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# NEW YORKER





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# THE NEW YORKER

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## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



## POLITICS &amp; MORE PODCAST

Dorothy Wickenden and James Ross Gardner discuss the deployment of federal agents to the Portland protests.



## MEDICAL DISPATCH

Rachel Pearson on her experiences as a pediatrician and an expectant mother amid the pandemic in Texas.

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# THE MAIL

## DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE

As a health-care professional who during the pandemic has used telemedicine for the first time, I read John Seabrook's report on the subject with great interest ("Hands Off," June 29th). Seabrook does an excellent job outlining telemedicine's advantages and limitations, but my colleagues and I continue to wonder how a for-profit medical system that relies on "heads in beds" to drive revenue can adequately deliver virtual care, particularly amid a pandemic. In developed countries with socialized medical systems, saving lives means saving money, because reducing the number of sick people lowers costs for the system. But in the United States the situation is reversed. Despite surging E.R. and I.C.U. admittances, hospitals—owing to the cancellation of lucrative elective procedures—are losing money and laying off staff. Although preventive medicine, such as visits with a primary-care physician, produces the best patient outcomes, it generates only a fraction of an organization's profit. There is thus little economic incentive for health-care professionals to permanently adopt telemedicine.

Although I appreciate how the country has rallied around essential workers, let's not pass up the opportunity to take a critical look at our failing medical system. To support our health-care heroes in the long term, we should focus on building a system that isn't bound and gagged by insurance and reimbursement, and which offers its patients multiple quality options for preventive care.  
*Suzy Gordon*  
*Boulder, Colo.*

I am a developmental-behavioral pediatrician who can attest to many of the benefits of telemedicine that Seabrook describes. However, telemedicine relies both on access to technology, which many don't have, and on English-language telehealth platforms, which pose difficulties for people with limited English proficiency or low health-care literacy. As we consider the role of telehealth in health-care delivery—whether now or,

dare I say, in a post-COVID world—we must make sure that virtual care becomes more accessible and equitable. Otherwise, we will contribute to the widening of health disparities.

*Kate E. Wallis*  
*Philadelphia, Pa.*

Seabrook's whirlwind tour of telemedicine conflates two types of telehealth: the uncontroversial doctor-to-doctor consultation and the more problematic patient-to-doctor treatment. The former is simply a virtual form of the long-practiced "curbside consult," in which a treating physician solicits advice from a colleague. In contrast, seeing a patient via a cell phone or a laptop provides convenience at the cost of diagnostic accuracy and careful treatment. Yes, physical exams are sometimes unnecessary, and some lesions, for example, can be evaluated using a camera, but does anyone think that a stethoscope, a reflex hammer, and a hands-on examination are mere theatrics?

During the pandemic, virtual treatment has been a godsend for me as a physician—not because it is as good as offering my patients in-person care but because it is better than offering them no treatment at all. After the pandemic, as before, telemedicine will be valuable in remote locations, and as a tool for follow-ups with patients. But problems arise when health care is made to fit a technology, rather than vice versa. Commercial interests that see telehealth as a cash cow won't insure medical excellence, and a public that often prefers fast and cheap care won't choose higher-quality in-person consultations when there's a virtual option. Doctors must advocate for best practices, and this usually means in-person visits.

*Steven Reidbord*  
*San Francisco, Calif.*

•  
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, most New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas are closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.*

JULY 29 – AUGUST 11, 2020



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



With New York movie theatres closed to maintain social distancing, the big-screen experience has been thriving at drive-ins, which are making a comeback throughout the region—whether upstate (as at the **Warwick Drive-In**, pictured above), in New Jersey (at Demarest Farms, in Hillsdale), or within the city limits (at the Skyline, in Greenpoint). Offerings tend toward familiar fare, such as “The Goonies,” “Iron Man,” and “Mamma Mia!,” but also include such new releases as “Relic” and “She Dies Tomorrow.”

## ART

## Ja'Tovia Gary

Early in her rhapsodic forty-minute film, “The Giverny Document (Single Channel),” from 2019, this American artist is seen standing on a street in Harlem asking women, “Do you feel safe in your body?” One answer declares a collective truth: “It’s already not easy being Black.” These cinéma-vérité interviews flow in and out of dreamy direct-film animations, indelible self-portrait tableaux staged in Claude Monet’s garden, and extensive found footage, including scenes of Josephine Baker, Nina Simone, and the fatal police shooting of Philando Castile, captured by his fiancée, Diamond Reynolds. The intricate subject of Gary’s moving-image mosaic is Black women’s lives—and the faith that pain can transform into power. Reconfigured into three parts in museums and galleries—and accompanied by two altars to African goddesses—the piece has made Gary a rising star in the art world. (An exhibition at the Hammer Museum, in L.A., was cut short by the pandemic.) Last month, she released the film on YouTube, explaining, “I wanted as many Black women as possible to be able to view the film without having to negotiate access with institutions. People who I am making the work for, who I am in direct communication with, need to have an immediate link to it.”—*Andrea K. Scott (jatovia.com)*

## Edward Hopper

I haven’t seen this large show at the Beyeler Foundation, Switzerland’s premier museum of modern art. I take its fine catalogue, “Edward Hopper: A Fresh Look at Landscape,” edited by the exhibition’s curator, Ulf Küster, as occasion enough for reflecting anew on the artist’s stubborn force. (A selection of Hopper’s paintings is also on view on the museum’s Web site.) The visual bard of American solitude—not loneliness, a maudlin projection—speaks to our isolated states these days with fortuitous poignance. But Hopper is always doing that, pandemic or no pandemic. Aloneness is his great theme, symbolizing America: insecure selfhoods in a country that is only abstractly a nation. (“E pluribus unum,” a magnificent ideal, thuds on “unum” every day throughout the land.) The emotional tug of all of Hopper’s characters requires their unawareness of being looked at. To see them is to take on a peculiar responsibility. Can you pledge patriotic allegiance to a void? Hopper shows how, exploring a condition in which, by being separate, we belong together. You don’t have to like the idea, but, once you’ve truly experienced this painter’s art, it is as impossible to ignore as a stone in your shoe.—*Peter Schjeldahl*

## Sophie Taeuber-Arp

Recent reconfigurations of modern art history are finally bringing the essential contributions of women artists into the light. Although certain figures—such as the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint—did work outside of established avant-garde circles, other pathbreakers, such as Taeuber-Arp, have been hidden in plain sight. The Swiss polymath’s marriage to her fellow-Dadaist Hans Arp may have secured her initial entry to that fervid scene, but her collaborative spirit—she worked with Arp, among other male

artists—likely denied her top billing until now. An online viewing room, on Hauser & Wirth’s Web site, celebrates the gallery’s representation of Taeuber-Arp’s estate with images of her dynamic Constructivist tapestries and paintings, geometric costumes and marionettes designed for performances at Zurich’s legendary Cabaret Voltaire night club, sinuous carved sculptures, and more. A brief documentary overview of her career offers memorable glimpses of the artist’s interior-design work, including the painted walls of Strasbourg’s Café de l’Aubette and a Bauhaus-inspired studio-residence outside Paris, where she gathered with friends (Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Joan Miró, and Marcel Duchamp among them). Next year’s Taeuber-Arp retrospective, co-organized by MOMA, the Kunstmuseum Basel, and the Tate Modern, can’t arrive soon enough.—*Johanna Fateman (hauserwirth.com)*

## “Armageddon”

When Hollywood wants to signal that the apocalypse is near, symbols of Western art history are often seen flashing onscreen—as the gargoyles of Notre-Dame do in the 1998 blockbuster “Armageddon.” This thoughtful online-only exhibition, organized by Alexander Ferrando at Metro Pictures, unites three artists who question what constitutes so-called civilization. Olivier Laric replicates ancient artifacts, including a dog-headed Greek Hermanubis figure, using 3-D scanning and printing technology; he makes the files that create his work available as free digital downloads. Sara VanDerBeek manipulates photographs of marble Roman antiquities, inserting garish colors into the images to question the supposed neutrality of museum displays. Both Laric and VanDerBeek owe a major conceptual debt to the show’s third artist, Louise

## AT THE GALLERIES



As galleries cautiously start to reopen, the most socially distanced show of the summer may be the promising debut of **Serena Stevens** at two vanguard spaces: Postmasters, in lower Manhattan (through Sept. 12), and the National Exemplar, in Iowa City (through July 30). The young realist painter—who recently returned to her native Iowa after chasing the light in California, New Mexico, and Rhode Island—is at her best in scenes of domestic interiors, watchfully rendered rooms that convey the contradictions of home and the tension between melancholy and intimacy (as seen in “Rocking Chair,” above). The spaces are lived-in but unoccupied, except for the occasional cat. In the spectral cream-and-blue “Sit on It,” it takes a moment to register that one pet lounging on an overstuffed chair is really a pillow—imagine a LOLcat envisioned by Vilhelm Hammershøi, the Danish bard of empty interiors. Stevens works at a roughly one-to-one scale, a lifelike proportion that lends her big, voluptuously painted pictures both an immediacy and an air of déjà vu.—*Andrea K. Scott*

## COUNTRY POP

It's been fourteen years since **the Chicks** dropped an album, and the way they kick off their comeback record, "Gaslighter," sounds like they're releasing a breath they've held in for more than a decade. They belt out the singsong chorus of the title track—"Gaslighter, denier, doin' anything to get your ass farther"—with voices that are somehow light, springy, and heavy with pent-up frustration, all at the same time. On the songs that follow, they scorch bad partners and double down on their political outspokenness ("Cut the shit, you know your city is sinkin'," they tell climate-change skeptics on "March March"). It's the glossiest, most pop-oriented project yet from the country trio, who recently cut "Dixie" from their name because of the word's Confederate connotations. Changes aside, they sound more like themselves than ever.—*Julyssa Lopez*



Lawler, whose photographs of art in storage and installed in collectors' homes have now become icons in their own right. (Lawler was the subject of a critically acclaimed retrospective at MOMA, in 2017.) In one photo, from 1984, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's sculpture of Ugolino (from Dante's *Inferno*) looks ready for a silver-screen closeup itself.—*J.F. (metropictures.com)*

## MUSIC

## Alarm Will Sound

**CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL** The new-music ensemble Alarm Will Sound built its reputation on innovation and disruption, and those qualities have persisted in the group's COVID-era projects, starting with a genuinely moving video-based reimaging of John Luther Adams's "Ten Thousand Birds," shared on YouTube in June. That composition, in its original form, will be featured in two live performances in upstate New York—at PS21, in Chatham (Aug. 7), and Artpark, in Lewiston (Aug. 9)—both of which will impose limited attendance and social distancing. August also brings the debut of "Video Chat Variations," an online series in which eminent creators are commissioned to write new works expressly designed for remote online performance; the first episode (Aug. 1) features the world première of "Anthem," by the iconic vocalist and composer Meredith Monk.—*Steve Smith (Aug. 1 at 9, Aug. 7 at 4, and Aug. 9 at 6:30.)*

## Shirley Collins: "Heart's Ease"

**FOLK** In the late seventies, the English folk grandee Shirley Collins lost her ability to sing as a result of dysphonia, a medical condition that befell the musician after her husband disclosed his love for another woman. Robbed of her angelic voice by heartbreak like a hapless fairy-tale heroine,

Collins did not release an album for a startling thirty-eight years; she reëmerged in 2016 with "Lodestar," and now unveils its comparatively rapid follow-up, "Heart's Ease." At eighty-five, she wields a voice far gruffer than the one that first wooed listeners, but the singer remains in her element. English folkies, even when they're young, tend to sound like grandmothers, anyway, thanks to their pacific lilt and antiquated source material. Six decades ago, a bright-eyed Collins travelled with the folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax as he recorded folk and blues elders whose warts-and-all performances opened windows onto taxing, enigmatic lives. Now Collins has joined their ranks, and her serene record finds peace amid a life spent in and out of music.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

