O	A	E	M	U
R	I	P	S	G	E	S	C	A	L	O	P
A	B	S	Q	U	A	T	U	L	A	T	E
V	I	B	U	R	L	E	S	Q	U	E	R
A	T	T	I	T	U	D	E	A	D	S	S
N	U	L	L	I	G	R	A	V	I	D	A
S	R	S	T	R	E	E	T	A	N	I	L
A	B	A	S	E	M	E	N	T	G	V	E
R	O	D	O	M	O	N	T	A	D	E	S
I	J	D	B	O	H	A	T	R	E	D	M
E	E	L	E	R	I	C	E	F	L	O	E
S	T	E	R	N	U	T	A	T	I	O	N

NOTES FOR "LOGOPHILIA":

*Note: * indicates an anagram.*

ACROSS: 1. COLLYWOBBLES (*bellyache*); 10. ari(Z-on, rev.)a; 11. [f]emu[r]; 12. R.I.P.s; 13. escal(O)p*; 15. ABSQUATULATE (*leave quickly*); 17. Bur(lesque*)r; 19. a[l](t)titude; 22. NULLIGRAVIDA (*a woman who's never had a baby*); 26. [P]stree*-t; 27. *; 28. a-basement; 30. RODOMONTADES (*boasts*); 33. *; 35. [f]eeler; 36. *; 37. STERNUTATION (*sneeze*).

DOWN: 1. car-a-van's-Aries; 2. [f]oribi[s]; 3. [s]lip(s); 4. y(og, rev.)urt; 5. [c]oast; 6. B(O)cuse*; 7. Ba(A)l, rev.; 8. emo(T-E)s, rev.; 9. *; 14. *; 16. qui(l)t; 18. pun; 20. tur-(boj-e[h]t, rev.); 21. a-VAT-a-r; 23. first letters; 24. *; 25. d(I've)d; 26. sa(DD)le; 29. *; 31. homophone; 32. hidden; 34. tea[m].

continues in their tradition. Turnbull's Ojas systems have been placed in several Supreme stores and used in one of the late designer Virgil Abloh's art shows. In September 2021, I started visiting Turnbull at his home in Clinton Hill. Four months later, he was building speakers for Mark Ronson and Tyler, the Creator.

Turnbull contacted Joe Roberts of *Sound Practices* and helped him sell off the remaining copies of the magazine on eBay last year. He speaks Japanese well enough, and has frequently traveled to Tokyo to buy vintage gear. Turnbull has a near-complete set of *MJ* magazine, which he scans for photos of listening rooms. When he told me this, I paused.

"That listening room Instagram account—this is you?" I asked.

"Yup," Turnbull said.

He was wearing limited-edition jeans printed with the artwork from John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. We listened to *Midnight Blue*, a 1963 Kenny Burrell album on Blue Note. On a Garrard 301 turntable (accepted by many as a kind of standard) equipped with an Ortofon SPU cartridge (also sent through a made-to-order combination of Ojas components and speakers, the music felt damp and bright, like a bunch of amplified plants. I had no desire to look at my phone or do anything other than listen. The experience was soothing, at a level deeper than mood. With a triode horn setup like the Ojas, there is a subtle recalibration of the physical world. The system costs roughly $85,000—and in that moment felt more than worth it. "The triode horn thing is the future, not the past," Reichert told me, and Turnbull seems proof enough of this.

After months of hearing about triodes and horns and wishing that I, too, were, say, a famous Scientologist who could afford a flash rig, I went with Heidi to the actual Oswalds Mill in Pennsylvania, to hear the system that started it for Weiss. The mill is a dark four-story building that's only slightly modernized. On the third floor is the system that Weiss has been toying with for a decade, the monster to his Frankenstein. From a couch covered with woven saddle bags ("women find these uncomfortable," Weiss said), I looked at the left-right stereo setup. Each side was anchored by a massive RCA baffle from the Thirties, which measured three feet by three feet, and looked a bit like a speaker cabinet you'd have seen at a rock show in the Eighties. On top of that were three or four small speakers, one of them an actual plasma flame that vibrated quickly enough to create high frequencies. I assumed Weiss was making this up, but the device later killed an insect, and the noise it created was nasty enough to convince me that it was, in fact, a flame.

Weiss pulled out a double LP and put it on. I heard someone strum an acoustic guitar, two chords in a syncopated cycle. This was the opening of "Tudo Que Você Podia Ser," the first track on *Clube da Esquina*, a collaboration between a collective of Brazilian musicians that was recorded in 1972 and is usually credited to the singers Milton Nascimento and Lô Borges. There isn't much popular music better than this record, a block that feels both airy and solid as lead. The intimacy between the friends is easily heard and instantly felt. It's the kind of thing that stops small talk and makes tough guys confess. What came out of this colossal ziggurat of speakers was not something I'd ever heard, though I've played the album over a hundred times.

In the following months, I developed a new way of thinking about how we listen to music, together or alone. My alliterative schema for the various listening environments, designed to be annoyingly mnemonic, is corner, club, cathedral, and cocoon. The corner (as in street corner) is where people take priority over sound, and this model encompasses both a block party using a multi-speaker sound system on the street and the digital commons of web radio stations and streaming platforms like Mixcloud and SoundCloud. One of my favorite web radio stations, LYL Radio, was established by Lucas Bouissou, who stated his view firmly: "About audio quality, honestly, I don't give a shit." LYL Radio is very much the corner, in every sense.

The cathedral is an environment built by the audiophile, where reflection is the norm. You don't have to be alone, but if there are a bunch of listeners together, you're not talking to one another. You listen, and only listen. One arrives here with a certain amount of time and money, introducing an exclusive element, which I don't love, but if I imagine a house of worship with its doors flung wide open, I am less uneasy, because the resources are oriented toward establishing a common good.

The club is halfway between these two points, presenting a certain level of audio quality, but not at the expense of interaction. If there is an emphasis in the club, it is about people connecting through music. The cocoon, meanwhile, is where most people find music now, through earbuds and headphones, locked into the cycle of wage labor or exercise. As cited in a recent thesis about headphone listening by Jacob Kingsbury Downs, the current market for headphones is worth an estimated $25.1 billion. The high-end crowd has higher price points, but they aren't moving nearly as many units.

The audiophile cohort serves as a volunteer R&D wing for the larger music community, for all four of these nodes. I find myself defending whoever is on the other end of the spectrum from the person I am talking to. When audiophiles start babbling on about old blues records or some dishwater new classical, I make it clear that I love Doja Cat. When someone tells me they are perfectly happy with Spotify and earbuds, I plead with them to listen to a live recording played through a decent setup.

Seen as a whole, the corner, club, cathedral, and cocoon are all healthy options. I am heartbroken that the masters of John Coltrane's Impulse! recordings were lost in a 2008 fire at Universal Studios. But I still think the existing analog and digital copies of those recordings are good enough to spread the message. An obsession with the quality of recordings is, on some level, antithetical to the spirit of mindful listening. The constant, beautiful, churning production of music in the present moment reminds us that fetishizing the past, rather than simply learning from it, is a non-musical obsession. You can love the texture and living power of recordings—I absolutely do—without losing your goddamn

mind. In their back-and-forth manner, all technologies have been improving, even if the peristalsis of history is hard to follow. The necessary gear will be there, somewhere, and even bad gear is good enough for great music.

That said, despite not having the space or money for massive bespoke speakers that move only in micrometers, I finally resolved to make a listening room of my own. I went to see Steve Guttenberg, who hosts a channel on YouTube called Audiophiliac. A small and cheerful man in his seventies, Guttenberg wants "people to have good sound, for not crazy amounts of money." He discusses several products a week on his channel, and he uses concrete and simple language to do so. I find myself swayed by most of what he says, largely because he seems to rate products based on his own preferences. He also clearly loves music (oddly not a prerequisite in this cohort).

When I dropped by his Brooklyn apartment, he was testing PureAudioProject's Duet15 Prelude speakers, which don't rely on a conventional cabinet to house their woofers and tweeters, but instead mount the elements to a flat board in order to produce what Guttenberg called "a more spacious sound." They sounded sick. I have no idea what they cost and I don't want to know. What I wanted was for him to tell me about something I could afford.

He suggested the Klipsch RP-600M, a bookshelf speaker made by the same company that first sold high-end audio equipment to home consumers. Although the RP-600M is not a Cornwall or a Klipschorn or a Heresy, the brand's most famous units, it is a speaker made by a group of people who lived with those models. I assumed a certain institutional spirit would infuse even this lesser iteration.

And there are horns in the speakers! Steve put it in human terms: "The tweeter is mounted in the horn." The Klipsch website puts it in the vernacular of an advertisement for razors or something:

> Leveraging a 1" titanium tweeter matted to our proprietary hybrid Tractrix® horn—the award-winning RP-600M bookshelf speakers deliver incredible acoustics to fill your home with loud, crystal-clear sound and robust bass.

That sort of thing.

A pair of RP-600Ms is priced at $568, but I found one for $350 on eBay. Heidi and I brought the speakers home, and we looked at them on our shelves. They are handsome black rectangles, their lower halves bisected by a gleaming copper cone. We got so excited by the spirit of change they introduced to the apartment that we decided to throw out a rug that had been decimated by mice, a long-delayed task that we estimated would take about an hour. It took the entire weekend and was revolting.

By the time we were finished, it was Monday. I connected the speakers and placed them on either end of our bookshelves, like rooks at the corners of a chessboard. Once they were set up, I played "Small Hours" by John Martyn. It's quiet music, mostly guitar phrases swelled into focus by Martyn's right foot on a volume pedal. There's a bit of delay on the guitar and a muffled heartbeat drum underneath the whole thing, and Martyn doesn't get around to singing for a few minutes. Though it's more than forty years old, it sounds completely of a piece with, say, James Blake or Frank Ocean. Through the Klipsch speakers, it sounded alive, drunk, and present. I felt a little reverent, maybe even bashful, about finally having real sound. It was not quite a prayer, but not not a prayer. ■

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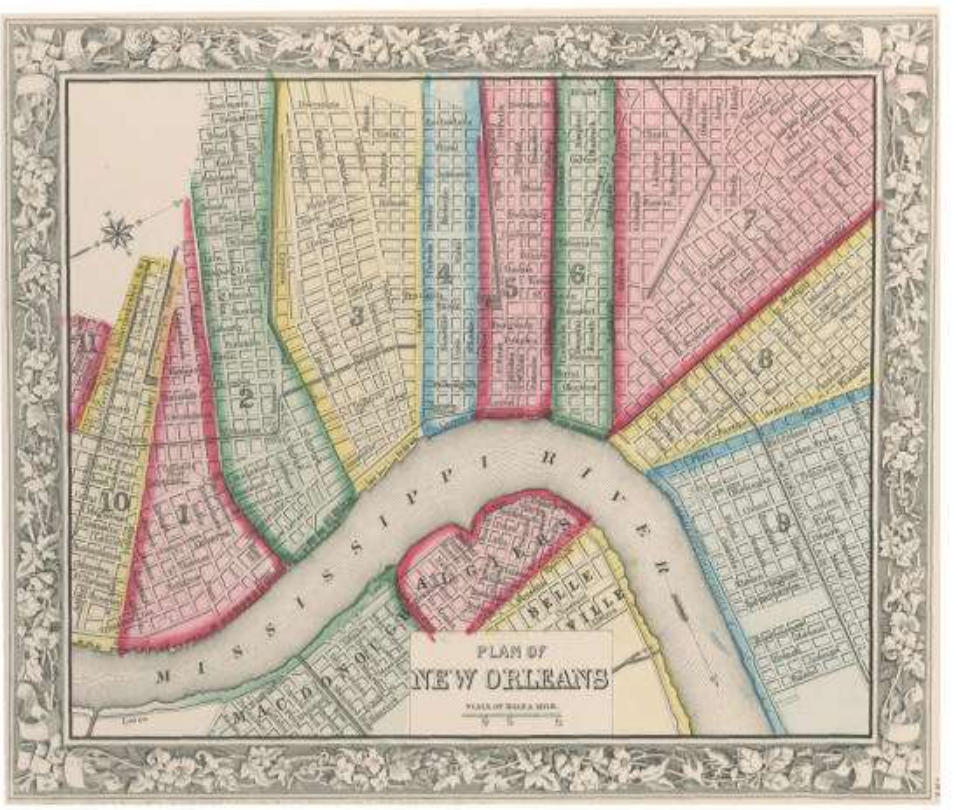
1 Congressional Research Service (Washington); **2,3** *New York Times*; **4** National Council on Problem Gambling (Washington)/Pew Research Center (Washington); **5–8** National Council on Problem Gambling; **9** Bonhams (NYC); **10** RR Auction (Boston); **11** Hipgnosis Songs Fund (London); **12** OnePoll (NYC); **13–17** YouGov (NYC); **18,19** Stella Rouse, University of Maryland (College Park); **20–23** Lifeway Christian Resources (Nashville, Tenn.); **24** Nitzan Peri-Rotem, University of Exeter (England); **25** Pew Research Center; **26** FMI, The Food Industry Association (Arlington, Va.); **27** My Favourite Voucher Codes (Bath, England); **28–30** National Retail Federation (Washington); **31,32** Gallup (Washington); **33,34** Topia (San Francisco); **35–37** Gallup; **38** Pew Research Center; **39** Sung-Min Cho, Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore); **40** American Academy of Ophthalmology (San Francisco).

BOOK OF THE LIVING

The house museums of New Orleans

By Marina Magloire



Omar Casimire dreamed of a flood a year before Hurricane Katrina arrived. The day after the levies broke, as he paddled a salvaged boat through the deluge burying New Orleans East, using a broken board as an oar, the vision resurfaced as déjà vu.

With a small digital camera, he photographed the dreamscape that now appeared in the world before him: familiar street signs barely clearing unfamiliar reservoirs. He took pictures as he watched the waters rise from a room in the Super 8 Hotel on Chef Menteur Highway, east of the city's Industrial Canal and south of Lake Pontchartrain—both breached—where he'd needed to sign a liability waiver to stay. As he told it in a poem he wrote later, "The Super 8 roof started to peel like a Plaquemines Parish orange."

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The need to preserve what he saw followed him like a phantom. He took photographs as he sought refuge in the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center—a shelter of last resort, like the infamous Superdome—where an estimated twenty-five thousand people awaited supplies and evacuation, languishing for days. He documented a baby's first steps amid the exhausted crowd; National Guardsmen resting in wheelchairs on a nearby street, rifles between their legs.