## Ellie Goulding: "Brightest Blue"

**POP** The word "ethereal" turns up constantly in descriptions of the singer Ellie Goulding. Her voice, diaphanous and light, has become one of the most recognizable in pop music—she sings as though she's actively trying to give listeners goosebumps. Her vocal approach is undoubtedly distinct, but the sonic directions she's taken are less clear-cut. On her new album, "Brightest Blue," Goulding tamps down the maximalist inclinations of her past and leans deeper into delicate balladry. Despite the cinematic climaxes of songs such as "Flux," the record can drag, and an upbeat, six-song addendum, featuring Lauv and Juice WRLD, among others, makes the effort feel bifurcated rather than eclectic. To her credit, Goulding pulls off different styles with ease, and trying a bit of everything has slowly become a signature.—*Julyssa Lopez*

## Juice WRLD: "Legends Never Die"

**HIP-HOP** Gloom and angst come with the emo-rap terrain, but Juice WRLD brought such raw, razored complexity to the landscape that his

association with the genre almost shortchanges him. The rapper died of an accidental overdose six days after his twenty-first birthday, this past December; though his career was tragically short, he established himself as an aching lyricist whose mournful rap-singing—inspired by trap and emo rock—revealed experiences with depression and heartbreak. Sadly, on his posthumous album, "Legends Never Die," his candor offers more bleakness than closure. The record is full of Auto-Tuned elegies about addiction and emotional turmoil, including "Wishing Well" and "Bad Energy." Still, it stands as a memorial to his exposed vulnerabilities, with crystalline songs such as "Righteous" preserving the best of his tender approach.—*J.L.*

## "Met Stars Live in Concert"

**OPERA** It's hard to replicate the experience of seeing a show at the Metropolitan Opera, with its starburst chandeliers and its multistory, gold-leaf ceiling, but the company isn't taking the lockdown lying down. Its new pay-per-view online series, "Met Stars Live in Concert," features some of its biggest headliners singing beloved arias and duets in sumptuous settings. On Aug. 1, Renée Fleming revisits gorgeous moments from her considerable discography, including solos from "Die Tote Stadt," "Faust," and "Der Rosenkavalier," at the Dumbarton Oaks estate, in Washington, D.C. Later this month, the husband-and-wife team of Roberto Alagna and Aleksandra Kurzak sing Romantic-era duets at a château on the French Riviera (Aug. 16), and the budding dramatic soprano Lise Davidsen nods to a legendary predecessor by closing her recital at a Norwegian palace with Birgit Nilsen's famous party piece "I Could Have Danced All Night" (Aug. 29). Each concert is available to stream for twelve days.—*Oussama Zahr*

## "Musik, Music, Musique"

**NEW WAVE** When much of the material on the three-disk anthology "Musik, Music, Musique—1980: The Dawn of Synth Pop" was first released, it presaged a freeze-dried musical future, thanks in part to the limited palettes of primitive synthesizers. With those melodic pings and whistles now an everyday aspect of pop music, tracks that once sounded defiantly outré—such as the soft-focussed Martian bop of the Residents' "Diskomo" or Nini Raviollette's coldwave recitation "Suis-Je Normale?"—feel practically cuddly now. The same goes for the big, bad future depicted in M's Bowie-indebted dystopian ditty "Official Secrets," which sounds a lot more fetching than the one we got.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

## Christopher Rouse: Symphony No. 5

**CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL** For the many admirers of Christopher Rouse, a well-loved American composer who died last September, a new recording of his Symphony No. 5, by the conductor Giancarlo Guerrero and the Nashville Symphony, will prove a welcome arrival. In the piece, which was introduced in 2017 by Jaap van Zweden and the Dallas Symphony, Rouse translates childhood memories of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony into his own muscular, fantastical idiom. Also included here are "Supplica," a rapturous meditation from 2013, and Concerto for Orchestra, a kaleidoscopic showpiece from 2008. Abetted by

robust performances, the album offers persuasive justification for Rouse's enduring appeal.—S.S.

## “Streaming Live at the Vanguard”

**JAZZ** It's both fitting and reassuring that the Village Vanguard, New York's iconic jazz club, has adapted to our present circumstances by streaming weekly performances from its hallowed basement every Friday and Saturday. The veteran pianist Fred Hersch, whose interaction with his bandmates is as impassioned as his own incisive improvising, takes to the stage with Drew Gress on bass and Jochen Rueckert on drums, two gifted players who also join him on an upcoming record. The lack of an audience and the energy it brings to a show may strike an odd chord, but the stream's unencumbered views and direct sound may prove an unexpected boon for those fans who have been stymied by the fabled club's partial sight lines.—*Steve Futterman (July 31 and Aug. 1 at 9.)*

## DANCE

### Beach Sessions Dance Series

For the past five years, this series has brought site-specific dance to the sands of Rockaway Beach, in Queens. This summer, the action is moving to the social-media platform TikTok. Such inventive choreographers as Pam Tanowitz, Moriah Evans, and Gillian Walsh have devised short dances or dance phrases that anyone and everyone can learn, available on the Beach Sessions' TikTok profile, @beachsessions-danceseries, starting on July 30. Film yourself performing one or all—outside, if possible—and post the footage to participate.—*Brian Seibert*

### Jacob's Pillow

On July 30, at 7 P.M., the now virtual festival screens excerpts from the Royal Danish Ballet's last visit, in 2018. (The company has been attending since 1955.) They include a pas de sept from “A Folk Tale” and a pas de deux from “Kermesse in Bruges”—both ballets by the Danish choreographer August Bournonville seldom seen in the U.S.—and also the second act of the more familiar “Giselle.” The following Thursday marks the fiftieth-anniversary appearance by Dance Theatre of Harlem, the company founded by Arthur Mitchell one year after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. It just so happens that the company's inaugural performance, in 1970, was at Jacob's Pillow. This broadcast, also at 7 P.M., features the windblown “Valse Fantaisie,” by George Balanchine, and “Harlem on My Mind,” by Darrell Grand Moultrie, a choreographer with one foot in ballet and the other in musical theatre.—*Marina Harss (jacobspillow.org/virtual-pillow)*

### Kaatsbaan Summer Festival Kaatsbaan Cultural Park

The location is idyllic: acres of open fields near the Hudson River in Tivoli, New York. The area is in Phase IV of reopening, which allows for gatherings of up to fifty people, making performances possible, particularly outdoors. Kaatsbaan's new artistic director, Stella Abrera—formerly of American Ballet Theatre—and executive director, Sonja Kostich,

have put together a small but ambitious dance festival. On weekends from Aug. 1 to Sept. 27, short performances will take place on an outdoor stage. The safety measures are extensive. The focus is on the return of live, in-person performance, but also on social justice, and recognizing the talents of Black dancers, choreographers, artists, and curators. Participants include Calvin Royal III, of A.B.T., Lloyd Knight, of the Martha Graham Dance Company, Tamisha Guy, of A.I.M., and the independent choreographer Jodi Melnick.—*M.H. (kaatsbaan.org/performances)*

### Live @ Home/Studio 5

This series from New York City Center pairs today's top American ballerinas with those of previous generations to discuss and demonstrate sections of great ballets. The session on July 30 focusses on the warhorse “Swan Lake.” The ballerinas are Sara Mearns, of New York City Ballet, and Nina Ananiashvili, the Georgian-born Bolshoi ballerina who spent years as a guest dancer with American Ballet Theatre. Both have performed extraordinary, and highly contrasting, renditions of the lead role. Ananiashvili, beaming in from Tbilisi, where she is the head of the Georgian state ballet company, coaches Mearns in a New York studio.—*M.H. (nycity-center.org/pdps/2019-2020/live-at-home/studio-5)*

### Mobile Dance Film Festival

Whether made in Uruguay, Australia, or the United States, the short films in this annual

festival, presented by the 92nd Street Y, have one thing in common: they were all shot on smartphones or other mobile devices. This year, however, they're split into two groups: the thirty created before the pandemic, and the thirteen made during lockdown, amid the challenges of social distancing.—*B.S. (92y.org/dance/mobile-dance-film-festival)*

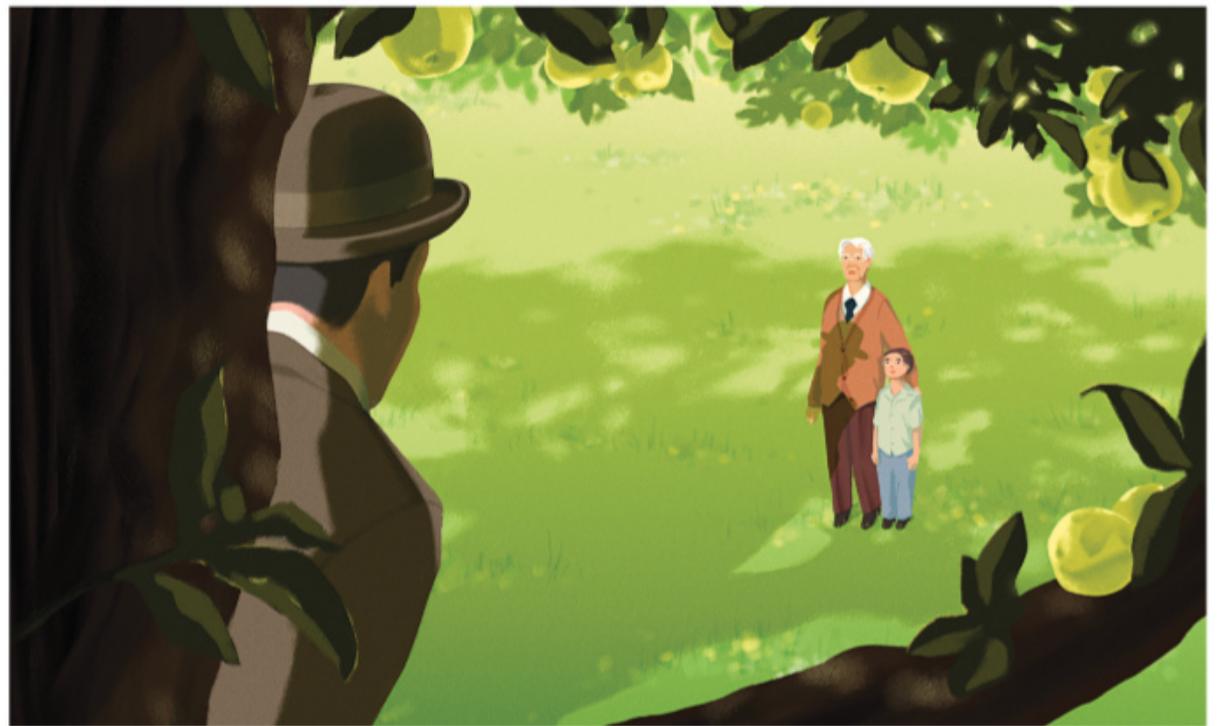
### Shantala Shivalingappa

Shivalingappa is a leading proponent of Kuchipudi, a dance form from the southeast Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. “Bhairava,” on JoyceStream starting on July 30 at 7 P.M., is not a filmed performance but a dance film, directed by the Canadian filmmakers Marlene Millar and Philip Szporer. Shivalingappa performs solo, accompanied by four musicians, on the granite hillsides near Hampi—a medieval Hindu temple complex in Karnataka—and in and around the temple itself. The dancing alludes to various aspects of the deity Lord Shiva but can also be seen as a kind of visual poem, a distillation of Shivalingappa's sinuous and dynamic movement, the singing of Ramesh Jetty, and the unforgiving landscape.—*M.H. (joyce.org/joycestream)*

### Vail Digital Dance Festival

Beyond its Rocky Mountain location, the Vail Dance Festival has distinguished itself, in the last fifteen years, as an event in which world-class dancers perform pieces and try out partnerships that they don't elsewhere. That's one

## VIRTUAL READING



In Paul Osborn's chestnut “**On Borrowed Time**,” from 1938, a little boy and his grandpa are visited by a mysterious Mr. Brink, who turns out to be Death incarnate. The old man tricks Mr. Brink into climbing an apple tree and then keeps him stuck up there, to forestall the inevitable. The stage legend Joel Grey directs a virtual reading of the play, with a cast that includes Sam Waterston, Bill Irwin, Phillipa Soo, and Bebe Neuwirth, as part of a benefit series produced by New Jersey's Two River Theatre. Act I will be performed on Aug. 5 and Act II on Aug. 6, with proceeds going to the Actors Fund. Oakes Fegley plays the grandson, a part that the eighty-eight-year-old Grey knows well: he played it himself, at the Cleveland Playhouse, when he was nine. Visit [tworivertheater.org](http://tworivertheater.org).—*Michael Schulman*

reason that the festival, running July 31-Aug. 7, now has plenty of great footage to stream virtually. Many of the works—by Justin Peck, Alonzo King, and Michelle Dorrance, among others—have never been seen outside Vail, and at least one—by Bobbi Jene Smith, with Melissa Toogood and Calvin Royal III—is brand new.—*B.S. (vaildance.org)*

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## MOVIES

### Jayhawkers

The politics inherent to sports get an analytical workout in the director Kevin Willmott's vigorous, insightful historical drama, set in the mid-nineteen-fifties, about the basketball star Wilt Chamberlain's college years, at the University of Kansas at Lawrence. On a recruiting visit, Chamberlain (played by Justin Wesley), who is Black, learns from prominent Black alumni that his stardom will empower him to become an instant local civil-rights leader.