One morning in late January last year, the plastic-sheathed pages of what Omar calls his Katrina List sat in an open binder in my lap, like a holy book. It was one volume of a collection of thousands of names, phone numbers, and signatures of survivors of the storm and its aftermath. I was seated in the front room of his home on the ground floor of a two-story shotgun house on Cleveland Avenue, a notoriously flood-prone area of Mid-City that, on one rainy day in 2017, had left Omar knee-deep in water inside.

We were surrounded by a maze of folding tables, chairs, and couches draped in kente cloth. In the center of the room sat a four-by-four-foot metal cage that had been used by a search and rescue team to airlift people from the roofs of inundated houses after Katrina. Every inch of the wall space around us was occupied, covered with artwork depicting the storm's ravages, and with Omar's photos. On one wall hung a large tarp affixed with handwritten accounts by survivors and aid workers: *Triaging a nursing home patient who handed me a wet plastic grocery store bag & said "This is everything I have left."*

Opposite page: The Musée de f.p.c. All photographs from New Orleans by Isaac Diggs, January 2021, for *Harper's Magazine* © The artist. This page: A map of New Orleans, 1863. Courtesy New York Public Library

Omar, a spry seventy-one, and dressed in white slacks and a white button-down, called this place the Katrina National Memorial Foundation. It was a house museum, as spaces like this are known in New Orleans—an installation of local and personal memory, sometimes art and culture, in a private home, open to the public and most often run by a black elder.

I came to the house museums through my friend Don Edwards, a gray-bearded griot who, on most days, could be found spinning tales in front of Flora café in the Marigny, where I first met him nine years ago. I lived in Louisiana as a teenager, and am now a seasonal resident of New Orleans, returning in the sweltering summers and fickle winters. Whenever I'm in town, I find Don at Flora, under the banana leaves, smoking the Pyramid cigarettes he'll only buy at a certain liquor store in Chalmette, a suburb to the east. And he always greets me by saying, "I got someone I want you to meet." Soon we're on our way in his white utility van, its mysterious contents rattling and rolling in the back as we fly over potholes. It was Don who introduced me to Omar, and to many other house museum proprietors—mostly men like him: charismatic and black, over seventy, and prone to winding stories.

Each time I come back to New Orleans, I become more aware of the responsibilities of memory work. In the past two years, several of the house museum proprietors have died. I returned this time to document the house museums while they still existed, and to see the curators who remained, men who had become my friends—to listen to the stories of elders who had survived Katrina, the COVID-19 pandemic, the difficult years long before, and the precarious years in between.

Omar's museum, divided from his living space by a curtain of wooden beads, is dedicated to the storm and to the dream of a future, grander memorial for its victims. Spread along one wall were blueprints, plans drawn up by his ex-wife, an architect, for the shrine of twisting glass and steel he aspires to build, its footprint the shape of a spinning hurricane. Less than two miles down the road, on Canal Street, was the city's $1.2 million official memorial for the nearly twelve hundred Louisiana residents who died in the storm—a series of marble mausoleums containing the remains of the unknown dead, and engraved with the names of the known. "All that money, and you can barely even read the names on those big old stones," Omar said. "And they stole my design!" The monument's walkway resembles a cyclone from above. Omar had sent a cease and desist letter to the mayor when it was constructed in 2008—he handed me a hefty three-ring binder to show me a copy. "I call this my Blood Book," he said. Inside were dozens of missives: sent to the IRS, and to New Orleans city planners, citing sundry broken promises, especially regarding the city's sites of public history.

Omar flitted around the crowded room like a hummingbird, conjuring more documents and photo albums from overflowing drawers and shelves crammed with books about the storm—titles like *1 Dead in Attic,* and *Not Just the Levees Broke.* The inauguration of Joe Biden played quietly on a television perched amid the papers on his desk. "Do you remember Barack Obama's inauguration?" he asked wistfully. "I was there!" He'd arrived a week early and stayed in what he called his "executive suite"—a van parked at a rest stop outside of D.C. He handed me a commemorative talking pen, still in its plastic cover, that blasted a line from Obama's 2008 election night acceptance speech: "Change has come to America!" I remembered it of course—the feeling that things would be different.

Omar told me that he'd planned to use his Katrina List to sue the government. "They abandoned us," he said. Like many of the tens of thousands of people evacuated from New Orleans after the storm, he was flown out of state with no choice as to where he

Left: The Katrina National Memorial Foundation Museum. Right: Omar Casimire

might be sent, and he arrived at Fort Chaffee, a military base in Arkansas that had housed Vietnamese refugees in the Seventies and Cuban refugees in the Eighties. "Some people don't like to be called refugees," he said. "But I tell them, 'You *was* a refugee.' They treated us like cattle." He spent his days at Fort Chaffee watching news coverage of the flood and searching the internet for information on his home and his family. That was how he discovered that his mother, Louise Thecla Jones-Casimire, had died after being moved out of her nursing home, which had lost power. A colorized photograph of Louise as a young woman in the Forties sat on a table nearby, her lips and cheeks the same powder pink.

After Katrina, traumas like Omar's became one of the most recognizable elements of New Orleans identity, alongside jazz and Bourbon Street, and the city was met with a wave of appetite for black suffering. Local tour companies, which had long offered "ghost tours" of the French Quarter and shepherded visitors around the grand homes of the Garden District, added "Katrina tours," delivering out-of-towners to hard-hit neighborhoods to gawk at the destruction from the safety of air-conditioned buses. This hunger for devastation has remained

and in part remade the city. It's there in the shops on Decatur Street selling T-shirts that read NEW ORLEANS: YOU HAVE TO BE TOUGH TO LIVE HERE over an image of the Superdome and a handgun. It's there in the eyes of tourists when they ask what exactly happened during the flood.

That's a question Omar never answers directly. He speaks circuitously, often recounting the history of New Orleans, its three hundred years of European, African, and Asian migration. "Napoleon needed the money," he told me, explaining the Louisiana Purchase, "'cause he was fighting our grandparents in Haiti, and he didn't know they could fight." Omar had figured out the Caribbean origins of my last name, and determined that we were likely cousins. "You know who this is?" he asked, pointing to a pin in the top button of his shirt, a tiny photograph of a light-skinned woman with thick black hair. I recognized her as Henriette Delille, a nineteenth-century New Orleanian nun, and the first black American woman to be considered for sainthood by the Catholic Church. "That's my great-great-great-aunt by marriage," he said proudly, producing yet another binder, this one full of marriage licenses, death certificates, and other records printed

Top: Corner of Ursulines Avenue and N Villere Street, Tremé. Bottom: Henriette Delille, by Ulrick Jean-Pierre © The artist. Courtesy Sisters of the Holy Family, New Orleans

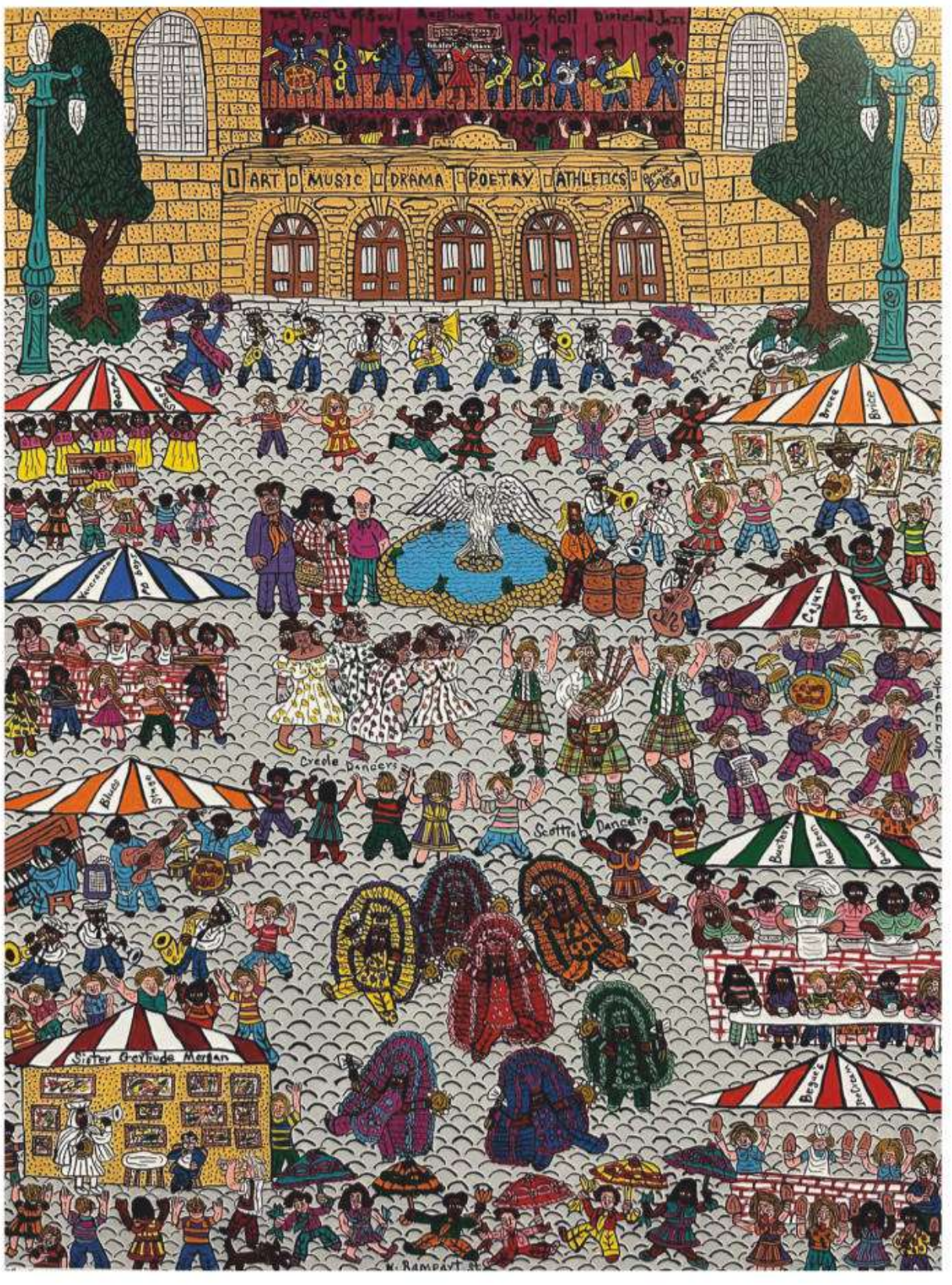
from the Louisiana State Archives and Ancestry.com.

Omar had long sought formal recognition of his place in New Orleanian, Louisianan, and American sagas, especially through entrée into historical societies, and he pulled the Blood Book out again to show me letters documenting his battles. He'd recently proved that his seventh great-grandfather was a Frenchman who fought alongside the American colonists in the war for independence, earning Omar a place as the only black member of the New Orleans chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution. But over the past three years he'd twice been denied membership in the General Society of the War of 1812. He turned the book's pages to certified copies of the records he'd sent the organization, substantiating that nine of his ancestors had fought in the war. He believed that the majority-white group would rather not acknowledge his heritage. "They don't want me to join because they know I'm kin to some of them," he said. As he waited for a response to his most recent appeal, he'd started an alternative association: the Free People of Color Battle of New Orleans War of 1812 Society. So far, he was the only member.

By the end of the visit, I was left holding everything Omar had thrust into my hands—the Katrina List, the photo albums, the Blood Book, the talking Obama pen. I didn't want to set any of it down, for fear of implying that any piece was unimportant.

As I balanced these items in my arms, Omar led me to an altar, tucked away in a far corner of the room. On a cloth-covered table sat Hindu prayer cards, a brass bell, a peacock feather, a small bottle of Barefoot wine, and photos of spirits related and unrelated: famous yogis, an aunt who'd passed away the year before, and Omar's youngest daughter, Asha, who'd passed in 2007 at twenty years old. "She had a weak heart," he said. A note written just days before she died rested against her wedding portrait: *I pray for health, wealth, happiness, and love now and forever for myself and the world.*

The altar was like the museum—or rather, the museum like the altar. It had the same accretive logic, the same impulse to collect material shards left behind, and to say, "This was life." Or, this is life. "What do you think?" Omar asked. "Does it need anything?"



Omar's wandering had seemed to me a refusal of plain suffering, something akin to what Zora Neale Hurston called the African-American "will to adorn." It was certainly a refusal of simple answers. For several decades, the house museums have shored up longtime residents' memories and their own views of the city. For a generation of black elders, these places are an antidote to a society that has told them in no uncertain terms that their lives and deaths do not matter.

Through Don I'd met proprietors such as Charles Gillam, of the Algiers Folk Art Zone and Blues Museum, a gallery of paintings, sculptures, and quilts by local artists, and Ronald Lewis, of the House of Dance and Feathers. Lewis's museum, like another, the Backstreet Cultural Museum, run by Sylvester Francis, was dedicated to the Mardi Gras Indians, the all-black societies known for their elaborate suits of beads and feathers. When I visited the House of Dance and Feathers in 2014, a one-room structure in Lewis's backyard in the Lower Ninth, the walls were covered in photographs of pa-

40th Anniversary, by Bruce Brice

rades, the ceiling hung with decorative fans and fragments of beaded aprons. At the Backstreet Museum a few years later, in a former funeral home in Tremé, Indian suits towered like trees forced to grow inside, their headdresses brushing the ceiling.

It was also with Don that I first visited David Fountain's Spirit of New Orleans Museum, a sparse space in Musicians' Village, in the Upper Ninth. Plastic-protected newspaper clippings documenting Katrina's aftermath covered the chain-link fence along Fountain's driveway. Among them was a photo that had spread worldwide, of a corpse lying beneath a brick-anchored sheet, spray-painted with the words HERE LIES VERA GOD HELP US. In the yard, where Fountain sat fanning himself, was an installation of what he called his "Katrinas": a collection of mannequins in sunglasses and wigs. The contiguity of tragic and comic struck me as another type of refusal.

The intent of each house museum is not always immediately apparent. (Omar recently had a visitor who'd arrived in an Uber, drunk at midday, who looked around and declared, "This ain't no museum! This is a house!") The curators themselves provide the ligatures of meaning. Don and the proprietors are among those called "culture bearers" in New Orleans, a title that has always made me picture them carrying culture on their heads in clay pots the way black people of another time or place might carry water. In some ways, the proprietors are the museums.

But in the past three years, Fountain, Francis, and Lewis have all passed away. In 2020, Lewis died of COVID-19, now a common cause of death for black elders in New Orleans. Francis also died in 2020, and Fountain in early 2021. As this generation of culture bearers ages and passes on, and as storm after storm, housing prices, and gentrification—accelerated by the pandemic—push black residents out of long-standing enclaves, it's unclear who, if anyone, will take their place.