Once installed on campus, he defies segregation in a restaurant and a movie theatre, and publicly mocks a white music professor who won't let his schoolmate Nathan Davis (Trai Byers) play jazz. (The real-life Davis, Chamberlain's college friend and a notable jazz musician, composed the film's score.) Willmott emphasizes the cruelties and horrors of Jim Crow, as in a sequence involving a playoff game in Dallas. In extended on-court scenes, he also scrutinizes the fine points of the sport itself, parsing the action with his high-contrast black-and-white palette. A teeming cast of characters, endowed with scintillatingly expressive dialogue, evokes the wide spectrum of experience that Chamberlain's college career—and powerful personality—encompassed. Released in 2014.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon Prime.)*

### She Dies Tomorrow

This paranoid drama of intimate apocalypse, written and directed by Amy Seimetz, is an eerily anticipatory tale of mortal contagion. Kate Lyn Sheil stars as Amy, a recovering alcoholic

who moves into a luxuriously furnished house that she's just bought and, as if overwhelmed by solitude, is seized with the certainty—heralded by flashing colored lights and sounds of sepulchral murk—that she has only one day left to live. She calls her friend Jane (Jane Adams), an artist who photographs images of blood as seen through a microscope, and Jane is soon gripped by the same sense of doom. They visit friends, relatives, and professional contacts, and infect them with it, too. Dramatic logic yields to symbolic fury as the metaphysical virus rips through their social network of the comfortable and the frivolous, leaving a trail of emotional wreckage and physical carnage. Seimetz films this coldly ghoulish and derisive fable with quiet intensity and rage at the way of the world. With James Benning.—*R.B. (Screening at drive-in theatres and streaming on Amazon and other services.)*

### Wadjda

Haifaa Al-Mansour's first feature, from 2013, is also the first to be directed by a Saudi Arabian woman. Waad Mohammed plays Wadjda, a girl of ten or eleven, who lives in Riyadh with her mother (Reem Abdullah) and father (Sultan Al Assaf), although he is seldom at home; we realize, as her mother's anxiety deepens, that he is seeking a second wife. Wadjda, perhaps in response to this tension, seeks what freedom she can; time and again, she bumps against her society's limits, whether at school, under the scolding gaze of the principal (Ahd), or on the streets, where her hope of buying and riding a bicycle, through a world of men, seems forlorn. There is no burst of fury in the film, and the moments of rebellion are subtle and few, yet our sense of society as a cage—or as a never-ending school day, where grown women are ruled and restricted like children—is unflinching. In Arabic.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 9/16/13.) (Streaming on Amazon and other services.)*

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## WHAT TO STREAM



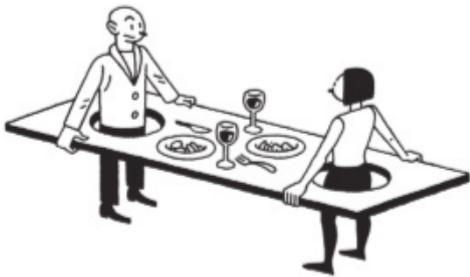
Religious repression gets satirized incisively in the writer and director Karen Maine's impressively intricate comedy **"Yes, God, Yes,"** set in the early two-thousands. (It's available via virtual cinemas and streaming services.) Natalia Dyer stars as Alice, a teen-ager in a strict Catholic high school where a teacher (Donna Lynne Champlin) patrols the hallway measuring girls' skirts and a hip young priest (Timothy Simons) earnestly inculcates sexual abstinence. But, at home, the naturally curious Alice explores Internet chat rooms in quest of knowledge and pleasure. On a school-sponsored four-day-long spiritual retreat, she develops a fierce crush on Chris (Wolfgang Novogratz), a tall and hairy athletic star, while enduring frenemies' rumors about her sex life. She also catches glimpses of other transgressors, and both processes and leverages those discoveries. Maine gleefully and ruefully lampoons the church's hectoring rhetoric and the torments endured—and inflicted—by students subjected to it. Dyer, with expressions like question marks, deepens emotionally charged situations with furtive glances and rapid gestures; she gives Alice's secrets and obsessions tremulous energy, and Maine's camera shivers along with her.—*Richard Brody*

### The Wrong Missy

With her idiosyncratic and energetic performance, Lauren Lapkus deserves more nuanced writing and direction than she gets in this cleverly conceived but scattershot romantic comedy. She plays Melissa, a.k.a. Missy, an uninhibited, unfiltered, and seemingly unhinged woman who proves to be the date from Hell for a straitlaced corporate striver named Tim (David Spade). Months later, Tim meets the woman of his dreams, an executive who is also named Melissa (Molly Sims). Soon thereafter, he mistakenly texts the first Missy to join him on his company's team-building retreat in Hawaii, resulting in a horrific skein of embarrassments in front of his boss (Geoff Pierson) and other colleagues. Of course, the situation is happily straightened out, thanks in large measure to the revelation that, beneath her apparently oblivious manner, Missy harbors nearly superhuman aptitudes. The screenwriters, Chris Pappas and Kevin Barnett, develop elaborate frameworks that steal precious screen time from Lapkus's wildest inspirations, and they offer no character behind Missy's quirks; the direction, by Tyler Spindel, has a sitcom's impatient neutrality.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix.)*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Picnic Baskets

The past few months have been, you could say, no picnic. Might I suggest . . . a picnic? Picnicking—on a sandy beach, a verdant meadow, or even a tar-sticky rooftop, with a blanket for both table and cloth—is, as the idiom implies, the height of earthly pleasure. Think of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s iconic nineteen-thirties photograph “Sunday on the Banks of the Marne” (the English word comes from the French *pique-nique*), in which four people in repose on a grassy slope pour wine and eat with their hands, napkins spread across their laps, in view of a boat equipped with folding chairs and fishing rods, or of Fernando Botero’s paintings of rotund figures reclining among fruit baskets, bottles, and loaves of bread atop a surrealist mountain range or lawn.

As the summer unfolds and the pandemic rages on, as New Yorkers resign to dining only en plein air, a handful of restaurants have seized on picnic potential. Sami & Susu, a self-described “modern-Mediterranean pickup and delivery restaurant,” which opened last month out of a Williamsburg bar, is

offering several sizes of mix-and-match, meze-style “picnic sets,” paired with a bottle or two of wine (sets \$48–\$110). On a recent balmy Saturday, sitting cross-legged on a sun-dappled bedsheet, mask affixed to my chin, I alternated bites of pastrami-spiced roasted cauliflower, slathered in citrus-scented nectarine mustard, with swigs of cold rosé from the Luberon, and swiped plush pita through a luscious baba ghanoush.

I brought, to a socially distanced salon in the waning shadow of Prospect Park’s Picnic House, Café Kitsuné’s pricey picnic for two (\$150), a canvas tote packed with what I imagine the luckiest French children eat for lunch: folds of frilly ham and sliced Gruyère on a chewy baguette; plump and plummy olives, marinated in lemon zest and thyme; house-made yam chips; and crisp, buttery, fox-shaped sables with a satisfying snap. (Plus a bottle of natural Riesling, complete with a branded wine key and paper cups.)

Basically any variety of fried chicken, which is generally as good if not better at room temperature as it is hot, insures a divine feast outdoors; Bubby’s, in Tribeca, makes it especially easy with its fried-chicken picnic package (\$100), featuring eight craggy pieces accompanied by flaky buttermilk biscuits, coleslaw, and four slices of pie, with fillings such as chocolate peanut butter and local blueberry. (If there were a suggestion box, I’d submit that mashed potatoes with gravy, also included, are as wrong for a picnic as fried chicken is right, but it’s a forgivable offense.)

I found the pinnacle of picnic, though, at Otaku Katsu, a tiny basement shop on the Lower East Side that never fit many people, anyhow. I’d eat the Sando Picnic Set (\$50) in the pouring rain, so enticing is its array; as it happens, I enjoyed it beneath the shade of a leafy tree on an idyllic afternoon when the humidity had temporarily lifted. Two cobs of sweet corn—their husks peeled back and braided beautifully into sturdy handles—were charred and slathered in an irresistible combination of miso butter and Kewpie mayo scented with yuzu, which served as an adherent for zesty togarashi and fluttery bonito flakes (though a few were carried off by a gentle breeze).

Five half-sandwiches, on perfect rectangles of squishy, crustless white bread, were nestled neatly into cardboard containers, not a dud among the bunch, from a classic, creamy egg salad to a panko-crusting salmon fillet, layered with silky shreds of white cabbage and slicks of salty-sweet katsu sauce. *Dायनु*, as the Jews say—“that would have been enough”—and yet there were also nori-dusted crinkle-cut potato chips; a trio of onigiri, or rice balls, stuffed with salted sour-plum paste, yuzu-marinated salmon belly, or kani salad; a tub of densely crunchy, wrinkled Japanese pickles (coins of cucumber, half-moons of daikon, matchsticks of eggplant dyed magenta with red shiso); and a hijiki salad with edamame, crumbled tofu, and tender nubs of shiitake mushroom. Yes, picnic.

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT THE WOMEN'S VOTE

For a country that prides itself on its democracy, the United States has forced a lot of its citizens to fight for the privilege of voting. August 18th marks the centenary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which declares that the right to vote “shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” That milestone is sometimes described as having “given” women the right to vote. It wasn’t a gift; it was a hard-won victory on the part of suffragists who’d been agitating for it for more than seventy years, on the basis of their common humanity with men.

Even in the decade before the amendment was passed, its ratification was by no means a certainty. Though women had the vote in a handful of Western states, elsewhere in the country state after state turned down women’s suffrage. The antis, who fretted that women would be irredeemably sullied by the rough-and-tumble of politics (and would push issues such as temperance and wage equality), included women as well as men.

It took a surge of inventive, audacious, confrontational protests, inspired in part by militant British suffragists, to reenergize the movement. In January, 1917, the National Women’s Party, led by the single-minded young suffragist Alice Paul, began a campaign of civil disobedience. For the first time, protesters picketed the White House. Woodrow Wilson, a Southern Democrat and patrician racist who had been reelected President the previous year, had no interest in support-

ing a federal amendment granting women the vote, but tolerated the provocation for a while. After the United States entered the First World War, though, the suffragists started carrying signs comparing Wilson to the Kaiser, and his patience ran out. In June, the police began arresting the protesters en masse. Convicted of offenses such as “disorderly conduct” and “obstructing sidewalk traffic,” they were imprisoned, in harsh and filthy conditions, at the Occoquan Workhouse, in Lorton, Virginia.