When I arrived in January, I headed straight to Flora to find Don, who had not been replying to my texts and emails for some months. This wasn't necessarily cause for alarm—he often struggled with technology—but I was worried. When I asked the cashier inside if she'd seen him, her face fell. Don had had a stroke. I checked in at Flora every day that week, hoping he might show.

Alvin "Al" Jackson's Tremé Petit Jazz Museum sits on the bottom floor of his home in a bright-blue two-story house, on a street named for a slaveholding Confederate, Governor Nicholls. Seventy-seven years old and jovial, with a panama hat perched on his fluffy white hair, Jackson welcomed me into a surprisingly formal dining space, secluded from his one-room museum by partial walls. He pulled out a chair for me at a long, lacquered table, where he'd laid out a spread of waffle cookies and fruit, a pot of dark coffee, and a freshly opened can of sweetened condensed milk, having warned me over text not to drink too much coffee before I arrived: "Tengo café bombón esperando."

The museum was full of instruments—a piano, guitars, horns, percussion—and framed historic venue contracts: agreements drawn up for artists such as Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles, and Little Richard, for performances at classic clubs in Louisiana and Mississippi, most of which, like the famous Dew Drop Inn in Central City, no longer existed.

"It all began in Africa," Jackson said, embarking on the story of jazz. He picked up a set of castanets. "Castanets come from the Gnawa people, out of Morocco." He opened and closed his fingers with a clack. "Don't let anyone tell you this is a European instrument." He escorted me over to a painting depicting young black drum and fife players in the smoke of a nineteenth-century battle. "Does this look like a second line to you?" he asked, referring to the contemporary New Orleans brass band parades. "There's no jazz without all-black military bands in the Civil War." And New Orleans jazz funerals, he said, had developed out of martial funeral processions, like that which honored André Cailloux, one of the first black officers to fight for the Union.

Jackson lifted a clarinet and waved it like a wand to punctuate each stage of the instrument's historical journey: how Emperor Maximilian of Mexico brought polka bands to Central America from Austria in the nineteenth century; how a family of New Orleans Creoles living in Mexico, the Tios, played the woodwind incorporating the Mexican style, revolutionizing its use in the United States; how Lorenzo Tio Jr. taught the New Orleanian Barney Bigard to play. It was Tio and Bigard together who wrote "Mood Indigo" for Duke Ellington.

Left: Tremé Petit Jazz Museum. Right: Alvin "Al" Jackson

Jackson had joined the Air Force at eighteen and was stationed in Wiesbaden, Germany. He remembered the joy of trips to multiracial Paris, "just putting on my civvies and catching the train." When he returned home after six years abroad, he came to question the limits of what his country offered, like so many black soldiers of the time. He set out to explore the world, over the years reaching Cuba, Venezuela, Spain. In Tunisia, he traveled in the footsteps of St. Augustine, who, Jackson asserted, was black. Jackson revels in little-known and rumored African ancestries. Alexandre Dumas? Black. Alexander Pushkin? Black. Ted Cruz? "He says his ancestors are from the Canary Islands," Jackson said, laughing. "Have you seen the Canary Islands on a map?"

He handed me a weighty document titled "After the Saga of the Confederate Monuments: Dare to Envision a Culturally Inclusive New Orleans." It was a heavily annotated proposal he'd submitted to the city, recommending historical black alternatives for the names of streets and landmarks that still honored figures of white supremacy. The city had yet to reply. He took a book from a shelf and riffled through its pages before handing it over. On its cover was a pencil drawing of a boy in military uniform holding a drum: Jordan Bankston Noble, who'd served as a drummer in the War of 1812 as a teenager and had gone on to perform in the Second Seminole War, the Mexican-American War, and the Civil War, on both sides. As an old man, Noble had often drummed in the streets of New Orleans, accompanied by two fifers, and according to Jackson, he was the first person of color to march and play in the city's avenues without wearing military colors. Jackson had written and self-published the book. It was carefully researched, but he took it as his prerogative to fill in gaps in the record. "People talk about historical fiction, but I prefer the term creative history," he said. "No, I wasn't born in 1815, and last I checked no one alive was either."

This reminded me of a poem by the black writer Lucille Clifton, "why some people be mad at me sometimes," and I read it to Jackson: "they ask me to remember/but they want me to remember/their memories/and i keep on remembering/mine." The lines resonated between us for some moments, like the rings of a bell. Jackson shook his head. "We have not insisted on the inclusion of our memories," he said. "Whether we wanted to or not, we've become the new storytellers."

The next day, I walked along a strip of black-owned businesses between Broad and North Miro streets on Bayou Road in the Seventh Ward. I used to live minutes away on North Dorgenois Street, and frequented these blocks, immersing myself in what seemed to be an independent and blissful black ecosystem: King & Queen Emporium International, selling homemade incense, oils, and tubs of whipped shea butter; Club Caribbean, a dance hall behind a turquoise façade, painted with portraits of Barack Obama and Marcus Garvey in Rastafarian red, gold, and green.

I hadn't known it at the time, but this was a type of curated experience. Much of the strip was owned by Dr. Dwight and Beverly McKenna, a local couple who intentionally rented to black businesses. I walked to meet the McKennas just a few blocks away, at one of two house museums owned by the pair, the Musée de f.p.c.—an acronym for free people of color—in an imposing Greek revival mansion on Esplanade Avenue, an oak-lined street strung with Spanish moss. The day was gray, and the grand house recessed in the shadows of hoary branches. On the wide front porch, empty rocking chairs stirred between two-story Corinthian columns. It was easy to see it as it once was: a seat of antebellum plantocracy.

I was conspicuously late and underdressed, and Kim Coleman, a thirty-one-year-old woman who serves as the museum's director of interpretation, led me through its dim halls. Through open doorways, I caught glimpses of crystal chandeliers; polished mahogany; and oil portraits, in gilded frames, of light-skinned black people in tignons and waistcoats. The museum's subjects were the black denizens of New Orleans who were free during French, Spanish, and American rule before the Civil War, ranging from black artisans and artists to activists such as Homer Plessy, of *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*. I'd visited the f.p.c. some years ago and knew it to be full of haunting juxtapositions. I'd held a pair of heavy shackles that had bound the legs of enslaved people, and brushed the velvet of a prayer bench knelt upon by a wealthy Creole family of the same era.

We arrived to the sunroom where the McKennas, both in burgundy sweaters, were seated with their backs to windows that faced a lush garden. Their posture was impeccable. "This is the only museum in the world that centers black freedom," Miss Beverly said grandly. "People look at us and can't understand why we have a black museum," she added, unprompted. I understood: the two were so light in complexion that someone unversed in New Orleanian ideas of race might believe they were white.

"I shut that down pretty quickly," Coleman said. "These people have lived a blacker experience than I have." The McKennas grew up in the Forties and Fifties; Dwight in the Seventh Ward, a historical Creole stronghold. He'd had little contact with white people until his last two years of college, when he was among the first black students to integrate the University of New Orleans. "Then, you had to endure white people calling you …" He paused and chose his words. "Names." "I had a lot of animosity within me," he said. "And I married a lady who understood."

Miss Beverly grew up in the Midwest, in Indiana and Ohio; her debutante ball was in Chicago. "My parents were always proud of our ancestors," she said, pointing behind me to a portrait of her great-grandmother, who was born into slavery. On her mother's side, she could trace a line of free people of color back to the seventeenth century.

The couple had lived in Washington, D.C., during McKenna's medical residency and were there when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. McKenna remembers bleeding demonstrators who were admitted to the hospital where he worked, fires that raged through black neighborhoods, and black businesses that shuttered and never

reopened. "My vision, like most visions, is clouded by my experience," he said. "My anger has not been diminished. It has been channeled."

McKenna's family had accrued substantial wealth over generations of liberty. The couple's second museum, the George and Leah McKenna Museum of African-American Art, showcases works from the diaspora in a grand white home in the Garden District. They live in a third house, and own other buildings throughout the city. "We've had economic freedom," McKenna said. "You cannot separate economic from political power." When they'd arrived back in the South, the McKennas were floored by the racism of the *Times-Picayune,* and in 1985 they founded the *New Orleans Tribune,* named after the first black daily newspaper in the country.

The couple have refused the near-constant overtures of white developers who covet their increasingly valuable real estate. "The most powerful word in the world is 'no,'" McKenna said. "You're only free when you're free to say no." The pair's fortune had also allowed them to celebrate the art they valued no matter the whims of large and white-dominated institutions. In 2008, their gallery was the first to acquire self-portraits by the local painter Gustave Blache III. Blache had previously met with staff from the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) about the possibility of a show of his work, but they had seemed uninterested. In 2010, when the McKennas exhibited more of his paintings at the f.p.c., NOMA curators attended, and a Blache solo exhibition at NOMA was arranged soon thereafter. Blache's work went on to be exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

"There's been a lot of interest in black museums lately," Miss Beverly said dryly, as the day's faint sun left the room. "They found out we're still alive. But why do we see money going to black exhibits within white institutions, and not to black-owned institutions?" As the city's house museums and small galleries have struggled to stay open throughout the pandemic, NOMA has remained flush with cash, and has scheduled exhibitions by black artists like the painter Jacob Lawrence and the New Orleans photographer Selwhyn Sthaddeus "Polo Silk" Terrell. Solo shows for black artists at NOMA used to be rare—years passed between exhibitions. In June 2020, a group of former museum employees, under the name #DismantleNOMA, published an open letter accusing museum administrators and senior staff of directing racist and homophobic slurs at employees, imposing racist dress codes, and perpetuating substantial racialized pay gaps. The group also alleged bias in the museum's collecting practices, including the tokenization and exploitation of black artists. NOMA issued a public response, apologizing to current and former employees and to the community for "any hurt we have caused," and outlining an "agenda for change," which included increasing the diversity of its board and its acquisitions, as well as establishing a new focus on New Orleanian artists.

Some of the house museum elders, like Omar, want the recognition that would come with the approval of a larger institution. In recent years, Omar's Katrina museum caught the attention of professors in the museum studies graduate program at the Southern University at New Orleans, and he was invited to apply. But a college transcript was necessary for admission, and he'd had to reveal that he'd never attended. Others, like Mr. Jackson, are unbothered by their position outside the fold. Jackson described his own qualifications, saying: "It's like having a PhD in history—I don't, but I do."

Fari Nzinga, an anthropologist and a co-creator of #DismantleNOMA who'd held a prestigious fellowship at NOMA from 2014 to 2016, said that the museum wasn't unique in its culture and practices, but that it seemed extraordinary in its disregard for its community and the artistic production of black New Orleanians, on whose reputation and labor the museum depends. As for the house museums, Nzinga said it was clear that major New Orleans establishments "haven't given two shits." If they had, they would have supported them, sharing resources, tools, practices.

After my visit to the f.p.c., I called Kim Coleman. She and I were both

young, pedigreed black professionals who had been let down by many of the institutions we were told would guarantee our happiness and financial stability. "We grew up with imminent success," she said. "The house museum elders, they grew up with imminent failure, and yet they are optimistic. The only way they could self-validate was to name themselves what white people would never call them." Owners, curators, historians. "At the same time," she said, "to exist, they've had to do something completely different than mainstream museums: that is, develop a community."

The elderly proprietors I know don't have succession plans for their projects. When I asked Mr. Jackson if his daughters might take over Petit Jazz, he told me flatly, "You cannot live your dream through your kids." Omar was evasive but the thrust of his answer was the same. "My family is interested, but they're not interested," he said. Coleman, who'd seemed a likely candidate to carry on the practice, planned to get out of museum work. She hoped to help the McKennas and the f.p.c. access a series of new grants and then begin her own work as a public archivist. She wanted to be in a decision-making role behind the scenes. She was exhausted by the need for in-person narrative at the small museums. Visitors, she said, especially white men, were always asking her, "Where did you learn this?," challenging her authority. "I'm tired of telling you stories," she said. "Why can't I act as a gatekeeper as well?" She was uncertain the house museum tradition would carry on. The younger generations, she implied, favored less emotionally invasive culture work—they protected themselves. "But," she said, "I hope young people won't mind proving to elders that we are worthy of carrying the torch."

Finally, on my last day in town, there was Don, at Flora. Except for a walker, folded discreetly beside his chair, the scene looked much the same as it had for all the years I'd known him: Don under the banana leaves, smoking his Pyramid cigarettes. "I got someone I want you to meet," he said. But it was someone he'd introduced me to years ago. When I told him I was on my way to see Omar, he furrowed his brow and asked, "Now who's that?" I felt the ground move beneath my feet. The two had known each other for a decade. When I gave a few identifying details—the Katrina museum, the white button-downs—Don smiled. "Oh, Omar," he said, his face relaxing. "When you see him, tell him I say hey. Tell him I haven't forgotten him."

In August, I returned to New Orleans to meet Demond Melancon, a young master beadworker and the Big Chief of the Young Seminole Hunters, from the Ninth Ward. The new generations of New Orleans culture bearers are more focused on public spaces than private memorialization—groups like Take 'Em Down NOLA, which targets white supremacist monuments throughout the city, and New Orleans for Lincoln Beach, which advocates for the revitalization of a historical all-black beach in New Orleans East. But I'd heard that Melancon wanted to open a house museum.

Early on Mardi Gras morning, an Indian suit, encased in glass, had appeared on a concrete plinth in the green space at Norman C. Francis Parkway and Canal Street, in Mid-City. The slab had been bare since 2017, when Take 'Em Down NOLA and others had succeeded in removing a bronze statue of Jefferson Davis. In shades of green, the costume stood like an exotic animal on display, nine feet tall from beaded moccasins to crown of ostrich feathers. Its apron, shimmering, depicted the life of Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia. Inside the glass enclosure, strewn along the bottom, were a dozen flyers, all reading the same thing: THE PEOPLE ARE KING.

The suit had been created by Melancon, who delivered it at 3 AM as light snow fell, aided by a small crew of collaborators, all disguised as construction workers in green reflective vests.

I went to meet Melancon at his apartment in the Bywater, in a renovated warehouse that provides affordable housing for artists in a now largely white neighborhood. Melan-

con, who is forty-two, wore thick glasses and a dense black beard. A basketball game played softly on the TV, before which two canvases were stretched. On one, curves of black beads outlined the cheeks of Breonna Taylor, who was slain by police in Louisville in 2020. When finished, a pencil sketch told me, she would wear a chaplet of flowers.

Demond was the first black masking Indian to have an overseas show of his beadwork, at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In October, shortly after my visit, the apron detail from his 2018 suit was auctioned at Sotheby's for over one hundred thousand dollars. The average masker costume takes four thousand hours of work and roughly a million glass beads. Until recently, it wasn't uncommon for maskers to spend a significant portion of their income on the costumes. "I've made suits and lost houses," Melancon told me. Recently, the New Orleans Tourism and Cultural Fund had begun providing grants to subsidize the costumes, and Melancon, a member of the fund's board, had connected community members with financing. "People think I just want to talk to the mayor," he said. "I'm trying to get us paid while we still living."

Melancon said he taught through his art, and he saw a house museum as a way to carry that into the future. But his apartment was barely large enough to contain even two costumes. The Selassie suit stood in a corner of the kitchen, facing the fridge, like a silent family member. Like Nzinga, Melancon believed that New Orleans's wealthy institutions should help fund the house museums, but he wasn't holding his breath. "I'm trying to buy myself peace," he said. In a year, he calculated, he'd have enough money to buy a place that could serve as a home, studio, and museum. He planned to call it the Tribal Seed Museum.

From behind a rack of T-shirts, Melancon pulled the canvas for his 2023 suit. Lines of spectral pencil depicted the famous 1839 revolt aboard the slave ship *Amistad*. On a vessel surrounded by sea, shirtless African men wielding machetes overpowered the crew. One man gripped the ship's wheel, his eyes fixed on some freedom just beyond the canvas.

By the end of my August trip, Omar and Don had each complained that they were unable to get in touch with the other. Don was doing better, though he could no longer drive, and I arranged to pick him up one morning and take him to Omar's. Don was excited to show me his latest project, a box of black T-shirts bearing an original coinage: NEW ORLEANS MUSIC IS THE NEW COTTON. The line, diagnosing the city as a culture plantation, had been a type of signature on his text messages for a few years, punctuating the end of every exchange. He told me to be ready for his forthcoming batch of Halloween shirts, which would read VISIT THE NEW ORLEANS JAZZ MAUSOLEUM. "Because we're displaying the corpse," he said.

When we arrived at Omar's, we found him consumed by his latest aspiration: for his Katrina memorial to be absorbed into a civil-rights museum that had been promised to the city by the developers of the River District, a thirty-nine-acre commercial project along the Mississippi. Since the multimillion-dollar deal had been finalized that March, Omar had noticed that the project's website described the civil-rights museum as a "potential" element, and he'd grown suspicious that it wouldn't materialize. Omar had rallied community leaders, drafting an open letter—signed by Al Jackson and Beverly McKenna, among others—to remind the developers that they'd committed to the reality of a civil-rights museum, not the possibility.

Don didn't think much of all this. "We don't need no civil-rights museum," he muttered. "We need some civil rights." "Listen!" Omar shouted. "Listen!" He began describing segregation, as if this were a point of disagreement; he talked about being the first black counselor for a local Boy Scout troop, and how the white boys had tried to convince him to drink a bottle of urine they'd said was orange juice. "Now slow down," Don kept saying.

"Now Don, I know you've always been progressive," Omar said, in a tone that suggested a minor indulgence. "But listen. In New Orleans we have this tree we call the misbelief tree, the Japanese plum. And you have to start with the fruit that's on the lowest branch. At the top, they've got fruits red like fire, sweet like you wouldn't believe. And we'll get there, believe me. But we've got to get the fruit that's on the lowest branches first."

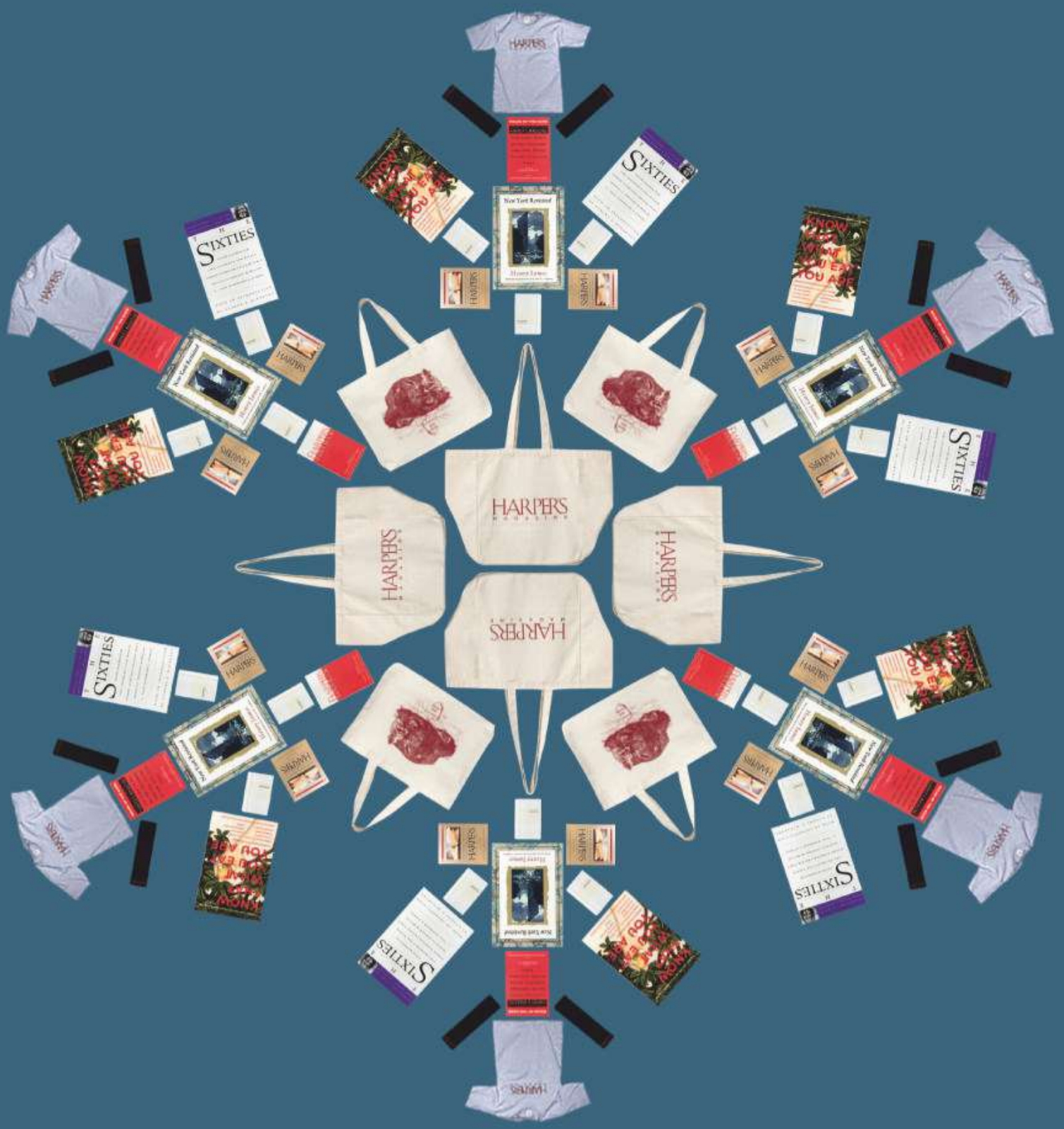
Don was getting agitated, and announced he needed to get his T-shirts out of my trunk. I followed him outside. He fumbled with his cigarettes. "Omar has all this hate inside him," he said. "And I just don't understand why he doesn't spew it all over the people responsible, instead of worshipping them for what they have."

Before leaving town, I took Don, Omar, and Mr. Jackson out to lunch at a restaurant of Jackson's choosing: Landry's Seafood House, a white-tablecloth chain with a wide view of boats bobbing on Lake Pontchartrain. "Who brought this old coot?" Jackson said, as he clasped Don's hand. Don and Omar seemed to have cooled off, and the three men chatted over bowls of gumbo and plates of discarded shrimp tails. For a moment, it seemed that maybe this was the highest fruit atop the tree. Soon, Don and Mr. Jackson began to disagree about Louis Armstrong, something about the historical marker at his birthplace on Tulane Avenue, and Omar began talking over them, trying to turn our attention to a story about the time he'd fasted for thirty-three days in New Mexico.

Later that month, Omar's Katrina memorial and Jackson's Petit Jazz were badly damaged by Hurricane Ida. Omar texted me on the eve of the storm, at around 10 PM. It was the anniversary of Katrina, and he was prepared to ride it out just as he had sixteen years before. "Anniversary inside; one visitor, Omar." He was unharmed, but shattered windows let in debris and warm, wet air, warping and wrinkling his photos. Both Omar and Mr. Jackson eventually reopened their museums, Omar's in a new home.

Before leaving Landry's that day in August, Don had offered Jackson a T-shirt. Jackson laughed as he unrolled it. "'New Orleans Music is the New Cotton.' Exactly," he said. "You can work it, but you can't own it." ■

HARPER'S MAGAZINE



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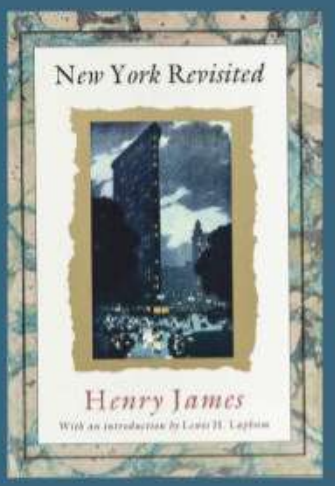

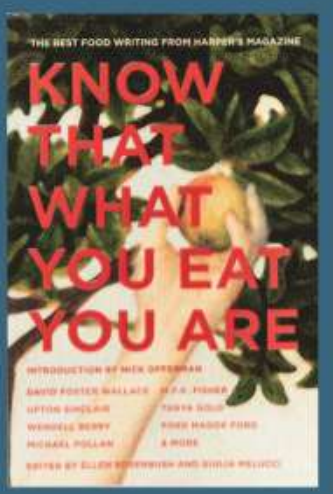

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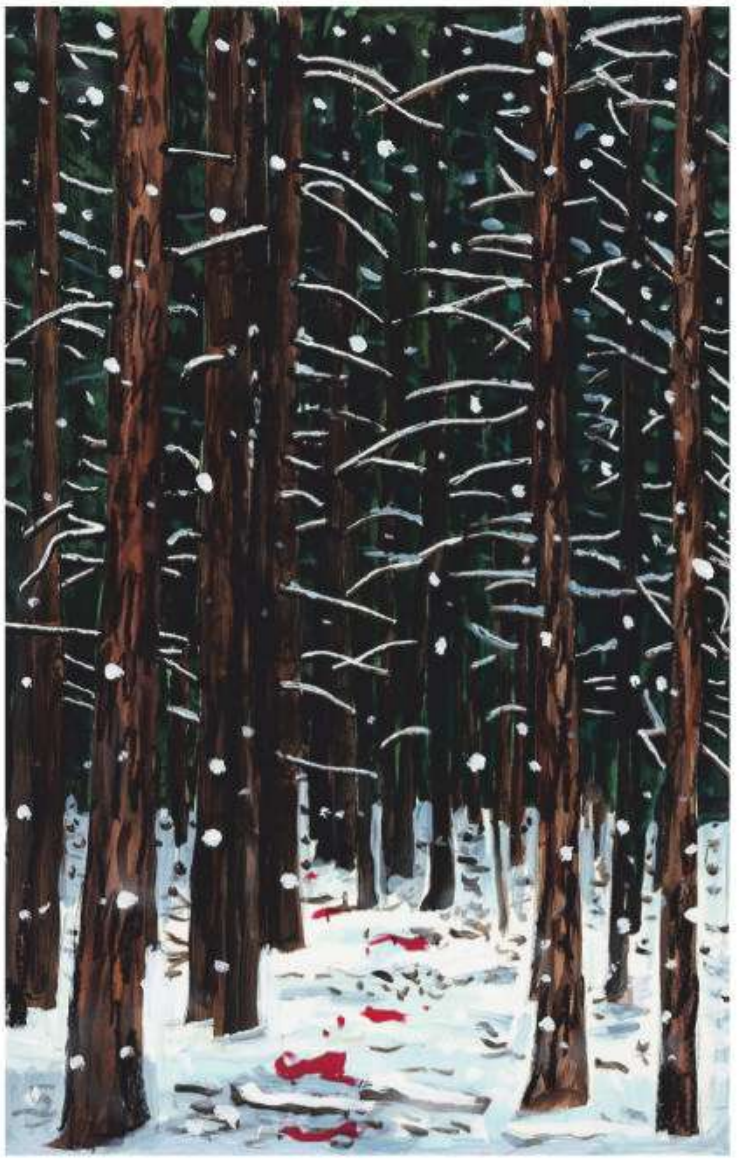
ON A WINTER'S NIGHT

By Kate DiCamillo



My father told me this story.

He said it happened one Christmas Eve many years ago.

A boy was walking alone alongside a highway and saw the lights of the A&P grocery store ahead of him in the darkness. The boy walked down into a ravine and across the deserted parking lot and stood in front of the store's automatic doors until they opened and admitted him.

"Hurry up, hon," said a woman at the register. "We're closing soon."

Christmas music played over the loudspeaker and a big display of canned hams sat right at the front of the store. The pile of stacked cans went halfway to the ceiling. Each can was decorated with a picture of a family—a father and a mother and a boy and a girl—all sitting around a table with a ham on a platter in the center of it.

Each member of the family was looking at the ham and smiling like they had never seen anything as amazing and beautiful, as miraculous, as a ham on a platter. The girl seemed particularly out of her mind with joy. She was clasping her hands together, beaming at the ham in ecstasy.

Next to the canned ham display was a gingerbread house resting on a cloud of cotton balls. The boy reached out and touched one of the walls. Styrofoam.

The floor of the A&P had white tiles alternating with red tiles. The boy made his way down the aisle slowly, stepping only on the red tiles.

The Christmas music stopped playing. A man's voice came over the loudspeaker and said, "A&P shoppers! We will be closing in five minutes. We wish you and yours a merry Christmas."

The Christmas music started up again, and the boy made it to the end of the aisle, all the way to the meat counter, without stepping on a single white tile.

To the right of the meat counter was a little wooden house. The house had green shutters and a green door and a brick chimney and a wooden chair out front. A velvet rope was strung around the house and the chair, and there was a sign on a pole that said, SANTA HAS GONE TO FEED THE REINDEER. HE'LL BE RIGHT BACK!

The boy climbed over the rope and pushed on the green door of the house. It was flimsy, made out of cardboard, and it opened onto a dark interior. There was nothing inside.

But what if he had gone through the green door and found a warm room with a fireplace and a fire? And what if in front of the fire there had been a big, overstuffed chair? And what if there had been something cooking over the fire, like a stew or some soup?