When the women were denied recognition as political prisoners, they went on hunger strike, and guards subjected them to horrific force-feedings. The more moderate suffragists continued to lobby male politicians, for the most part politely and effectively. But when Congress finally passed the Nineteenth Amendment, and the states ratified it, that victory was largely due to the new

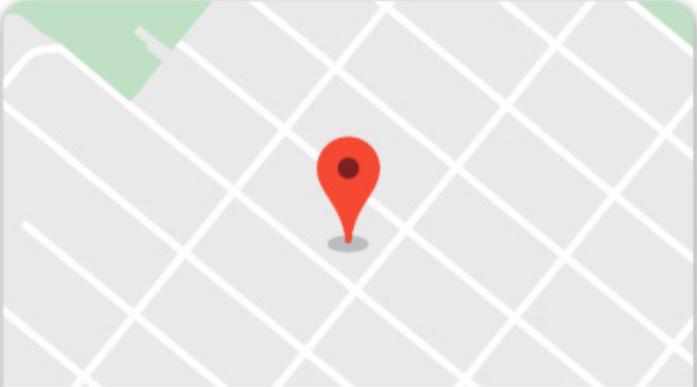
breed of suffragist who simply would not stand down. “People who had never before thought of suffrage for women had to think about it,” a jailed picketer recalled, “if only to the extent of objecting to the way in which we asked for it.”

In the Presidential election of 1920, and for some years after, women did not vote in the expected large numbers. It was easy to blame them for a deficiency of civic spirit, and plenty of people did, including former suffragists. But there were structural forces at work. Local election officials often regarded the influx of new voters as a burden, and imposed poll taxes and literacy tests. Black women, in particular, faced obstacles that made voting risky and difficult, if not impossible.

The disenfranchisement of Black women was a cause that Alice Paul and the newly formed League of Women Voters should have taken up—not least because African-Americans had been key figures in the drive for female suffrage, dating back to Frederick Douglass’s enthusiastic participation in the Seneca Falls Convention, in 1848, and Sojourner Truth’s “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech, three years later, up through the N.A.A.C.P.’s advocacy for the cause, starting in the nineteen-tens. Yet when Black women’s groups appealed to Paul for help, in 1921, she refused them, saying that the problem was a “race issue,” not a “women’s issue.”

Some suffragists had hoped that women would consolidate into a coherent voting bloc, but this never happened. Women had their own crosscutting interests of class, race, and political and religious beliefs. They disagreed even on so-called women’s issues, such as





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abortion. But the past four years have been remarkably effective at turning women into a more united force. The historian Lara Putnam and the sociologist Theda Skocpol, who have studied the unprecedented mobilization of suburban college-educated women, most of them Democrats, since the Women's March in 2017, call it a "national pattern of mutually energizing local engagement" that is shifting the political landscape.

The gender gap that first appeared during Ronald Reagan's Presidency has widened into a chasm since the election of Donald Trump: according to the Pew Research Center, fifty-six per cent of women now say that they are Democrats or lean that way, versus thirty-eight per cent who identify as or lean Republican. Black women, who tend to vote more reliably than other groups and who cast their ballots overwhelmingly for Democrats, played a crucial role in the 2018 midterms and in the

2020 Presidential primaries, especially in the South.

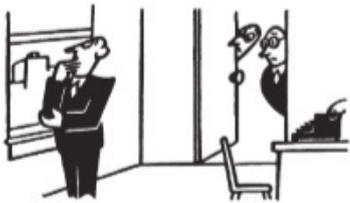
Even among the white working-class voters who anchor Trump's base, support for the President has fallen among women—from sixty-one per cent to fifty per cent, according to a new ABC News/Washington *Post* poll. (His support among white men is as high as it was in 2016.) A year ago, the Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg conducted focus groups of working-class voters in Maine and Wisconsin. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the resulting report concluded that women who had pulled away from Trump did so because "his ego makes him impulsive and a bully, healthcare remains unaffordable, he's dividing the country, he doesn't care about the working class, only the 1 per cent, he's corrupt and out for himself and he doesn't respect women." (And that was before his mishandling of the pandemic.) Voting out of office a Pres-

ident whom even former supporters describe that way—and who seeks to discourage voter turnout and crush protests aimed at advancing human rights—would be a better way to mark the struggle that women endured to win the franchise than any reverent commemoration.

In a powerful speech on the House floor last week, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez denounced the language that she had been subjected to by a Republican colleague, Ted Yoho. He had called her, among other things, "disgusting" and "out of your freaking mind." In some ways, the kind of verbal abuse she cited isn't so different from the denigration heaped on women who protested for the vote. In 1918, the *Times* editorialized that women being jailed for "suffrage obsession" ought more properly to be put in the hands of psychiatrists. How grateful we are to those women and their obsession now.

—Margaret Talbot

## WYOMING POSTCARD BEST WESTERN



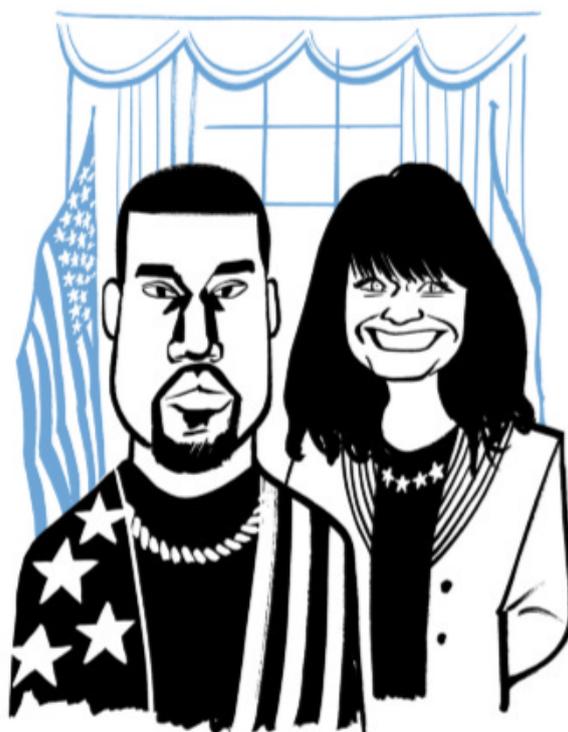
Bill Garlow, the great-grandson of Buffalo Bill Cody, owns two Best Western hotels in Cody, Wyoming. In June, Garlow, who is seventy-eight, found himself sitting in his office across from Kanye West—a Cody resident since 2019—along with West's cousin and a Yeezy employee. None of them wore masks. "Kanye kept saying, 'Best . . . West . . . ern,'" Lindsay Garlow, Bill's daughter, who'd sat in on the meeting, recalled. "He didn't seem to know that it was a chain of international hotels." West loved the name—and he thought her dad had come up with it. The group spoke for an hour. "They were on their phones the entire time, texting," she said. "As a teacher, that drives me batshit crazy." Eventually, Bill cleared his throat, and West looked up. "He wanted to talk to Dad about hospitality," Lindsay said, "but we weren't sure where he was going with that." West further confused the Garlows when he removed one of his Yeezy shoes and passed it across the desk to

Bill. "It was weird," Lindsay said. She noted her dad's poor health, adding, "I told him to wash up when Kanye left."

West had spoken to them about his love of Jesus and his idolization of Donald Trump. But he had said little about his Presidential campaign, which he would announce a week later—"Other than a sentence that began, 'When I am President,'" Lindsay said. The Garlows Googled his platform. It includes, as a coronavirus measure, "Stop making God mad." West is also anti-Planned Parenthood

and anti-Black History Month. (At a campaign stop in Charleston, West said, to boos, that Harriet Tubman "never actually freed the slaves.") The Garlows plan to vote for Joe Biden. "But if it were Kanye versus Trump, I'd vote Kanye," Lindsay said. "He's kinder. And he's been booking us full since January," with friends and associates. Her father added, "I have half his business. I'd like all of it."

Unlike Biden, West has announced his running mate: Michelle Tidball, a fifty-seven-year-old white woman from Cody who runs an online Bible study, works in a dental office, and has so far said nothing public about the campaign. To find out more about her, Lindsay Garlow suggested calling Mary L. Keller, a scholar of religious studies at the University of Wyoming. Keller and Tidball attended Cody High in the early eighties. "Michelle was the bubbly, charismatic cheerleader," Keller said. And she's smart. "I think she knows Hebrew pretty well." In 2016, the two women ran a youth group together, and Tidball had talked about her role as an "online prophet." "We went out for drinks, and she told me about this international group of people who are in touch with the divine and discuss it with each other," Keller recalled. Tidball also told her that they'd predicted Trump's victory. Keller



*Kanye West and Michelle Tidball*

laughed at the memory. “To her, his election was evidence.”

When Keller heard about West choosing Tidball, she said, “it made sense. They both believe they have direct access to God and read the world as evidence of that access.” She figured they’d probably met through Tidball’s online prophet network. “The religious imagination is about the only thing that can provide language for drought, flood, fire,” she said, noting an upside. “I see Kanye and Michelle as the kinds of voices that people might turn to for a meaningful story in the face of climate change.” She added, “We’d all be safer with Michelle next to Kanye than we are with Pence next to Trump.”

One local Tidball booster, Wallace Johnson, is a retired lawyer and a former special assistant to Richard Nixon. Years ago, he hired Tidball to run a mentoring program. She was “great with the kids,” he said. He is also a patient at her dental office: “I saw her there just before Kanye’s announcement.” He wasn’t sure where she and West had met. Maybe an airport lounge? “Michelle has spent considerable time studying the Torah, and I’m sure he picked up on that,” Johnson went on. “She’s a wise pick: extremely articulate, likable, and capable. As far from Sarah Palin as I can imagine.” He added, “I never thought Kanye had a theology of his own, but maybe he’s developing one. I don’t want to call it a cult, but that’s what a new religion is. Michelle could help with that. She’s very persuasive.” Starting a religion is easier than running for President. Recently, West tweeted that he may push his run to 2024. “I don’t think we’re about to say that the forty-sixth President lives here in Cody,” Johnson said. “Maybe in four years, but not now.”

—Charles Bethea

## BRIDGE AND TUNNEL DEPT. FLOTSAM



Weekend swabbies readied themselves to swarm New York Harbor on Sunday, July 19th, for Trump-Stock NY, a floating political rally, which, its organizers hoped, would

“make liberals cry.” The more immediate effect was to give the local Coast Guard agita. According to Chief Warrant Officer Mariana (“like the deep sea trench”) O’Leary, a week before the event, official attempts to communicate with Boaters for Trump New York had met with radio silence. No permit application had been filed. A direct message from the group’s Facebook page told participants to “just show up.”

“Trumptillas” (Trump flotillas) and “KAGattas” (“Keep America Great” regattas) have been spotted around the country since Memorial Day. The President approves, retweeting announcements and praising the “beautiful ‘boaters.’” At a Florida event, he crowed, “There are thousands and thousands of boats every weekend. . . . Nobody has seen anything like it ever!”

“No way are we going, ‘Yeah, this is great,’” O’Leary said, five days before the New York event. That day, the group finally filed a permit application, proposing a course looping through some of the world’s busiest waters—across the Upper Bay from the Statue of Liberty, around Governors Island, and up the Buttermilk Channel, a tight strait frequented by barges. The boats would do a U-turn at the Brooklyn Bridge and power up the Hudson to the George Washington Bridge. The application “didn’t meet our safety standards,” O’Leary said. A permit was granted for a modified route, with a projected six hundred boats going directly to the George Washington Bridge from the statue, and finishing by 3 P.M.

On Sunday morning, the sun glared off the wet fibreglass hulls of a gaggle of Jet Skis, cabin cruisers, and muscle boats in the harbor, ringed by seven Coast Guard vessels and a smattering of F.D.N.Y., N.Y.P.D., N.J. State Police, and U.S. Park Police craft. “Trump 2020” banners and “Don’t Tread on Me” flags flapped in the wind. A flag read “Adorable Deplorable.” On a banner, “Honor and Remember” was spelled out in bloopy orange letters reminiscent of the Dunkin’ Donuts logo. The lead boat, called Team Deplorable, had a Trump impersonator on deck, and the rest of the flotilla evidenced a thriving market for inflatable Trumps. The songs blasting over the marine radio (“Born in the U.S.A.,” “American Pie”)



seemed to have been chosen by keyword search rather than by comprehension of the lyrics.