The boy had once seen a poster of a rabbit in a burrow on the wall of the school library. The rabbit had a plaid blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He was sitting in an armchair in front

Kate DiCamillo's most recent novel is The Beatryce Prophecy. *She lives in Minneapolis.*

Forest with Blood, by Richard Bosman © The artist. Courtesy Pamela Salisbury Gallery, Hudson, New York

of a fireplace, and his big, furry feet were up on a footstool. The rabbit was talking to a mole, who was standing in front of the fire, stirring something in a big pot. The mole was wearing slippers—green ones. And he looked like he was listening to what the rabbit was saying.

The rabbit held a mug in his front paws. Steam was rising out of the mug, glittering in the light of the fire, and the rabbit's whiskers and ears were outlined in the same light. So was the mole's nose.

Two pictures hung on roots emerging from the dirt wall of the room. One of the pictures was of an older mole lady, wearing glasses and a lace shawl. She was smiling down at the fireplace, looking at the mole and the rabbit with approval. The other picture was of the rabbit and the mole in front of the fire, just as they were in the poster. The boy liked the dizzy way the picture made him feel—as if there were worlds hidden inside of other worlds, going on to infinity.

At the bottom of the poster were the words ON A WINTER'S NIGHT.

The school librarian had seen the boy staring at the poster and asked him if he would like to check out the book.

"No," he said. "It's all just made up, isn't it? It's just a story."

"Well, yes," said the librarian. "I suppose so, but it's a good story."

He couldn't explain it to her—what a big waste of time it would be to believe that anything like that could happen, that a rabbit and a mole could be friends and sit around in front of a fire talking.

"A&P shoppers!" said the man over the loudspeaker. "We appreciate your business. The store is now closed."

The Christmas music stopped, and the only noise was the hum of the refrigerators and freezers.

The boy sat down in the little house and leaned up against the cardboard wall.

Maybe he would just sleep for a while. He was tired.

He put his head on his knees and wrapped his arms around his legs. Curling up like that made him think of Martin Miner.

Martin Miner was a kid at school who rolled himself up into a little ball every time the other kids started to pick on him.

"Less surface area." That was what Martin Miner had said to the boy when they were sitting together outside the principal's office. "When there's less surface area, you're smaller. And then there's less of you to hurt."

Martin's face was swollen and scraped, bleeding in places.

"It looks to me like you got hurt pretty bad," said the boy.

Martin Miner put up a hand and touched his face. "Yeah," he said. "I guess so. But what I'm worried about is my glasses. They're broken."

He held them up. The glasses were in two distinct pieces.

"Can you see without them?"

Martin blinked. "I can see some things. But not the details."

"Who needs details?" the boy said. He was bleeding, too. But only on his knuckles, and it was from hitting someone, not from being hit.

"I like details," said Martin Miner in a dreamy voice. "I like the patterns in bird feathers and the veins on leaves and those little feelers on ants; and also, punctuation. I like seeing punctuation marks."

The boy felt a drop of sweat dribble down the side of his face. It was hot in the hallway. They were sitting next to a radiator.

"My mother is going to be mad," Martin said. "The glasses were expensive. Maybe Santa will get me a new pair. I was hoping for a train set, but maybe he can get me glasses instead."

"Give them to me," said the boy.

Martin Miner handed him the glasses.

"I could fix these," said the boy.

"Really?" said Martin Miner.

The door to the principal's office opened and the principal stuck his head out and said, "Martin, come in here. We're going to talk about why this keeps happening to you."

Martin stood up. The principal pointed the stem of his pipe at the boy. "I'll deal with you next," he said.

Martin went into the office. The principal closed the door.

"Sure you will," said the boy. "Sure you'll deal with me." The radiator ticked; the fluorescent lights hummed.

The boy put Martin's glasses in the chest pocket of his jacket, and then he stood up and headed down the empty hallway and out of the building.

He did not look behind him.

That had been Thursday, the last day of school before Christmas break.

Inside the A&P, in the little pretend house, the boy touched the front pocket of his jacket. The glasses were still there. He pulled the pieces out and held them up and looked at them. He shook his head.

Why would Martin Miner just hand over his glasses?

Why would he believe that the boy could fix anything?

The overhead lights went out in the A&P. The boy stood up. He held himself still for a minute, blinking, waiting until his eyes adjusted to the gloom, and then he went through the little green door and stepped over the velvet rope.

The parking lot lights were still on. He could see them glowing. He walked down the aisle toward the front of the store.

Would his mother wonder where he was?

Probably not.

She probably wasn't even home. She was probably still at the bar, working. Or maybe done with work and at some party. Who could say? She didn't tell the boy her plans.

"Nobody tells *me* their plans," she had said to him once. "Do you think your father ever told me his plans? Huh?"

At the front of the store, the boy found a section with Scotch tape and notebooks and pencils and pens and masking tape. He held the two pieces of Martin Miner's glasses up to the light coming in from the parking lot, and then he tore a long piece of masking tape from one of the rolls and wound it around the center of the glasses until the two pieces were joined.

The boy put Martin Miner's glasses on and looked out at the parking lot.

It was snowing.

Great, fat flakes were twirling down.

The glasses bent the world and made it look like a painting that someone had swiped a hand through, blurring it before it dried.

"Details, huh?" said the boy. "I don't see any details."

He stared out at the smeary world. In the whiteness, there suddenly appeared a dark shape.

It looked like a deer.

Not just a deer, but a giant buck.

The boy shook his head. He took the glasses off and folded them carefully and put them in the pocket of his jacket, and then he looked out at the parking lot again.

The deer was still there, its outlines sharper now, more distinct.

The boy's father had taken him hunting once, before he disappeared for good. The boy was younger then, and it had been cold in the woods.

"The most important thing is that you got to keep your eyes open," his father told him. "Don't ever close your eyes."

The boy was the one who had seen the deer.

He was the one who had pointed him out to his father. But when his father raised the rifle to shoot, the boy had pulled at his arm, trying to stop him, and the shot missed the deer's heart. A bright patch of red appeared on the deer's neck, and the deer had looked right at the boy. He had given him a great, sorrowful glance of disbelief before he turned and leapt away.

His father had been furious. "The biggest buck I've ever seen, and what do you do? Shove me. Shove me and I miss."

Now, looking out at the deer in the parking lot, the boy had the crazy thought that this was the same animal, the same deer his father had tried to kill.

The boy watched as the buck moved toward him through the yellow light and the falling snow. He watched as the deer came right up to the automatic doors and stood looking into the darkened store.

"Here I am," said the boy. "Stay there. Wait there."

He turned and ran past the canned ham family, past the Styrofoam gingerbread house and down the aisle, past the Santa throne and the empty little house, past the meat counter and through a swinging door into the stockroom. He pushed his way past boxes and pallets. He banged his shin on a shelving unit. He ran toward the exit sign glowing in the dark. He pushed on the handle of the door. An alarm went off and the boy was out and in the alley and running toward the front of the store.

The snow was coming down fast and the boy's heart was pounding, saying the same two words over and over: *Be there. Be there. Be there.*

The deer was there.

Standing in front of the automatic doors.

"Here," said the boy. "I'm here."

The great antlered head turned in his direction, and then the deer started to walk away from the store, away from the boy. He stopped once, and looked over his shoulder, and then continued walking.

"Should I follow you?" said the boy. "Am I supposed to follow you?"

The deer made his way through the empty, snowy parking lot. The boy followed, staying several steps behind.

The snow kept falling. They walked past houses with yellow windows and strings of bright Christmas lights. The boy's shoes were wet and his pants were soaked through and the snow was coming so fast and thick that it was sometimes hard to see, but each time they walked beneath a streetlight, the deer's antlers were suddenly outlined in gold and the boy wasn't cold or afraid.

The deer walked down the middle of the street and then into the front yard of a small house with a Christmas tree in the window.

The deer stopped and the boy went and stood beside him.

They were both breathing hard.

A face appeared in the front window, next to the lighted Christmas tree.

Martin. Martin Miner.

"I've got this kid's glasses," said the boy to the deer.

The deer turned and looked at the boy. His eyes were weary and bright. The boy felt dizzy. He put out his hand and touched the deer's neck, felt his heart pulsing, felt the warmth of him, the reality of him.

Martin came running out of his house.

"Hey," shouted Martin.

The deer turned and in one fluid movement leapt over the box hedge and disappeared into the swirling snow.

"I saw him," said Martin. "It was a reindeer!"

"No," said the boy. "It was just a wild deer."

"Martin!" shouted a woman from the doorway. "What in the world are you doing?"

"Here," said the boy. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the glasses.

"You fixed them!" said Martin.

"They're not fixed. I just taped them together."

Martin put the glasses on and looked around at the world, smiling.

"Get in here!" shouted Martin's mother.

"You have to come in," said Martin. "She'll be mad if you don't come in."

The boy went inside and Martin's mother made him sit down in front of the fire. "People die from walking around like that, all soaking wet in the cold," she said.

She put a big, heavy blanket around his shoulders. It was warm, so warm, but the boy couldn't stop shivering. And then he was crying—great, heaving sobs.

Martin didn't say anything. He just sat next to the boy in front of the fire. Christmas music was playing.

Somewhere out in the woods, beyond the little house and the lights and the fire and the music, the deer was walking, putting one foot in front of the other.

The deer was alive. His heart was beating. The boy had felt it. He had felt the deer's beating heart.

He had felt, too, a scar on the deer's neck, the thickened skin where something had entered him, broken through him, and then, somehow, miraculously healed over. And to the boy, this meant that he had been forgiven, and he thought that this was a very good Christmas gift.

My father told me this story once when I was young, and then again when I was grown and he was very old.

Both times, I asked him the same question.

"Were you the boy?"

The first time I asked him, he told me that it didn't matter—that it was a story, just a story.

But when I asked him the question the second time, when I asked him again, "Were you the boy?" my father turned to me and said, "I felt it. I felt the bullet inside of him. It was still there." He started to cry. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you understand how warm it was in front of Martin Miner's fire?"

"Yes," I told him. "I understand."

And I sat with my father and held his hand and let him cry. ■

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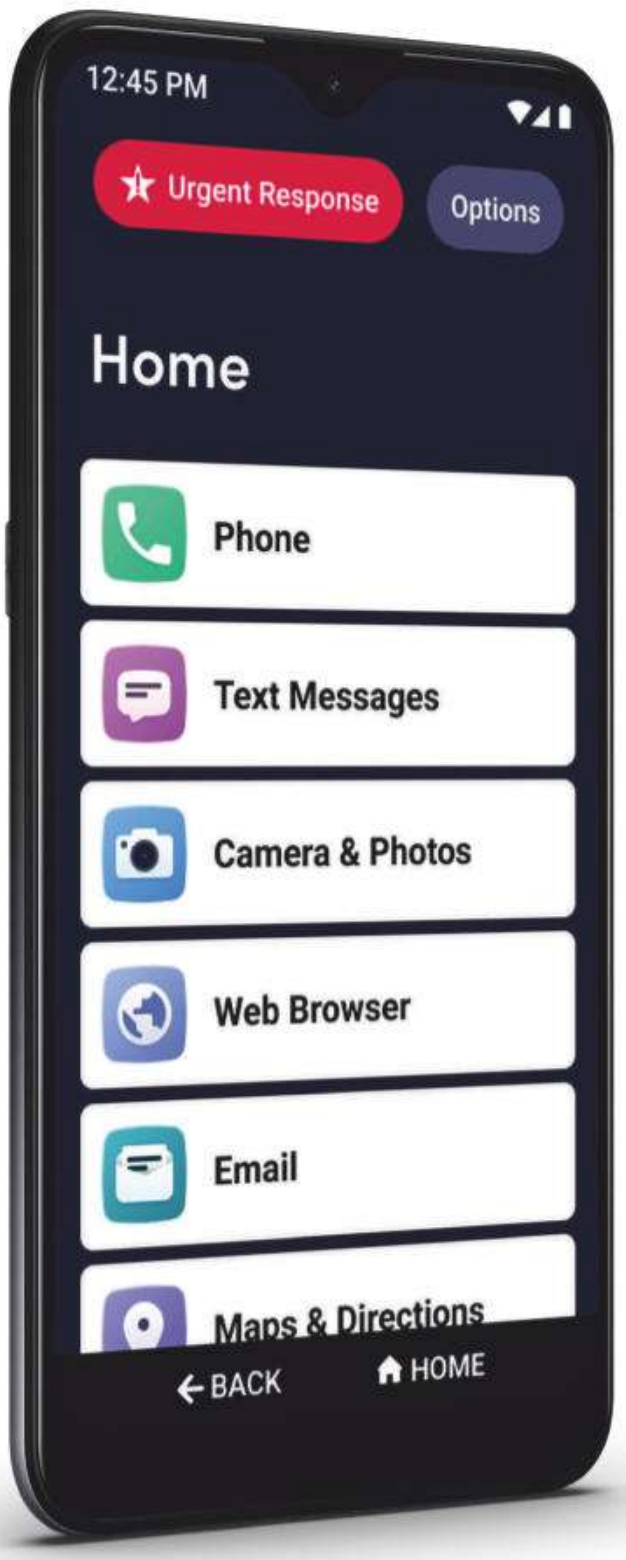

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NEW BOOKS

By Claire Messud

"Animals are in trouble all over the world." So begins **JUSTICE FOR ANIMALS** (Simon and Schuster, $28.99), a call to action from the philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum. Recent research into animal behavior has confirmed the ethical intuition that humans "are deforming the existence of intelligent and complexly sentient forms of life." Almost fifty years after the publication of Peter Singer's seminal *Animal Liberation*, Nussbaum offers an urgent, groundbreaking book of her own. In language accessible to the non-philosopher, *Justice for Animals* applies Nussbaum's now well-established "capabilities approach" to sentient non-human creatures. She wants to elicit "wonder at the complexity and diversity of animal lives, compassion for what all too often befalls those lives in our human-dominated world, and a productive future-directed outrage."

Nussbaum builds on an idea developed in the Eighties by the Indian economist Amartya Sen. It is a theory of political justice focused on "giving striving creatures a chance to flourish." Central to this philosophy is a Kantian commitment to dignity:

> People are often used as tools, but the [capabilities approach] holds that a nation is minimally just only when each person is treated as an end in some very important areas of life, their dignity respected.

No person is merely a "use" for someone else; each has inherent value. "Why on earth," Nussbaum asks, "would such an approach to the lives of other animals not be appropriate, for similar reasons?"