The seafarers bobbed in anticipation of what they expected to be a gleeful invasion of left-leaning waters. Confusion set in early, as they communicated with one another over Marine Radio Channel 11, an official V.H.F. band reserved for the aquatic version of air-traffic control. “Does anyone know which is the check-in boat?” one hailed. “I don’t think there’s no such thing,” came the reply. A long horn blast of warning from an oncoming Staten Island ferry was met with a chorus of toots from the Trump supporters, who mistook it for a friendly salute. Steve Ursomanno, a commercial captain who runs dinner cruises out of Pier 83 and was aboard his friend’s Sea Ray Sundancer, was embarrassed. “Most pleasure boaters have no clue how to operate in the harbor,” he said. During his off-hours, he enjoys flying a Trump flag from his Yamaha WaveRunner as he speeds along the Upper West Side. “I call it fishing for liberals,” he said.

When the boaters discovered the proper radio channel, 82, the chatter ran from fanboy excitement to seething resentment. A sampling:

“This is gonna be *yuuuuuuge!*”

“Does anyone know when the Trump chopper will be flying over?”

“That would be *epic!*”

“Is there a boat where I can buy T-shirts?”

“Get a Trump flag and wear it like

a cape. Then you'd be like a superhero!"

"If Joe Biden's boat breaks down, don't stop for him."

"I think I saw Hillary up front. Time for a keelhauling!"

To an F.D.N.Y. boat: "We'd love to see the water cannons!"

"Unfortunately they can't do that."

"Yeah, but they did it for the gay-pride parade!"

After they realized that, in the middle of the Hudson, they were not visible to people onshore: "Everyone to the Manhattan side! No one can see your flags!"

At this exhortation, some mutinying boats and Jet Skis veered toward the bank, skimming over submerged pilings off Riverside Park. A local paddleboarder who was nearly wiped out by the racing vessels said later, "I'm surprised none of them got hulled."

In less than ninety minutes, the Trumpzilla, which the Coast Guard estimated at a hundred and twenty craft (the *Post* put the number at "dozens"), rather than the projected six hundred, was over. Some boaters chalked up the scant turnout to the harbor's distance from suburban Republican home ports. One Connecticut woman with a Web site that sells MAGA hats, CBD products, and Ben Wa balls said on Facebook that the city's crime spike had scared her away; another speculated that boaters were worried about anarchists

bombarding the flotilla with debris from the George Washington Bridge. Kevin Young, who, along with his family, had come downriver from Westchester aboard a cabin cruiser called Grandpa's Wake, joked, "I think those kids on TikTok bought all the tickets so people couldn't show up."

—Erik Beard

## DELIVERY DEPT. EAT YOUR VEGETABLES



Pizza delivery is surging, mac-and-cheese consumption is up, and fast food is getting by with a little help from a friend in the White House. What's a lowly vegetable to do? If it's smart: get frozen by Daily Harvest, a Jolly Green Giant for the direct-to-consumer era. The company, which is based in Manhattan, sells on-trend concoctions of greens and beans—kelp "pad Thai" (\$8.99), chickpea "cookie dough" (\$7.99)—that offer the benefits of the produce aisle without the ordeal of masking up, lining up, wiping down, and, as the case may be, breaking down. "Every ingredient is frozen on the farm within twenty-four hours of harvest," Rachel Drori, the

founder and C.E.O., said the other day, via videoconference from Long Island. She wore a pink T-shirt and had an unfussy ponytail; behind her was an unmade bed. There is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through food, but, "if you're as neurotic as I am, there's an extra layer of security," Drori said. "I haven't been to a grocery store in four weeks."

Though most of Daily Harvest's two hundred employees have been working from home since March 12th, when Drori temporarily closed the company's Flatiron headquarters, increased demand—seventy per cent more new customers than anticipated—meant that a critical part of the business could not flag: taste-testing potential new products. "Vegetables are hard," Drori said. "You have to know what to do to make them, like, really amazing."

Ashley Lonsdale, Daily Harvest's head chef, in Brooklyn, joined the videoconference to pick apart a couple of meals in development. "This is a fresh production sample," said Lonsdale, who wore a black shirt, had a halo of brown curls, and was seated in a blond-wood kitchen. "It's a bowl created for customers looking for low-sugar breakfast options." Price: \$5.99. Ingredients: chia seeds, riced cauliflower, and maca, a Peruvian root. Also: mission fig, vanilla, and coconut cream.

"Let me go to the kitchen and grab my chia," Drori said, as her image jumbled. Shouts of "Mom!" followed. Usually, the company invites customers into the office for taste tests; for now, two toddlers would do. "But I need you to be helpful, O.K.?" Drori said. Little heads nodded. Lonsdale scooped up a spoonful. "I'm getting more vanilla flavor than our last sample, which is nice," she said.

"The salt brought that out," Drori said.

"Salt, vanilla, and fat make this really great, magical taste," Lonsdale said, "like a salty cookie"—or the opposite of cold cauliflower.

"Should the figs be cut up smaller?" Drori asked. To one of the testers: "No, you cannot steal a fig." Her husband entered the shot and set down another bowl: avocado, maca, chocolate, cherries, and oats. "It's scorching hot and I know I'm gonna burn my face, because I'm not patient," Drori said.

"Make sure it's stirred," Lonsdale said. "Get the chocolate distributed."



*"I'm relaxed enough that I've stopped thinking about the drive here, but not so relaxed that I'm not thinking about the drive back."*

Drori sampled it. “Do you think it’s too sweet?” she asked. “Do you think people want that much chocolate for breakfast?” Yet what was breakfast, these days, but a construct? They discussed how the marketing team could position the dish (“energizing,” “anti-inflammatory,” “smooth and decadent”) and which customers to target (those who positively reviewed cacao-avocado smoothies). Drori’s image jumbled again, and she was back in the bedroom. “Ashley, two thumbs up from the kids,” she said. “They were fighting over the cherries. I had to leave. I was, like, ‘I’m out.’”

Daily Harvest has explored other ways to make vegetables more palatable. In April, to promote a new line of flat “breads” (one is cauliflower-based), the company enlisted one of its customers, Neil Patrick Harris, to host a vegetable-themed bingo night on YouTube—a few winners received flatbreads, as did City Harvest, a nonprofit—and sent him a shiny raffle drum filled with inscribed Ping-Pong balls. “This says ‘reishi,’” Harris said, turning over one of the balls. “I’m going to guess that it’s a Latin root vegetable.” (It’s a mushroom.)

“We wanted to create a good, heart-warming moment,” Drori said. “You go on any site right now, it’s just doom and gloom.” But even the most magic of mushrooms can’t solve everything. “There’s somebody in my house who’s sick—not with COVID—but I had to run to the pharmacy,” Drori said. “I had to suit up and I was so stressed out.”

—Sheila Marikar

## DEPT. OF PROTESTING SUMMER SCHOOL



**B**artley Jeannoute teaches sixth-grade humanities at the Abington Friends School, a private Quaker institution in the North Philadelphia suburb of Jenkintown. When schools closed for the pandemic, in March, he was teaching via Zoom within days. “It was pretty easy for us to pivot to distance learning,” he said, because of his school’s resources. “Meanwhile, kids in the public schools were just at home, getting no interaction

from their teachers, for almost a month.”

Before joining Abington Friends, last year, Jeannoute taught at the Philadelphia School, another private institution. A decade earlier, he attended Seton Hall Prep, a Catholic boys’ high school in New Jersey, where he was one of two dozen Black students in a class of around two hundred. He got good grades, but he grew frustrated with the curriculum of all-white authors. “I felt like I was reading other people’s literature, other people’s theology, other people’s history,” he said. “I was looking for something that spoke more to my experience—it was like the second-to-last chapter of the book that we never got to.” When he asked his teachers about incorporating more Black voices, the school sent a letter to his mother. His teachers had noted a “radical shift” in his behavior, describing him as “hostile” and “aggressive.” After that, Jeannoute stayed quiet in class.

But the world is a little different now. This summer, Jeannoute is teaching a free course for inner-city high schoolers called Protest Writing. It is hosted by Mighty Writers, a local nonprofit. The reading list ranges from W. E. B. Du Bois to Nikole Hannah-Jones and Kendrick Lamar, and the class culminates in the students writing their own pieces. The other day, after eight students had shown up for class over Zoom, Jeannoute shared his screen, so that they could view a political cartoon. The drawing, titled “The American Dream Game,” showed two boys—one white and one Black—taking different paths to get to the end of the same board game. The white kid’s path was straight and short, while the Black kid’s was three times as long, winding through such obstacles as “Segregation: Lose 25 Turns.”

Federico, a sophomore in a green shirt, raised his hand. “White people tend to judge African-Americans, saying ‘They’re slow’ or something like that, when in reality they just have a lot more things to overcome in order to reach that American dream,” he said.

Zion Perry, a junior who wore her hair in braids, chimed in: “Some white people are so comfortable in what they have or where they are that, if they see a person of color in the same position as them, then they think that they both got to that place in the same way.”

Jeannoute asked the class, “How do

you think that this board might look if, instead of a Black man, this was a Black woman?” A sophomore named Felix, whose Webcam was positioned so that only the top half of his face was visible, guessed that the path would look even twistier. He said that he had heard Black women talk about the disrespect that they get from various groups, including Black men. “It must be really hard if you feel like even the people inside of your own race don’t respect you,” he said.

“I like what Felix said a lot,” Perry said. She described some of the difficulties of being a Black woman: “When we’re passionate or loud about something, we’re seen as ghetto. But when we try to conform to societal standards we’re whitewashed.”

On to homework. The students had been asked to read a piece in the *Times* about how two schools—one private and one public—had adjusted to remote learning. They talked about the failings of their own public schools. Perry, who goes to the Academy of the New Church, a private school in the affluent suburb of Bryn Athyn, said that her school had done a bad job transitioning to remote learning, too. “It really showed you how they actually felt about you,” she said, explaining that her teachers hadn’t seemed to care whether she fell behind on her work.

This past June, she began posting on Instagram about experiencing racism at her school. She also wrote about it for Jeannoute’s class. In a two-page poem titled “The Masked Prisoner,” she compares the school’s instructors to prison guards (“They were terrible overseers and their titles were ‘teachers’/I was taught Latin and European, and even how to be like one”) and describes how they seemed to favor some students over others (“‘The victims’ that were always seen as nice/And kind and so sweet and ‘oh so pretty’ and white”). A spokesperson for the Academy of the New Church responded, in a statement, “We support all our students, alumni, and families in courageously speaking out about the hurt they experienced while attending our schools and we thank them for sharing input on how to make our schools better.”

Perry’s parents plan to enroll her in a new school this fall. In her poem, she writes, “COVID came around and the killer saved my life.”

—Tyler Foggatt

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

## ALL THE KING'S DATA

*Simulation, automation, and the election of John F. Kennedy.*

BY JILL LEPORE



The Simulmatics Corporation opened for business on February 18, 1959, in an office rented by Edward L. Greenfield, the company's thirty-one-year-old president, on an upper floor of a building at the corner of Madison Avenue and Fifty-second Street, five blocks south of I.B.M.'s glittering World Headquarters. Greenfield, an adman, political consultant, and all-around huckster, pulled people in like a "Looney Tunes" magnet. "Ed Greenfield," he'd say, flashing a Dean Martin grin, slapping a back, offering a vodka-and-tonic, palming a business card. His new company's offices were threadbare; his ambition could hardly have been grander. "Simulmatics," a mashup of "simulation"

and "automatic," had much the same mystique as another nineteen-fifties neologism: "artificial intelligence." Decades before Facebook and Google and Cambridge Analytica and every app on your phone, Simulmatics' founders thought of it all: they had the idea that, if they could collect enough data about enough people and write enough good code, everything, one day, might be predicted—every human mind simulated and then directed by targeted messages as unerring as missiles. For its first mission, Simulmatics aimed to win the White House back for the Democratic Party.

In 1960, John F. Kennedy defeated Richard M. Nixon in a campaign that

carries an air of destiny, mainly because of an iconic account by the reporter Theodore H. White. In "The Making of the President 1960," White created the myth of Kennedy as an inevitable President—King Arthur, pulling Excalibur from the stone. But Kennedy's bid for the nomination was a long shot, his victory in the general election was one of the closest in American history, and his campaign deployed an election simulator. However commonplace now, this was new then, and fiercely controversial. White, while never naming Simulmatics, took the trouble to disavow its influence on the very first page of his book. "It is the nature of politics that men must always act on the basis of uncertain fact," he wrote. "Were it otherwise, then . . . politics would be an exact science in which our purposes and destiny could be left to great impersonal computers." White was close to the Kennedy campaign, and the Kennedy campaign had decided to deny, publicly, that it had used Simulmatics.