Nussbaum sets out the parameters, the nature, and the means for working to secure justice for animals. The creatures for which she seeks redress "possess that elusive property known as *sentience*. The world looks like something to them, and they strive for the good as they see it." Sentience is not a matter of simply "feel[ing] pain," but rather "the notion of having a subjective point of view on the world." In Nussbaum's view, all mammals fall within this category; so too do bony fish and birds; insects can go either way; corals, jellyfish, and sponges don't qualify.

Asking what constitutes justice for sentient animals, Nussbaum explores the question of death as a harm. Epicurus proclaimed that "death … is nothing to us. For when we are there, death is not; and when death is there, we are not." Nussbaum contends that this view is insufficient, because "when a life contains a temporal unfolding of which the subject is aware and which the subject values, death can harm it." This forces us to rethink which animals can be killed "humanely": pigs, chickens, and cattle are out of the question, Nussbaum thinks, while whether fish experience their lives temporally remains up for debate.

Nussbaum considers the situations of the animals living in our homes, animals in the wild, and animals in captivity. She suggests that "today at any rate, there is no such thing as 'the wild,' no

Pearl, by Gail Spaien © The artist. Courtesy Nancy Margolis Gallery

space, that is, that is not controlled by humans: the pretense that 'the wild' exists is a way of avoiding responsibility." If our aim is to support "the capabilities of animals to lead a type of life characteristic of their species," we must consider what human interventions are ethical and appropriate.

Ultimately, Nussbaum's position is one of resolute and pragmatic optimism. Although she applauds veganism, she proposes that we could also just reduce our consumption of factory-farmed products, and choose, say, free-range eggs instead. She believes that "our time is a time of great hope for the future of animals." She discusses interspecies friendships (among them the relationship between the scientist Irene Pepperberg and her parrot Alex, who wittily refused his research tasks); she celebrates several instances in which the law has given standing to non-humans. Throughout, she is inspiring and persuasive. Nussbaum explains in her moving introduction that the book is "a work of love and . . . of what I might call constructive mourning," written to honor the legacy of her daughter, Rachel Nussbaum Wichert, an animal-rights attorney who died following an organ transplant in 2019, having devoted her life "to improving the lives of abused and suffering creatures."

One might not immediately associate hope with the French novelist Marguerite Duras. Most famous for *The Lover,* which won the Prix Goncourt in 1984, she wrote many more works of fiction, as well as plays and screenplays. **THE EASY LIFE** (Bloomsbury, $18), her second novel, first published in 1944, has been ably translated into English for the first time by Olivia Baes and Emma Ramadan, and is presented with an illuminating foreword by Kate Zambreno. At the same time, Duras's last work, **NO MORE** (Seven Stories, $15.95), originally translated in 1998 by Richard Howard, has been reissued. Duras, whose revival has been prompted by a growing interest in autofiction, repeatedly visited episodes of her own life—such as the affair she had with an older Chinese man in Vietnam. Without embellishment, she turned these incidents into archetypes. The approach seemed to allow Duras room to experiment with her style, which became sparer and more cryptic over time. Both books are, in distinct ways, brutal and bleak. Yet somehow both, in their darkness—even, in the case of *No More,* at the very edge of language—retain a flicker of optimism.

The Easy Life is set not in French Indochina, where Duras grew up, but in rural southwest France. The narrator, a young woman named Francine, lives with her extended family on an estate called Les Bugues. The agonistic, Faulknerian circumstances

fill the house with awful silences. As the novel opens, Francine and her brother Nicolas are following their maternal uncle Jérôme along a path that leads back home. The two men have fought, and the elder has been seriously injured:

> He had swallowed himself, it seemed, and was watching himself from the inside, dazzled by his own suffering. . . . From time to time he tried to stand back up and a huff of stupor slipped from his chest. Along with these moans, something foamy came out of his mouth.

Thus begins Jérôme's slow, torturous, and questionably necessary death, and with it a sequence of events that will transform the household, each ghastly step both fated and seemingly tipped by Francine's hand.

The novel's first half, muscular and gothic, carries the inexorable force of Greek tragedy. In the second half, following another terrible death, Francine spends a few weeks in a seaside town. In this section, Duras sustains Francine's lyrical and often abstract musings without concern for narrative movement or, indeed, particular clarity:

> Thoughts float at the same level. They appear and disappear: wrecks out there on the sea. . . . The thought of my person is also cold and distant. It is somewhere outside me. . . . I am a certain form in which a certain history that is not mine has been poured.

These reflections—framed around a third death, which Francine does nothing to avert—will either thrill or infuriate, depending on the reader. As Zambreno observes: "It is the loss of control of the Duras narrator and her writing of her narrative that is the point, a breaking down that will become her trademark in later works." That the novel resolves in a surprisingly conventional way—with the prospect of marriage, the happiest ending possible given the circumstances; indeed, what would in any other novel be deemed "hope"—is somehow mitigated by Duras's final insistence on its darkness. "I got him without wanting to keep him," Francine says. "I have him."

From the earliest work to the last, Duras retained her enigmatic multivalence. The pages of *No More* are composed of gnomic iterations, fragments of thought or expostulation, and dialogue with her devoted partner Yann Andréa, who compiled *No More* in the penultimate year of her life. ("Y.A.: Are you very gifted? M.D.: Yes, it seems to me that I am.") Elsewhere, she announces: "I am in contact with myself/in a freedom which coincides with/myself," which seems almost a reprise of Francine's detached self-observation in *The Easy Life*. More delphically still, Duras writes: "That is what I am, pursuit of the/wind." And at last: "There is the book that wants my death. Y.A.: Who is the author. M.D.: Me. Duras."

Her prose is at times amazingly good and at others laughably terrible, but it is always unflinching in its contemplation of life's great intensi-

Study from the South of France, by Anna Boberg

ties (Eros, death, the psyche, the self). Paradoxically, her egotism can transcend self-obsession to make her work an exploration of female experience tout court, and that, too, is a hope. "I know something about language. That's something I'm really good at," she says in *No More,* and then: "You know, that's a confirmation of Duras,/everywhere in this world and the next."

Nino Strachey's **YOUNG BLOOMSBURY** (Atria, $29) is a brisk, light tonic after Duras's occasionally unparsable interiorities. Strachey, a member of the aristocratic and variously accomplished family, has taken as her subject the generation following the formidable Bloomsbury group (which included, among others, Lytton Strachey, Nino's first cousin once removed, Duncan Grant, Virginia Woolf, and Vanessa Bell). This younger generation, some "the children of Bloomsbury families" and some "lovers who became friends," thrillingly made up "a group of queer young people who found the freedom to express their sexuality amidst a group of supportive adults." The nature of this community is particularly important to the author: as the "mother of a child who identifies as gender-fluid and queer," she writes, "I have learned some sad truths about the ongoing impact of prejudice." Joyfully transgressive, the younger Bloomsbury

cohort included writers (Eddy Sackville-West, Julia Strachey), a journalist (Raymond Mortimer), artists (Stephen Tennant, Stephen Tomlin), and academics (Sebastian Sprott, Dadie Rylands), as well as one socialist politician (John Strachey, Julia's cousin).

Strachey divides this set into early recruits—a decade or so younger than the original crew—and a bunch that's more youthful still. The former comprised Grant's lover, David "Bunny" Garnett, and the artist Dora Carrington, who found in Lytton Strachey "a different type of intimate companion." Carrington accepted Strachey's homosexuality because he was, as she put it, "the only person to whom I never needed to lie, because he never expected me to be anything different to what I was." Together with Ralph Partridge, they formed "what would be described today as a polyamorous throuple," and led a life of "domestic harmony" long after their physical passions faded.

The group on whom the book is chiefly focused is divided into various subsets—"Young People from Oxford," "Young People from Cambridge," "Young Relations and Many More"—but its members often come into view chiefly as objects of sexual interest for the older Bloomsbury group. Strachey provides frothy accounts of their gatherings at the Gargoyle (on the walls of which Matisse's famous painting *The Red Studio,* recently the subject of an exhibition at MoMA, hung for many years); or at the all-male Cranium Club, founded by Bunny Garnett, where sherry was sipped from a skull and conversation permitted only on "abstract and literary subjects"; or in private homes, like Gerald Reitlinger's, at which Lytton Strachey danced with Nancy Mitford, and young men writhed in orgiastic heaps. She describes the era's exuberant "cult of the effeminate": while a student at Oxford, John Strachey "was rumored to carry a ladies' handbag," and played cricket "wearing a large peasant's hat adorned with trailing pink ribbons," while Stephen Tennant "appeared in a shimmering chiffon dress and pearls as Queen Marie of Romania for the Impersonation Party of July 1927." *Young Bloomsbury* is rich in such detail.

Perhaps Strachey overstates how separate the generations were: the original Bloomsburies seem to have gone to the same parties as the new set, and the book is less convincing as an account of its characters as creators of lasting work: though Julia Strachey's *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding* was made into a movie in 2012, Eddy Sackville-West's novels have long been forgotten; and of Stephen Tennant, Strachey is forced to concede that "few critics give [him] credit for being an 'artist' today; if he is considered at all, it is usually as a socialite or model." The most considerable among them was perhaps John Strachey. His father edited *The Spectator,* but he became a socialist, Labour politician, and writer. His wife, Esther Murphy, sister of Gerald Murphy (who was a friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald's and an inspiration for Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night*), is one of the subjects of Lisa Cohen's fine triple biography *All We Know,* which offers more substantial insight into this world.

Indeed, those involved in the creative florescence in Britain in the period roughly between the First World War and the Great Depression have been much written about. That their freedoms were born of wealth and privilege is undeniable. But for each rising generation there's reason to illuminate again their particular, if fleeting, triumphs. "Together they had pioneered an inclusive way of living not seen again for another century," Strachey writes, "a brief flowering of intergenerational acceptance, pushing at gender boundaries, flouting conventions, embracing sexual freedom." ■

Top: *The Red Studio,* 1911, by Henri Matisse © 2022 Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society, New York City. Courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund
Bottom: A photograph of the Bloomsbury group at an *Alice in Wonderland* party, January 1930 © Tate, London

BETWEEN CHAOS AND THE MAN

How not to become an anarchist

By Alan Jacobs

Discussed in this essay:

The Dispossessed, by Ursula K. Le Guin. Harper Perennial. 400 pages. $16.99.
The Dawn of Everything, by David Graeber and David Wengrow. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 704 pages. $35.

I first heard of anarchism around forty-five years ago, as a teenage member of the Science Fiction Book Club. One day the U.S. Postal Service delivered a novel by Ursula K. Le Guin called *The Dispossessed*, which I read as soon as it arrived and immediately declared my favorite book—even better than Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* or Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey*, which had until that moment shared the honor. Then I dug out a moldy volume of our old World Book Encyclopedia and read about the history of anarchism.

My enthusiasm soon—I almost said faded, but that's not quite right: lacking a point of focus, it diffracted. I retained my enthusiasm but didn't know where to direct it. I hold Le Guin partly responsible, because she was too intelligent and honest a writer to portray her anarchist society as anything but "an ambiguous utopia," as a cover blurb of a later edition put it, in a formulation that would eventually become the effective subtitle of the book. Even an anarchist society is made up of human beings, and we all know the warping that inevitably happens when that crooked timber is one's primary building material. Le Guin made anarchism beautiful but also human—and therefore questionable.

I also came to feel increasingly strongly that I lived in a country dominated by two parties, two parties that could not be dislodged, and that could not be persuaded to take anarchist ideas seriously. Again and again I watched third-party candidates who deviated only slightly from political orthodoxy spring up and then wither away, along with the movements in which they were rooted; what chance, then, did something as bizarre as anarchism have? Anarchism was, I decided, fascinating in science fiction but irrelevant to the world in which I actually lived.

That was the story I told myself, anyway. Looking back, I see that there were other forces at work: a disinclination to marginalize myself; a reluctance to follow paths of thought that might lead to discomfort, or to unpleasant choices; and perhaps most important, an inchoate sense that I didn't hold anarchism's view of human nature. But none of this caused me to forget anarchism's appeal.

Since that encounter with *The Dispossessed* I have read a great deal in the history of this subject. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was pedantic; Peter Kropotkin was sometimes stimulating but often dreary; Murray Bookchin was my best guide through the thickets of intra-anarchist divisions and hostilities, but he couldn't help me cut them down to a reasonable density. Sometimes I felt that the most useful readings came not from self-declared anarchists but from anarchism-adjacent scholars such as Marshall Sahlins, whose *Stone Age Economics* makes a charming and largely convincing defense of the leisurely lives of hunter-gatherers—though it didn't help me understand how I could adopt, even in a distant way, their approach to the basic problem of staying fed and clothed with the least possible expenditure of energy.

Sahlins's argument is more than half a century old now, so I looked forward to reading a "new history of humanity," *The Dawn of Everything*, by David Graeber and David Wengrow (a book completed just before Graeber's sudden death in September 2020, at the age of fifty-nine). Their dismantling of the established sequence of social development that progresses from hunter-gatherer bands to agricultural tribes to urban kingdoms to our very own modern nation-states convinced me; they make clear through innumerable examples that the sequence is simply a myth. But I didn't know where to take their ideas. Graeber and Wengrow are like Sixties gurus telling me to free my mind. Okay, so my mind feels freer now—what do I do with my freedom? Why am I even still drawn to this stuff? Trying to understand my own curious addiction, I decided to reread *The Dispossessed*.

The novel begins in a place called Anarres—the moon of the planet Urras—where we meet Le Guin's protagonist, a physicist named Shevek. One of the most profound ambiguities of *The Dispossessed* involves the poverty of Anarres: its people live at scarcely better than a subsistence level, in dramatic contrast to the wealth and luxury experienced by many on Urras. But cause and effect are uncertain here. The Anarresti are the descendants of a revolutionary anarchist movement that arose on Urras two centuries earlier—they are called Odonians, after a political philosopher and revolutionary leader named Odo. The result of the Odonians' revolution was not the rule of their own world, but rather the granting of exclusive residence on the arid and barely habitable Anarres. Their collective life is a kind of gift, and a kind of exile.

It is easy and partly correct to say that the resource-poor environment of Anarres ensured that its residents would live simply; but it is equally true to say that simplicity was what the Odonians preferred. They stood a better chance of adhering to that preference, and of remaining anarchist, on a world that never tempted them with a lush life and (therefore)

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a more differentiated social order. Ample natural resources and hierarchical political structures—such as existed on Urras, especially in the nation called A-Io—lead to innovation and productivity; but they also lead to inequality, injustice, and the exploitation of the world and its creatures, including its human creatures.