In 1959, the Democratic Party, at war with itself, was being driven to the grave by segregationists. Republicans had held the White House since Eisenhower's victory in 1952. Twice, Illinois's governor, Adlai E. Stevenson, had failed to defeat him. In 1952, Stevenson had had a segregationist as his running mate, and in 1956 he told a mostly Black audience in Los Angeles that desegregation ought to "proceed gradually." Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., an African-American congressman from New York, and a Democrat, damned his party for its cowardice, and endorsed Eisenhower. Even with a new running mate, Stevenson won only states that had been claimed by the Confederacy. Nevertheless, he enjoyed nearly universal support among white liberal intellectuals, including the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, the poet Archibald MacLeish, and *The New Yorker's* John Hersey; all four drafted speeches for Stevenson, erudite and elegant. The Eisenhower campaign, meanwhile, ran what Stevenson supporters called a Corn Flakes Campaign: it sold its candidate like laundry detergent. "I think of a man in the voting booth who hesitates between two levers as if he were pausing between competing tubes of toothpaste in a drugstore," one of his

*To help elect J.F.K., Simulmatics devised computer models of voter behavior.*

campaign consultants said. “I Like Ike,” the TV jingle ran. “It’s time for a change,” Eisenhower said, in meaningless ad copy written by the guy who came up with M&M’s “Melts in your mouth, not in your hand.”

Ed Greenfield, whose political-consulting firm worked on the Stevenson campaign in 1956, concluded that his speeches were too brainy. “The Emphasis upon Complexity Should Be Minimized,” the company’s social-science division recommended. But Stevenson refused either to simplify or to abandon his quisling position on civil rights. Nixon, Eisenhower’s Vice-President, was a formidable candidate, and a ferocious adversary. To beat him in 1960, Greenfield thought, Democrats needed a secret weapon.

Modern American politics began with that secret weapon. Greenfield called it Project Macroscopic. He recruited the best and the brightest, many of whom had been trained in the science of psychological warfare. “The scientists are from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and Johns Hopkins,” the *New York Times* reported. Simulmatics’ 1960 election project was one of the largest political-science research projects ever conducted. Led by an M.I.T. political scientist named Ithiel de Sola Pool, the chairman of Simulmatics’ research board, Greenfield’s scientists compiled a set of “massive data” from election returns and public-opinion surveys going back to 1952, sorting voters into four hundred and eighty types, and issues into fifty-two clusters. Then they built what they sometimes called a voting-behavior machine, a computer simulation of the 1960 election, in which they could test scenarios on an endlessly customizable virtual population: you could ask it a question about any move a candidate might make and it would tell you how voters would respond, down to the tiniest segment of the electorate.

“Suppose that during the campaign, the question arises as to the possible consequences of making a strong civil rights speech in the deep South,” Greenfield and Pool wrote:

We will, from our model, be able to predict what such a speech would mean to each of 1,000 sub-groups of the population, and how

many individuals belonging to each sub-group there are in each state. We would therefore be able to predict the approximate small fraction of a percent difference that such a speech would make in each state and consequently to pinpoint the state where it could affect the electoral vote. We might thus advise, for example, that such a speech would lose 2 to 3% of the vote in several Southern states that we would carry anyhow, but might gain ½ of a percent of the vote in some crucial Northern state.

Should a politician make a strong speech about civil rights in the South because it’s the right thing to do? No. A politician should make a strong speech about civil rights in the South when and where advised to do so by a for-profit data-analytics firm.

After settling into Simulmatics’ new offices, Greenfield sent a proposal for Project Macroscopic to Newton Minow, a partner at Stevenson’s Chicago law firm who had served as Stevenson’s counsel. Minow forwarded the proposal to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in Cambridge, where he lived two doors down from Ithiel de Sola Pool. “Without prejudicing your judgment, my own opinion is that such a thing (a) cannot work, (b) is immoral, (c) should be declared illegal,” Minow wrote. “Please advise.” Schlesinger looked over the proposal. “I have pretty much your feelings about Project Macroscopic,” he wrote back. “I shudder at the implication for public leadership of the notion . . . that a man shouldn’t say something until it is cleared with the machine.” But he wasn’t going to thwart it. “I do believe in science and don’t like to be a party to choking off new ideas.” Project Macroscopic went ahead. It’s going on still.

Project Macroscopic aimed to solve the problem of Adlai E. Stevenson. Greenfield and Pool, the Columbia sociologist William McPhee, and the Yale psychologist Robert Abelson persuaded the Democratic Advisory Council, a pro-Stevenson arm of the Democratic National Committee, to hire Simulmatics to conduct an initial simulation. It would cost, in 2020 money, nearly six hundred thousand dollars, and it would study the Black vote.

Most Blacks in the South couldn’t vote. And only a tiny slice of Simulmatics’ bank of voters were Black: sixty-five hundred and sixty-four in all, of whom four thousand and fifty were in the

North. But the company’s ambition of studying African-Americans as a voting type represented a major change. George Gallup had notoriously failed to include African-Americans in his surveys, not least because he depended on the financial support of Southern newspapers, which were unwilling to print the opinions of Black Americans, especially about race relations.

At the same time that Simulmatics’ scientists got to work, Kennedy began wooing the liberals who had long supported Stevenson. In 1958, Kennedy had won reelection to the Senate with seventy-three per cent of the vote. Still, he had liabilities: he was Catholic, and the United States had never before elected a Catholic President. He was even weaker on civil rights than Stevenson. He was young, only forty-two. He had close ties to Joseph McCarthy: his father had donated money to McCarthy’s crusade; two of his sisters had once dated him; and his brother Bobby had worked for him. And when Congress voted to censure McCarthy, 67–22, Kennedy, in the hospital, chose not to cast a vote. Liberals had never forgiven him. Kennedy set about seeking that forgiveness.

“One morning in mid-July 1959, as I was sitting in the sun at Wellfleet, Kennedy called from Hyannis Port to invite me to dinner that night,” Schlesinger recalled. Visiting the lavish Kennedy compound on Cape Cod, Schlesinger, like White, fell in love with Jackie—“Underneath a veil of lovely inconsequence, she concealed tremendous awareness”—and with Jack, who impressed him with his vigor and determination and intelligence and decisiveness. Quietly, Schlesinger switched sides. For months, he positioned himself as a middleman between Stevenson and Kennedy, passing along messages and setting up meetings, trying to get Stevenson to throw his support behind Kennedy. None of it worked.

On January 2, 1960, Kennedy announced his bid for the Democratic nomination. The Minnesota senator Hubert Humphrey had entered the race, too, though he later said, “I felt as competent as any man to be President with the exception of Stevenson.” In February, at a whites-only lunch counter in a Woolworth’s in Greensboro, four Black students, freshmen from North Carolina

A. & T., refused to give up their seats. The sit-ins spread across the South, even as Simulmatics' scientists wrote code and sorted punch cards, trying to simulate the mind of the Black voter.

On March 8th, Kennedy won the New Hampshire primary. On April 5th, he won in Wisconsin, a painful defeat for the Midwestern Humphrey, who, observing the efficiency of the Kennedy campaign, said, "I felt like an independent merchant competing against a chain store." The next week, Kennedy won Stevenson's home state of Illinois. In May, after Kennedy won the West Virginia primary, Humphrey withdrew from the race.

On May 15, 1960, Simulmatics presented its first report, "Negro Voters in Northern Cities," to the Democratic Advisory Council. In a year when two hundred and sixty-nine of a possible five hundred and thirty-seven Electoral College delegates were needed to win the Presidency, eight states with high African-American voter turnout—New York, Pennsylvania, California, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, and Missouri—would together account for two hundred and ten. African-Americans had long voted Republican, but in the nineteen-thirties F.D.R. had pulled many into his New Deal coalition. Simulmatics reported that, in the nineteen-fifties, this coalition had begun to fall apart: in 1956 and 1958, Democratic candidates had lost Black voters in the North, especially middle-class Black voters, especially after Eisenhower signed the 1957 Civil Rights Act. "The shift was not just a swing to 'Ike,'" Simulmatics reported. "It was definitely a shift in party loyalty," as evidenced by the swing in the 1958 midterms, when Eisenhower was not on the ballot. "The thing that won them over was not the father-image of Eisenhower (who was, however, not disliked) but the image of what each party had done for the Negro people." It came to this: the Democratic Party could not win back the White House without winning back those Black voters, and it couldn't win them back without taking a stronger position on civil rights. Reaching this conclusion might not have seemed to require a team of quantitative behavioral scientists, an I.B.M. 704, and more than half a million dollars—really, you had only to

watch the sit-ins on TV. But, given the Party's intransigence, maybe it did.

By now, Kennedy had all the momentum. Lyndon Johnson, who hated him, orchestrated a "Stop Kennedy" campaign. *The New Republic* and *The Nation* endorsed Stevenson, and begged him to run. "Draft Stevenson" groups sprouted up all over the country. On May 21st, Kennedy visited Stevenson at his house in Libertyville. He asked Stevenson not only to support him but to deliver his nominating speech at the Convention. "Look, I have the votes for the nomination and if you don't give me your support, I'll have to shit all over you," Stevenson recalled being told by Kennedy. "I don't want to do that but I can, and I will if I have to." Stevenson refused.

Schlesinger set about trying to knock Stevenson out of the race. On June 5th, Stevenson visited Cambridge, and stayed at Schlesinger's house, just over the garden gate from Galbraith's house. Again, Stevenson refused to endorse Kennedy. Then began a battle of the intellectuals. On June 13th, some of the leading liberals in the United States, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Reinhold Niebuhr, Archibald MacLeish, John Hersey, Carl Sandburg, and John Steinbeck, sent a petition to the Democratic National Committee endorsing Stevenson. Four days later, there appeared a counter-petition, with a list of names headed by Schlesinger and Galbraith. The petition contained Kennedy's assurance that he supported an end to segregation.

Schlesinger later said that he regretted that the statement had come out so soon after Stevenson had been a guest in his house. Schlesinger's wife, Marian, told newspapers she was still for Stevenson. (Robert Kennedy wrote in a postscript scrawled at the bottom of a letter to Schlesinger, "Can't you control your own wife—or are you like me?") At a party, Galbraith was accused of the "worst personal betrayal in American history." Not everyone jumped ship. But Ithiel de Sola Pool did. He sent a copy of Simulmatics' first, confidential report to a Kennedy aide, Ted Sorensen; Pool may have handed one to Schlesinger, too. Sorensen mulled it over, but, at the moment, he, like everyone else, was busy getting ready for the Democratic National Convention, in Los Angeles. On

July 5th, Lyndon Johnson entered the race, mainly to rattle Kennedy. Three days later, on CBS News, Stevenson said that, if drafted, he would run.

Conventions involve a lot of jiggery-pokery and more too-rich food and bad champagne than most people see in a lifetime. Then, there's the dealmaking. Early in July, the Kennedy campaign set up headquarters in a four-room suite at the Biltmore Hotel. A young writer named Thomas B. Morgan, a very close friend of Ed Greenfield's (and soon to be Simulmatics' director of publicity), flew from New York to Los Angeles, where he wore a "Draft Stevenson" button on his lapel. He was there, as press secretary, to help establish headquarters for the nonexistent Stevenson campaign. Kennedy arrived in Los Angeles on Saturday, July 9th. So did Stevenson, who was greeted at the airport by thousands of supporters. Schlesinger, about to board his own plane, wrote in his diary, miserably, "If AES had any chance, I would feel happier in Los Angeles if I were working for him, or at least I think I would; I would feel happier for myself."

Pool and Greenfield flew to Los Angeles, too, to make sure that Simulmatics' report on Black voters in the North got into the hands of the platform committee. They had already given a copy of the report to Chester Bowles, the committee chairman, and another to Harris Wofford, a Kennedy staffer and friend of Greenfield's who would draft the platform's civil-rights plank. ("Let me suggest that some time soon you try to talk with a good friend of mine, a very astute public relations man, Ed Greenfield," Wofford had written to Martin Luther King, Jr., earlier that year.) Bowles had appointed a twenty-man drafting panel that included only four Southerners. Meeting on Sunday, July 10th, it endorsed a platform called "The Rights of Man." Its boldest plank staked out the most liberal position on civil rights ever taken by either party.

The public sees what happens on the Convention floor; the dealmaking takes place behind closed doors. Gore Vidal hosted a party that, as Schlesinger reported, included "everyone from Max Lerner to Gina Lollobrigida." The morning after a party at the Beverly

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Hills Hotel, Minow pulled Stevenson into a bathroom, for a private word.

“Governor,” he said, “you can listen to what you hear from those people or to me. Illinois is caucusing in fifteen minutes and it’s almost one hundred percent for Kennedy.”

“Really?” Stevenson asked. “What do you suggest?”

“I suggest you not go out of here a defeated guy trying to get nominated a third time,” Minow said. “I suggest you come out for Kennedy, be identified with his nomination, and unite the party.”

Stevenson dithered. On the morning of Monday, July 11th, in the Kennedy suite at the Biltmore, Bobby Kennedy held a staff meeting. He took off his coat and loosened his tie and climbed onto a chair. “I want to say a few words about civil rights,” he said. “We have the best civil-rights plank the Democratic party has ever had. I want you fellows to make it clear to your delegations that the Kennedy forces are unequivocally in favor of this plank.” Schlesinger found it one of the most impressive speeches of the Convention.

Outside the arena, thousands of Stevenson supporters gathered, chanting and carrying banners. (“A THINKING MAN’S CHOICE—STEVENSON!” “FACE THE MORAL CHALLENGE—STEVENSON.”) Even White admitted, “This was more than a demonstration, it was an explosion.” By Tuesday, the number of Stevenson supporters outside the arena seemed to have doubled. That night, Stevenson entered the Convention hall, not as a candidate but as a delegate for Illinois, to seventeen minutes of applause. Wednesday newspapers ran new headlines: “KENNEDY TIDE EBBS.”

The Minnesota senator Eugene McCarthy nominated Stevenson. On Wednesday night, McCarthy rose to make his speech. “Do not leave this prophet without honor in his own party,” he pleaded. “Do not reject this man.” By Morgan’s count, the applause lasted for twenty-seven minutes. And there was the unending chant, “We Want Stevenson!” Morgan described “a giant papier-mâché ‘snowball’—made of petitions bearing more than a million signatures calling on the convention to ‘Draft Ste-

venson’” floating up from the rostrum. Someone yelled, “Look, it’s Sputnik!”

As the galleries seemed to surge and throb, the delegates on the floor were strangely silent. McCarthy asked them to set themselves free from whatever pledge they’d made, no matter the caucuses and the primaries. But most delegates considered themselves bound, at least in the first ballot, by their instructions from the voters. “This the delegates knew; but not the galleries,” White wrote. Stevenson, in any case, had already lost. Earlier that day, he’d tried to persuade Chicago’s Mayor Richard Daley to deliver the Illinois delegation to him, and Daley had refused. His campaign ended before it had begun.



Kennedy was persuaded to offer the Vice-Presidency to Lyndon Johnson, as a means of assuring that, as President, he would have the full support of Johnson as Senate Majority Leader. No one expected Johnson to accept. “You just won’t believe it,” Kennedy said, when he came back from meeting with Johnson. “He wants it!”

Finally, on Friday, July 15th, an exhausted Kennedy delivered an acceptance speech so lacklustre that it gave Nixon confidence that he would have no trouble handling Kennedy in a televised debate. Schlesinger watched with a twinge. “I believe him to be a liberal,” he wrote in his diary. “I also believe him to be a devious and, if necessary, a ruthless man.” The next day, seeking out that ruthless man, Pool wrote to the Kennedy-for-President headquarters, formally offering the services of the Simulmatics Corporation.

Minow thought Project Macroscopic was unethical and ought to be illegal. Schlesinger thought it just might work. On August 11th, Simulmatics began to compile three reports for the Kennedy campaign. Two weeks later, the firm presented its findings to Bobby Kennedy and top campaign staff, at a briefing held in R.F.K.’s office.

There’s really no way to measure the influence of the Simulmatics reports on the Kennedy campaign. After the briefing, the campaign followed Simul-

matics’ advice about what Kennedy should do. The question is whether the Kennedy campaign would have done these things, anyway.

To conventional polls and political analysis, Simulmatics added computer simulations, not unlike, say, the simulations used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to predict the number of new COVID-19 cases given various scenarios. A simulation program works by way of endless IF/THEN statements: IF this, THEN that. IF/THEN was the syntax of Simulmatics’ reports. They began with the state of play: Kennedy was behind Nixon in the polls, but nearly a quarter of voters had not yet made a decision. “Negro voters are a danger point for the Kennedy campaign,” the Simulmatics team observed, and Jewish support for Kennedy was fairly weak, suggesting that “a straightforward attack on prejudice will appeal to these minorities since they are ideologically inclined to oppose such prejudices.” What Kennedy viewed as a liability might be turned into a strength. “The issue of anti-Catholicism and religious prejudice could become much more salient in the voters’ minds. If that occurs, what will happen?” The team had run a computer simulation, analyzing the effect of further discussion of religion on each of four hundred and eighty voter types concerning “(1) its past voting record; (2) its turnout at the polls; and (3) its attitude toward a Catholic candidate.” As a result of this analysis, Simulmatics recommended that Kennedy confront the religious issue, with the aim not of averting criticism but of inciting it: “The simulation shows that Kennedy today has lost the bulk of the votes he would lose if the election campaign were to be embittered by the issue of anti-Catholicism. The net worst has been done.” If Kennedy were to talk more and more openly about his Catholicism, then he would be attacked for it. And, if he were attacked, that would shore up support where he needed it most.

Simulmatics made this case on August 25th. Kennedy began tackling the issue of his Catholicism head on in early September. Instead of deflecting anti-Catholic opposition, the campaign drew attention to it, seeking opportunities for the candidate to respond by decrying religious prejudice. Speaking before Prot-

estant ministers of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12th, Kennedy squarely condemned religious intolerance. “I may be the victim, but tomorrow it may be you,” he said. And he warned, “I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my Church on public matters, and the Church does not speak for me.”

Kennedy, who had been trailing Nixon in the polls all summer, gained on him after Labor Day because of his frank talk about religion, because of his new stand on civil rights, and because of his performance in televised debates with Nixon. In each of these cases, the approach he took had been recommended by Simulmatics. Simulmatics had urged a stronger stance on civil rights in its first report, presented to the D.N.C. in May, sent by Pool to the Kennedy campaign in June, and handed to the chairman of the platform committee by Greenfield in advance of the Convention. Immediately after the Convention, Kennedy, who, according to White, was the Democratic candidate least appealing to African-Americans, set up a civil-rights “division” headed by Harris Wofford, the friend of Ed Greenfield’s who had drafted the civil-rights plank of the Party’s platform. In October, Kennedy dramatically improved his standing with African-American voters when (urged by Wofford) he called Coretta Scott King, after her husband was arrested at a sit-in in Atlanta. One of the Simulmatics reports given to Kennedy specifically addressed the upcoming debates, describing them as a risk for Nixon: “The danger to Nixon is that Kennedy can make use of his more personable traits—including a range of emotions such as fervor, humor, friendship, and spirituality beyond the expected seriousness and anger.”

Kennedy spent Election Night, November 8th, at his family’s compound in Hyannis Port, where a pink-and-white children’s bedroom on the second floor of Robert Kennedy’s house had been converted into a data-analysis center. All night, Kennedy walked back and forth across the lawn, from his own house, where Jackie, eight

months pregnant, was trying to rest, to Bobby’s house, where teletype keys were clattering. But ordinary Americans had their own data-analysis centers in their living rooms, or their kitchens, or wherever they watched television. The election of 1960 was the fastest-reported one in American history. In Studio 65, CBS News’ election headquarters, an I.B.M. 7090 made a preliminary prediction at 7:26 P.M., when hardly any polls had closed, and with less than one per cent of all precincts reporting. CBS cautiously predicted a victory for Nixon. The mood at the Kennedy compound turned gloomy. But at 8:12 P.M., with four per cent of precincts reporting, the 7090 offered a new prediction: Kennedy would win with fifty-one per cent of the popular vote; two minutes later, CBS broadcast this prediction, absent any caveat.

I.B.M.’s prediction held. Kennedy’s electoral margin of victory, three hundred and three to two hundred and nineteen, was wide. But his margin in the popular vote—49.7 per cent to 49.6 per cent—was the closest since 1888, close enough to lead to two recount efforts led by the Republican National Committee but not endorsed by Nixon, who told a biographer that he wanted to spare the country the “agony of a constitutional crisis.” And, as Simulmatics had predicted, “Negro Voters in Northern Cities” turned out to be crucial to the Democrats’ victory. Kennedy won six of the eight states mentioned in the report.

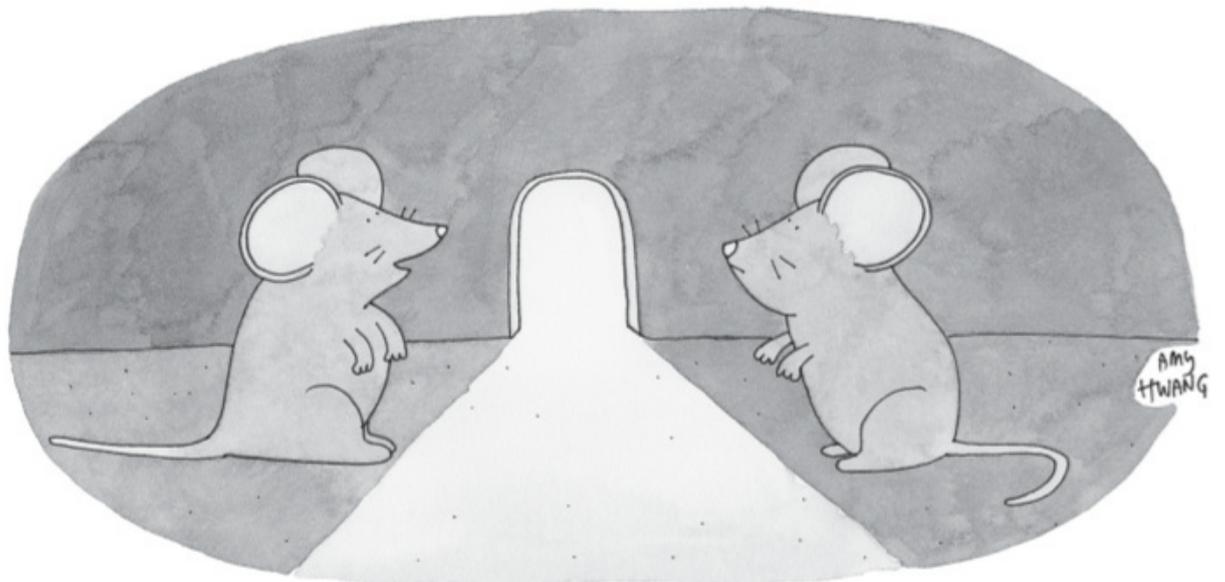
“What we have demonstrated is how data from past situations can be used to simulate a future situation,” the scien-

tists of Simulmatics had boasted. Were they flimflam men? Or had they reinvented American politics?

Simulmatics launched a publicity blitz. Five days after the election, the *Boston Globe* ran a piece about how Simulmatics had told Kennedy “why and what he must do” and credited the data company with both his victory in the debates and his position on civil rights. “We know the Kennedy brothers read our reports the day they got them—and knew what was in them three days later,” Pool told the reporter. “They are great readers.”

Even before the election, word had got out that White was writing a book about the campaign. Pool decided to write his own book about the making of the President, the story of how a “starry-eyed notion on the frontiers of science became a reality.” Meanwhile, Morgan pitched an article to *Harper’s*. His story, “The People Machine,” appeared in the January, 1961, issue, which hit newsstands the week before Christmas and stayed there nearly until Kennedy’s Inauguration.