Every social order comes with trade-offs. The Odonians of Anarres know they have given up comforts that those on Urras would deem necessities. Most of them warmly accept those sacrifices, and indeed don't think of them as sacrifices, because they believe themselves to be amply compensated by their freedom and egalitarian social solidarity. When Shevek visits A-Io, and meets some of its residents, he thinks, "They knew no relation but possession. They were possessed." By contrast, the Anarresti have been dispossessed by Urras—and by themselves.

Dispossession initiates a particular kind of order. Proudhon, in the middle of the nineteenth century, asserted that liberty is "not the daughter but the mother of order," and that "society seeks order in anarchy." Anarchists do not reject order or rule or governance but insist that in a healthy society these things cannot be imposed from above—from some *arche*, some authoritative source. Rather they *emerge* from negotiations between social equals. When complex phenomena arise from simple rules distributed throughout a large population—as can be seen best in social insects and slime molds—modern humans tend to be puzzled. For a long time scientists thought that there had to be intelligent queens in bee colonies giving directions to the other bees, because how else could the behavior within colonies be explained? The idea that the complexity simply *emerges* from the rigorous application of a handful of simple behavioral rules is hard for us to grasp. Bees and ants demonstrate how anarchy is order. It's a shame that Proudhon did not know this.

On Anarres, "negotiations between social equals" happen within the ambit of a particular task or project or profession. Shevek, for example, is part of a self-organizing and self-maintaining syndic of scientists, in which responsibilities are typically assumed by volunteers. Shevek wants to work on highly technical problems of theoretical physics, which makes him grateful that others are willing to take on the inevitable administrative tasks. One of these others is a man named Sabul, who serves as the conduit through whom scientific papers move from Anarres to Urras, Urras to Anarres. For the student of anarchism, Sabul may be the novel's most significant character.

It is often said—not least by central figures in the history of anarchist thought—that anarchism as a political philosophy depends on a belief in the essential goodness of human beings. In an essay titled "Are You An Anarchist? The Answer May Surprise You!," Graeber poses the following question: "Do you believe that human beings are fundamentally corrupt and evil … ?" He continues, "If you answered 'yes,' then, well, it looks like you aren't an anarchist after all." But much hinges here on what is meant by "fundamentally corrupt and evil." I don't believe that everyone is wicked altogether; I don't believe that without the restraint of law we would have what Thomas Hobbes called the "War of every man against every man." But I do believe that everything we human beings do is to some extent infected by selfishness,

Illustration by Brett Ryder

by pride, by the often unconscious desire to make ourselves superior to others in some way—perhaps in wealth, perhaps in power, perhaps in virtue. Does this mean that I can't be an anarchist after all?

Anarchism depends, Kropotkin claims in his seminal book *Mutual Aid*, on the belief that cooperation and reciprocity come more naturally to humans than competition and a desire for dominance do. When I first read Kropotkin's argument, decades after encountering *The Dispossessed,* I found it unconvincing—because I remembered Sabul.

I remembered Sabul because, however strongly and sincerely he may affirm Odonian principles, he is not at all cooperative. He is, rather, intensely protective of his little field of authority. Jealous of Shevek's more powerful mind, he gums up the works, preventing, as best he can, any real communication between Shevek and physicists on Urras. Indeed, the crucial events of the book are set in motion by Shevek's decision to travel to Urras, and he makes that decision only because of Sabul's petty obstructionism.

For those who associate anarchism with a belief in the cooperativeness of human beings, the key word in that sentence will probably be "obstructionism." Does not Sabul's jealousy of Shevek, and his determination to achieve and maintain control, suggest that a society built on the assumption of voluntary, *emergent* mutual aid is a pipe dream?

For me, though—a person with an exceptionally low anthropology, a skepticism about human motives that borders on the cynical—the key word is "petty." The decentralized character of Anarresti society means that, however tyrannical Sabul may be in temperament, he does not and cannot exercise tyranny. In a more structured and hierarchical society he would be far more dangerous. As I reflected on these matters, it seemed to me that—whatever Graeber and Kropotkin may have thought to the contrary—anarchism may well be the ideal political philosophy for those of us who believe in original sin.

In every sector of society we are afflicted by a hierarchical centralization, a concentration of power in the hands of a few, typically a few who are directly accountable to no one—least of all to us, the people. Standards and canons of efficiency have come to rule all: the era in which "mechanization takes command"—the title of a 1948 book by Sigfried Giedion—has given way to the era of what Nikil Saval has called "self-Taylorizing," the psychological internalization of the impulse toward efficiency and productivity. And only anarchic order, as far as I can tell, offers any real hope of rescue.

An accurate assessment of the character of the moment is needed here. Those of us drawn to any scheme of decentralization, either anarchism or the Distributism of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, are often treated to a litany of the gifts of modern civilization that would be absent in an anarchist society. One could argue about the quality of those gifts—the meaning of the German word *Gift* comes to mind: poison—but I think it more expedient to waive the point. I am not at all certain that any of us are better off with iPhones than we were without them but, sure, let's posit that iPhones are wonderful, gifts in the English sense rather than the German. Without contesting that point let's simply say: enough is enough.

As I noted earlier, I was fascinated but also somewhat confused by *The Dawn of Everything.* It was meant—before Graeber's untimely death—to be the first of several volumes. Maybe Wengrow will write the successors, and maybe they will clarify the path forward, but in the interim, I found myself knowing very well what it means to be interested in anarchism but not at all what it means to *become* an anarchist. I found myself wondering whether "How do I become an anarchist?" is even the right question. Maybe (I thought) *becoming* an anarchist is a very un-anarchistic thing to do.

Around the time *The Dispossessed* came out, Le Guin published a kind of pendant to it, a short story called "The Day Before the Revolution," in which Odo spends the eve of the revolution that will lead to the colonization of Anarres not dreaming of the future but lost in her past. Living with her disciples, most of them much younger, she realizes that they dress in a way that would have been considered immodest in her youth. By contrast, she continues to dress in accordance with the conventions of her own upbringing. "They had grown up in the principle of freedom of dress and sex and all the rest, and she hadn't. All she had done was invent it. It's not the same." When she speaks of her late "husband" Asieo, her followers grow uncomfortable. "The word she should use as a good Odonian, of course, was 'partner.'" But, Odo reflects, "Why the hell did she have to be a good Odonian?" The leader of an anarchist movement has become uncomfortable as anarchy has settled into habit, into structure, into *expectation.* There is something livelier and more human about being Odo than there is about being an Odonian. Which may be another way of saying: something more anarchic.

One of the ways the Anarresti are dispossessed is through their language, called Pravic, which doesn't dispense with possessive pronouns altogether but is idiomatically resistant to them. "To say 'this one is mine and that's yours' in Pravic, one said, 'I use this one and you use that.'" A child is encouraged to say not "my mother" but "the mother." It is significant, though, that we are told all this about Pravic because a friend of Shevek's, who learns that he plans to work with Sabul, warns him: "You will be his man." The use of the possessive startles Shevek, but eventually he learns the ways in which that uncommon usage was appropriate. These tensions between Pravic and its speakers indicate what language can't do; what politics can't do; and what order, even the order that is anarchy, can't do.

"State is the name for the coldest of all cold monsters," Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the same passage he elaborates:

> Every people speaks its own tongue of good and evil: this the neighbor does not understand. It has invented its own language of customs and rights. But the state lies in all the tongues of good and evil.

Is not Pravic, subtly yet necessarily, the tongue of a kind of state?

In "The Day Before the Revolution" Odo—an elderly woman, suffering the effects of a stroke—walks slowly through the city she lives in, and thinks, "There would not be slums like this, if the Revolution prevailed." She continues:

> But there would be misery. There would always be misery, waste, cruelty. She had never pretended to be changing the human condition, to be Mama taking tragedy away from the children so they won't hurt themselves. Anything but. So long as people were free to choose, if they chose to drink flybane and live in sewers, it was their business. Just so long as it wasn't the business of Business, the source of profit and the means of power for other people.

At another point in the story Odo quotes herself: *"What is an anarchist? One who, choosing, accepts the responsibility of choice."* Is this statement profound—or fatuous? I think it's fatuous in our current social order, in which choice is always already governed by the logic and power of consumption: that we choose is an illusion that it's the business of Business to maintain. But if you ask yourself in what circumstances might this sentence be necessary wisdom, maybe it will look different. If the whole formulation strikes you as individualistic, perhaps you might reflect that one cannot truly have individualism until one has individuals. And if the question of what might serve to form genuine individuals is one that anarchism cannot answer—well, perhaps anarchy can.

Some years ago, Walter Mosley published a novella called *Archibald Lawless, Anarchist at Large*—in which, let me be quick to say, the titular character acknowledges the peculiarity of his last name, though he never explains it. Lawless does, however, freely and frequently state his convictions to his new scribe, Felix Orlean. He says, for instance, "I walk the line between chaos and the man." He says, even more portentously,

> I am, everyone is, a potential sovereignty, a nation upon my own. I am responsible for every action taken in my name and for every step that I take—or that I don't take. When you get to the place that you can see yourself as a completely autonomous, self-governing entity then everything will come to you; everything that you will need.

I was in a pro-anarchist frame of mind when I first read this story, and so I tried to make the best of it, but no—this is the common caricature of anarchism: radically self-indulgent and "lawless," without any order at all. Nevertheless, there's something intriguing about that notion of *walking the line* "between chaos and the man," between the absence of order and a rigid simulacrum of order imposed from above. Isn't that, after all, what anarchy in practice is: a tightrope strung across a double abyss?

Trying to think these matters through, I found myself returning to Graeber's voluminous writings, many of which appear on obscure websites. I was not *wholly* deterred by his suggestion that my cynicism debars me from being an anarchist; my obsession was not so easily dispelled. So I kept reading, and in a long essay titled "Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology" I came across this:

> Anarchistic societies are no more unaware of human capacities for greed or vainglory than modern Americans are unaware of human capacities for envy, gluttony, or sloth; they would just find them equally unappealing as the basis for their civilization. In fact, they see these phenomena as moral dangers so dire they end up organizing much of their social life around containing them.

I like this; I think of it as Graeber opening his heart to reveal the secular Calvinist hidden within. And such clear-eyed awareness of our darker proclivities is surely a better ground for anarchist action than any celebration of the human propensity for cooperative action. The best reason to pursue anarchism, to walk that line between chaos and the man, is that none of us is free from greed or vainglory. Insofar as anarchism arises from that sober and constant awareness of the "moral dangers" our own *libido dominandi* present to social order, I am all for it.

Graeber also helps me to understand how to pursue it. One of his core

concepts is "prefigurative politics": action that practically instantiates what you hope for and therefore "prefigures" it. "Revolutionary action is not a form of self-sacrifice," he writes, "a grim dedication to doing whatever it takes to achieve a future world of freedom. It is the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free." But, I would say, that prefigured freedom should *primarily* be freedom not from the man out there but the man that I always, by nature, want to be.

There are many schools of anarchism, most only partly reconcilable with the others: anarcho-syndicalism, anarcho-communism, primitivism, cooperativism, and so on. The most interesting thing they have in common, Graeber notes, is that they aren't named for a person (Marxism) or an economic system (capitalism) but rather for modes of practice—ways of acting in the world. Somewhere down the line perhaps one *becomes* an anarchist of one description or another; but however that may be, to act in accordance with the better world imaginatively prefigured is an option for me, for each of us, right now.

So this is what I have come around to, this is how I have made sense of my obsession with anarchism: the first target of anarchistic practice ought to be whatever it is *in me* that resists anarchy—what resists negotiation, the turning toward the Other as neighbor and potential collaborator. I return to Odo's line, *"What is an anarchist? One who, choosing, accepts the responsibility of choice,"* but I add this: The responsibility of choice arises when I acknowledge my own participation, in a thousand different ways, in the imposition of order on others. This is where anarchism begins; where the turning aside from the coldest of all cold monsters begins; where I begin. The possibility of anarchic action arises when I acknowledge my own will to power. Self-dispossession begins when I say to myself: *Je suis Sabul.* ■

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(Signed) John R. MacArthur, President & Publisher

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PUZZLE

DEDICATED DODECAHEDRON: HOLIDAY EDITION

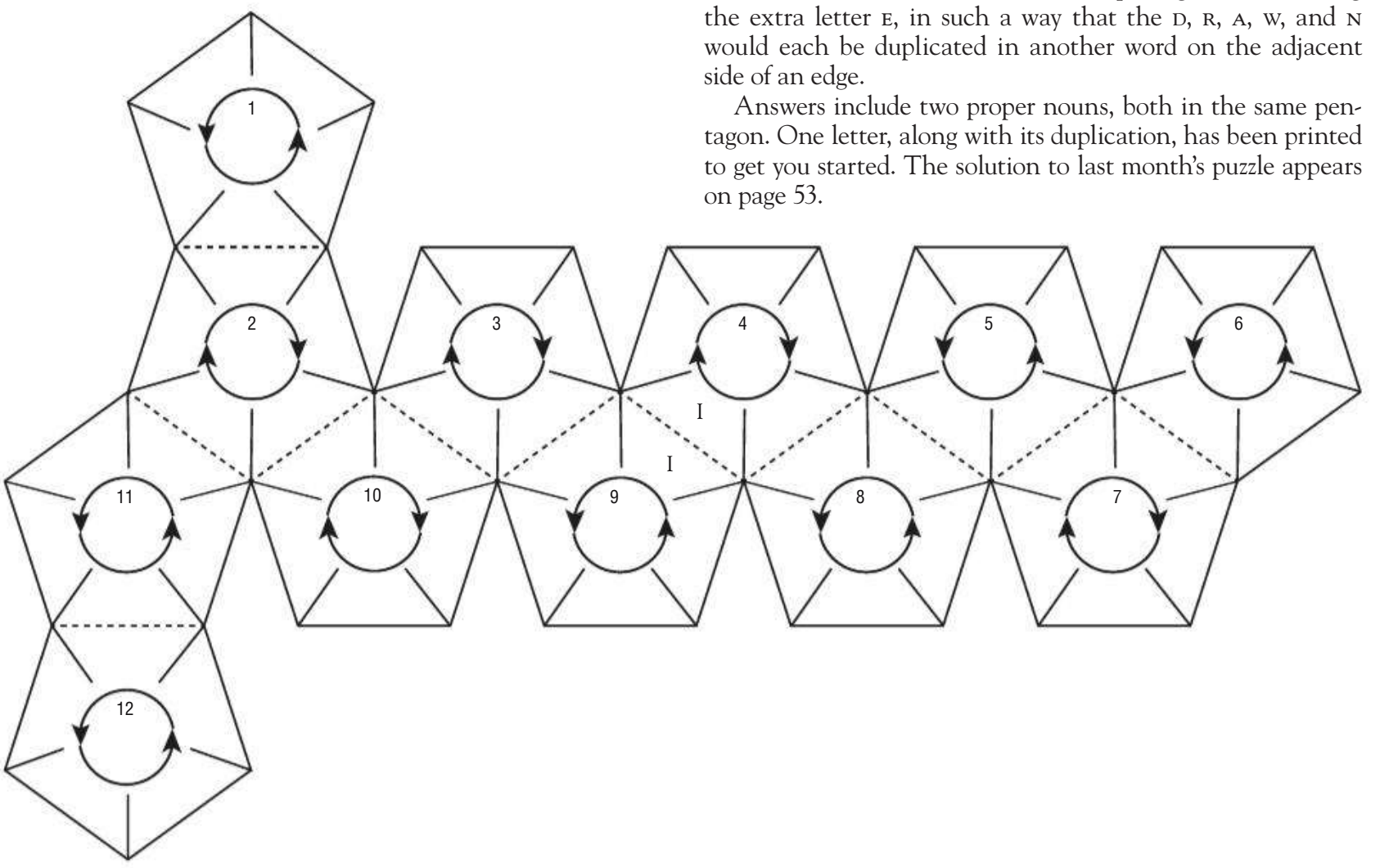
THE TWELVE CLUES OF CHRISTMAS

By Richard E. Maltby Jr. (with acknowledgments to Jeffec of The Listener*)*

The diagram would form a regular twelve-sided solid if folded along the dotted lines. The clues in group A lead to words of six letters; each of these words contains all the (mixed) letters of a five-letter word plus one extra letter. The five-letter words are clued in group B. The extra letters are to be entered in the centers of the appropriate pentagons, with the associated five-letter words inscribed around them (to be read in the direction shown by the arrows) in such a way that, at each edge of the solid, adjacent letters are the same. When the diagram is complete, the central letters from 1 to 12 will spell the name of the holiday-related person to whom the puzzle is dedicated.

The clues are ordered randomly. Solvers must figure out which answers are "associated" with each other and where to place them. Example: The answer to a clue in group A might be WARDEN; the answer to a clue in group B might be DRAWN. Since WARDEN contains the letters in DRAWN these two words would be "associated" and DRAWN would be entered (in the direction of the arrows) in one of the pentagons surrounding the extra letter E, in such a way that the D, R, A, W, and N would each be duplicated in another word on the adjacent side of an edge.

Answers include two proper nouns, both in the same pentagon. One letter, along with its duplication, has been printed to get you started. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 53.



GROUP A: SIX-LETTER WORDS

1. School enrols singular individuals
2. Ocean without a floating island upsets divers
3. Virginia breaks part of a window—it's sad to hear
4. Backbone—one way to kill a fish, so they say
5. Goes to bed, right out gets reconnected
6. Cocksure American, at heart a boring tool
7. Gym levels decentralized, pursuant to endless law suit flaps
8. Send up South American, one involved in revolutionary movement!
9. Chatterbox heads for Polynesian restaurant—and the emergency room
10. Pitch and beat provide material for a highland jig, perhaps
11. Island songs from, for example, the capital of Guyana are crazy covers
12. Some traditionally moving back in with, or around, mom

GROUP B: FIVE-LETTER WORDS

1. Bum steer leads you to the woods
2. Eager to get letters sent off, correspond
3. Ruthless? Not her! But on returning, I groan
4. Parts heard in an English car
5. Tears apart a late bloomer
6. A bit of what targets the essence of a garden
7. Suitable material? Sounds really swell
8. Talk about unwanted bits of fruit rings!
9. Arrangement of paean—it takes your breath away
10. Taper off? More than likely!
11. Disrobe in the street, in Las Vegas
12. Build-up in Defense gives back millions

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "Dedicated Dodecahedron," *Harper's Magazine,* 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's,* please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by December 13. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the February issue. The winner of the October puzzle, "Gentlemen's Agreement," is Todd Brown, Tucson, Ariz.

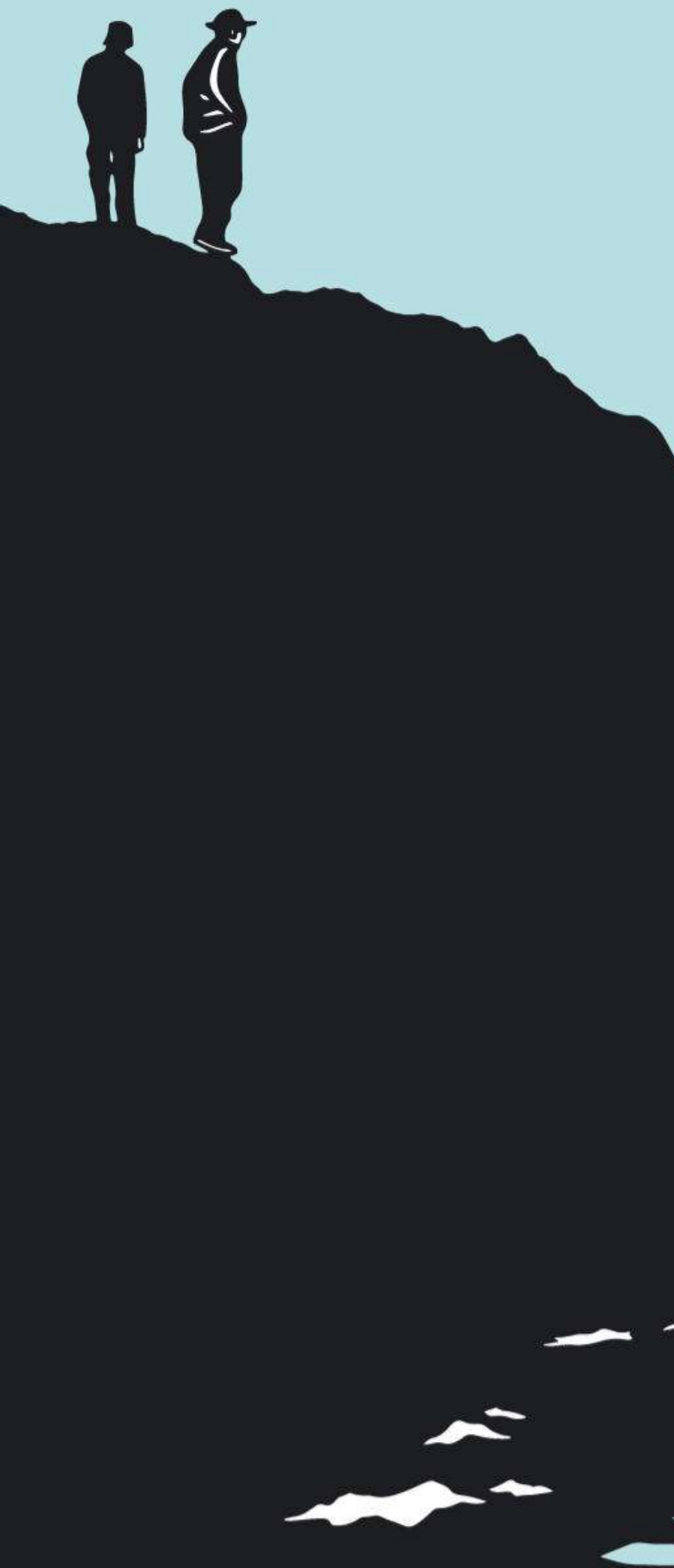
FINDINGS

Astronomers created a detailed map of all the stars ever to have died in the Milky Way. A report of stars in the sky during the solar eclipse of July 19, 418, at Constantinople allowed Japanese astronomers to remap the path of totality. The sarcophagus of Ptahemwia, treasurer to Ramesses II, was found inscribed with emblems to Nut, who was likewise found in art uncovered at the temple of Esna, which also depicts the gods of the sun and the moon in the other world. Fifteen falcons, most of them headless, were found buried in a temple at Berenike along with a stele whose inscription reads IT IS IMPROPER TO BOIL A HEAD IN HERE. Confusion over a hapax legomenon in an Old Hungarian runic inscription led to its being misread as I LOVE YOU SEXUALLY ENIKŐ, MY ENIKŐ rather than as I LOVE YOU ENIKŐ, MY ENIKŐ! In the Liang Tebo cave in Borneo, archaeologists found evidence of the earliest survived amputation, from 31,000 years ago. Violent deaths were more common than previously thought among South American mummies. Underweight and normal weight human bodies, but not overweight ones, increase the bacterial diversity of the soil in which they decompose.

Shock collars can compel grazing cattle to create firebreaks in the scrublands of the American West. The Great Salt Lake is becoming saltier. Physicists described the salinity staircase of the Arctic Ocean, where glass microspheres will only further melt sea ice, and where the number of rainy days is predicted to double by 2100. Refreezing the poles was estimated to be possible at an annual cost of $11 billion, while the net economic benefit of decarbonizing the world's energy grids by 2050 was estimated to be $12 trillion. Cleaner air is reducing the warming-mitigation effect of air pollution. A study of leaf temperatures determined that atmospheric warming will compromise the carbon uptake of forests. Hateful tweets in the United States increase by up to 22 percent when temperatures rise above seventy degrees Fahrenheit, and a temperature-racist-tweet response curve was discovered in Europe. The largest organism on earth is beginning to break apart.

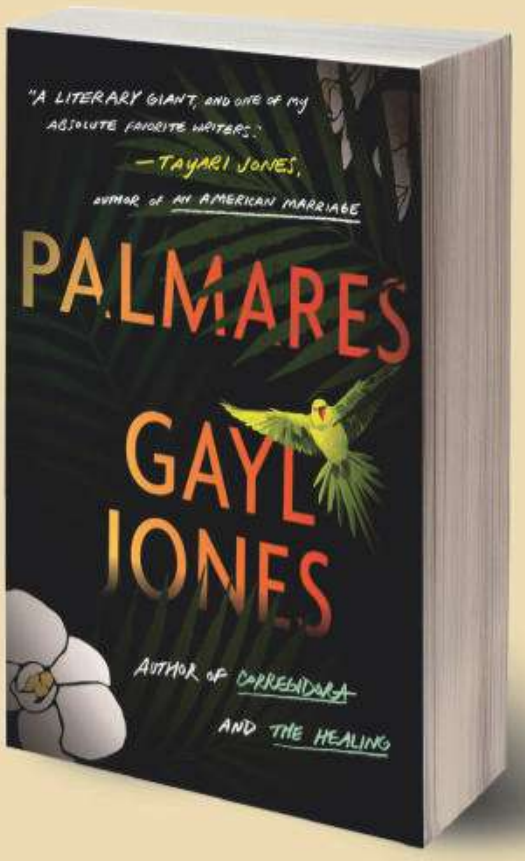
Blue whales can tell when the wind is changing. A new species of octopus was discovered at the Dongshan Seafood Market Pier. The California two-spot octopus always attacks using its second arm on either side. Marine biologists described the strange attractor of narwhals' apparent diurnal chaos. Declines in amphibian populations may be tied to malaria outbreaks among humans, zoo bears are being fed too much protein, and a two-decade observation of apes found evidence of enduring relationships between gorillas and chimpanzees. Hotel guests prefer female robots. Cornell computers anticipated the moves of volleyball players with 80 percent accuracy. The consciousness of ICU patients can be tracked algorithmically, and music may temper the delirium of elderly, mechanically ventilated ICU patients. Wakeful mind-blanking is structurally similar to deep sleep. Chemists were close to completing a marijuana breathalyzer. The lead author of a study on toxoplasmosis infections in humans explained that "the most 'sexy' takeaway from our study is that our political views are also shaped by biological factors, including parasitic infections," which were recently found to make humans sexier. Dehorning black rhinos does not hurt their sexual prospects. The pandemic led to a shortfall of three million American pet neuterings. Dogs can smell the lingering presence of stress. A green puppy was born on a lavender farm. ■

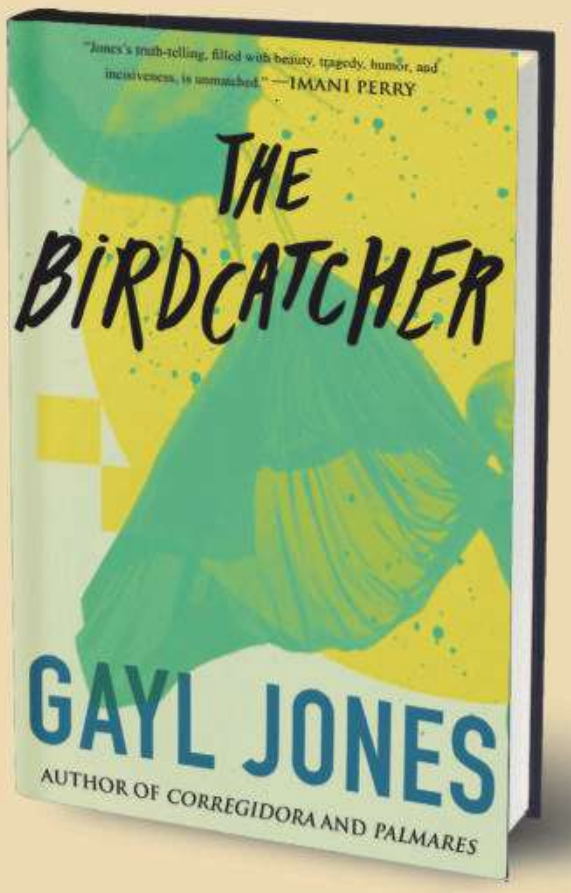
Let it Rice, Let it Rice, Let it Rice *and* Stuck in an Egg Tart, *paintings by Chang Ya Chin, whose work is on view this month with Half Gallery at Art Basel Miami © The artist. Courtesy Half Gallery, New York City*



"The Best American Novelist Whose Name You May Not Know."

—CALVIN BAKER, *The Atlantic*





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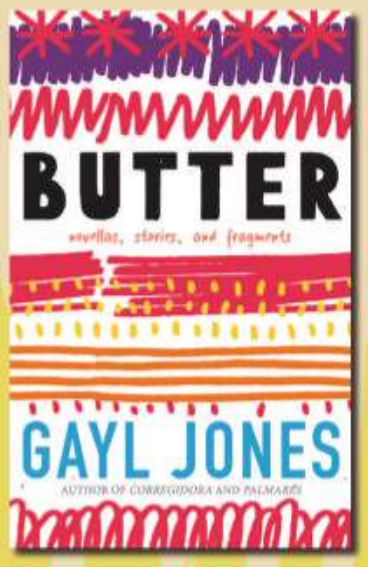

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