Most of the Cambridge Analytica-era questions and concerns raised in the early decades of the twenty-first century about computers and politics were first raised by Morgan’s essay in *Harper’s*, nearly six decades ago: “If, in a free society, information is power, how do we prevent tampering with the data provided by the machine? . . . As we seek more and more data for the machines, can we maintain our traditions of privacy?” The story was picked up all over the country. The *New York Herald Tribune* reported that “a big, bulky monster called a ‘Simulmatics’”



*“The possibilities of what could go wrong out there are stressing me out.”*

had been Kennedy's "secret weapon." An Oregon newspaper editorialized that the Kennedy campaign had reduced "the voters—you, me, Mrs. Jones next door, and Professor Smith at the university— . . . to little holes in punch cards," implying that the tyranny of the People Machine made "the tyrannies of Hitler, Stalin and their forebears look like the inept fumbling of a village bully." "Mouth more or less agape and breath more or less bated, we have been reading how by 'simulmatics' this marvelous contrivance gave young Mr. Robert Kennedy the 'advance dope' on problems as opaque as the religious issue," the editors of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote dubiously. "Hinkle-pinkle! If Mr. Kennedy took serious stock in the machine—a model of the American people' better than the original since it knew what the people would do even before they were sure—that would be enough to explain how he came so close to losing the election." The distance between then and now is the measure of how entirely the American voting public now takes this kind of political shenanigan for granted. "Mouth agape" is not how Americans view the ordinary undertakings of the thousands of data-analytics firms that have come to advise our political campaigns.

Directly after that issue of *Harper's* hit newsstands, Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, issued a public denial. "We did not use the machine," Salinger said. "Nor were the machine studies made for us." The rebuke ran in papers all over the country, under headlines like "KENNEDY CAMP DENIES USE OF AN ELECTRONIC 'BRAIN.'" But the denial only fanned the flames. "The fact remains," the editors of the Cincinnati *Enquirer* remarked, "that the machine knew whereof it spoke." The conservative columnist Victor Lasky confronted Salinger with the evidence. "Pierre's recollection was somewhat refreshed," Lasky later wrote, "after it was disclosed that Bobby Kennedy had helped finance the People Machine . . . and that reports based on its findings went directly to Bobby." (Simulmatics' reports can be found, today, in the archives at the Kennedy Library.) In "J.F.K.: The Man and the Myth," a fierce and partisan book published in September, 1963, Lasky would all but argue that, by using a computer simulation, Kennedy had stolen

the election from Nixon. But after Kennedy was assassinated Lasky's publishers halted printing. "I've cancelled out of everything," Lasky said after the President's death. "As far as I am concerned Kennedy is no longer subject to criticism on my part."

Still, criticism endured. The University of California political theorist Eugene Burdick had worked for Greenfield in 1956, but decided not to join Simulmatics. Instead, he wrote a novel about it. In "The 480," a political thriller published in 1964, a barely disguised "Simulations Enterprises" meddles with a U.S. Presidential election. "This may or may not result in evil," Burdick warned. "Certainly it will result in the end of politics as Americans have known it." That same year, in "Simulacron-3," a science-fiction novel set in the year 2034, specialists in the field of "simulelectronics" build a People Machine—a "total environment simulator"—only to discover that they themselves don't exist and are, instead, merely the ethereal, Escherian inventions of yet another People Machine. After that, Simulmatics lived on in fiction and film, an anonymous avatar. In 1973, the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder adapted "Simulacron-3" into "World on a Wire," a forerunner of the 1999 film "The Matrix," in which all of humanity lives in a simulation, trapped, deluded, and dehumanized.

The first array of the matrix was erected in 1959. After the election of 1960, the Simulmatics Corporation ventured into nearly every realm of American life. In 1961, it introduced computer simulation to the advertising industry. In 1962, it was the first data firm to provide real-time computing to an American newspaper—the *Times*—for the purpose of analyzing election results. In 1963, it simulated the entire economy of a developing nation, Venezuela, with an eye toward thwarting Communist revolution. Beginning in 1965, Simulmatics conducted psychological research in Vietnam as part of a larger project of waging a war by way of computer-run data analysis and modelling. In 1967 and 1968, at home, Simulmatics attempted to build a race-riot-prediction machine. In 1969, after antiwar demonstrators called Pool a war criminal, the People Machine crashed; in 1970, the company filed for bankruptcy. (Most of its rec-

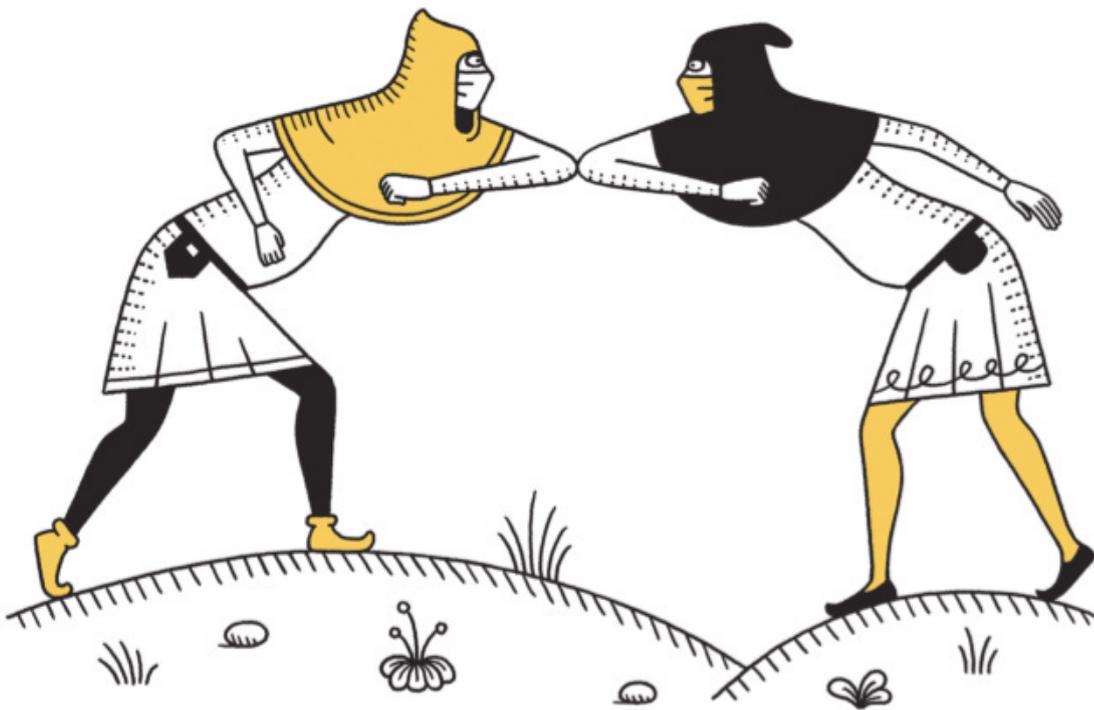
ords were destroyed; I stumbled across what remains, in Pool's papers, at M.I.T.)

Simulmatics is a relic of its time, an artifact of the Eisenhower-Kennedy-Nixon Cold War; a product of the Madison Avenue of M&M's and toothpaste ads; a casualty of mid-century American liberalism. The Simulations Enterprises of "The 480" is a mega-corporation and the "simulelectronics" specialists in "Simulacron-3" are technical geniuses. The real Simulmatics Corporation was a small, struggling company. It was said to be the "A-bomb of the social sciences." But, like a long-buried mine, it took decades to detonate. The People Machine was hobbled by its time, by the technological limitations of the nineteen-sixties. Data were scarce. Models were weak. Computers were slow. The men who built the machine could not repair it: the company's behavioral scientists had little business sense, its chief mathematician contended with insanity, its computer scientist fell behind the latest research, its president drank too much, and nearly all their marriages were falling apart. The machine sputtered, sparks flying, smoke rising, and ground to a halt.

Simulmatics failed. And yet it had built a very early version of the machine in which humanity would find itself trapped in the early twenty-first century, a machine that applies the science of psychological warfare to the affairs of ordinary life, a machine that manipulates opinion, exploits attention, commodifies information, divides voters, atomizes communities, alienates individuals, and undermines democracy. Facebook, Palantir, Cambridge Analytica, Amazon, the Internet Research Agency, Google: these are, every one, the children of Simulmatics.

"The Company proposes to engage principally in estimating probable human behavior by the use of computer technology," Greenfield promised investors in Simulmatics' initial stock offering. By the time of the 2016 election, the mission of Simulmatics had become the mission of nearly every corporation. Collect data. Write code: IF/THEN/ELSE. Detect patterns. Predict behavior. Direct action. Encourage consumption. Influence elections. If Simulmatics had not begun this work, then it would have been done by someone else. But, if someone else had done it, then it might have been done differently. ♦

## SHOUTS &amp; MURMURS



## SMALL TALK IN 1348

BY TEDDY WAYNE

—Good morrow, neighbor. How are you holding up in your thatched cottage?

—“Holding up”? What is the meaning of that?

—I mean, how are you faring in this arduous time of the Black Death?

—Oh. That is an interesting way to say it.

—I just invented the expression. Do you like it?

—(*Trying it out*) “How are you holding up?” Yes, it is harmonious to the ear!

—Should we use it each time we speak during this plague?

—I do not see why not. It is most congenial.

—But what if we tire of the expression, and of answering to it, after a few hundred uses? Should we devise an alternative?

—How about “I hope this salutation finds you well”?

—Very good. Although . . . is anyone truly “well” during a plague?

—You are correct. No one except, perhaps, those who possess a remote castle by the White Cliffs of Dover.

—What if we add “or as well as anyone can be these days”?

—Yes. And if the salutation is rendered on a Friday or a Monday, and some mention of the end of the week that is about to take place or has just occurred is expected, one may add “whatever an ‘end of the week’ is these days.”

—Because the days are so like one another that the end of the week is hardly distinct from the middle of the week.

—It is as if time, that phenomenon we measure so precisely by the shadow of the sun on a dial in the town square, has ceased to mean anything.

—I know. This barley season has felt like four rye seasons.

—When I feel a craving for mead but it is too early in the eve, I say to my wife, in jest, “Well, the shadow is angling downward on a dial *somewhere*.”

—I make the same jest when I am desirous of ale but I have not yet plowed my field for the required sixteen hours!

—After a discussion of time such as this, a body can ask if the other body has seen any good morality plays lately.

—I certainly have. At times I have feasted on three morality plays in succession. My children have a saying

for it: “morality plays and idleness.”

—And I thought I would be using this time to learn to read.

—I, too. Instead, I have attempted the new recipes for gruel that the town crier has shouted. When I prepare a gruel that is especially pleasing to the eye, I ask Garrick the Weaver to capture its essence in a tapestry, which I then unfurl outside my thatched cottage so that others may admire it. I am innocent of the sin of pride, because I am not depicted in the tapestry myself—only the gruel.

—I have seen and liked your gruel tapestries.

—I did not know you liked them. You have never indicated so.

—Have I not? I am sorry. I like them.

—Which ones?

—Just . . . all of them, really.

(*A silence.*)

—Fie on 1348.

—And we thought 1347 was bad.

—Strange times.

—Rouse me from my slumber when it is the thirteen-fifties.

—I am in disbelief that, of all kings to rule over us during the Black Death, we are cursed with Edward the Third.

—I would take Edward the *Second* right now.

—All right, who are you, and what have you done with Ælwyn the Plowman?

—Ha! As if what I said does not accord with my character, and therefore, despite all appearances, I must not be Ælwyn the Plowman but instead someone who has disposed of his body and assumed his likeness. A most amusing jest.

—I just invented it.

—Did you hear Edward the Third said that, as leeches may cure the plague when applied to the skin, healers should also put them *inside* the body?

—He must have a secret investment in leech-gathering. That is the only explanation.

(*Another silence.*)

—Well, I will let you go back inside your thatched cottage.

—So, next week, same shadow angle on the sundial?

—Uh . . . I am busy next week. But we shall find a shadow angle soon.

—Stay hale out there.

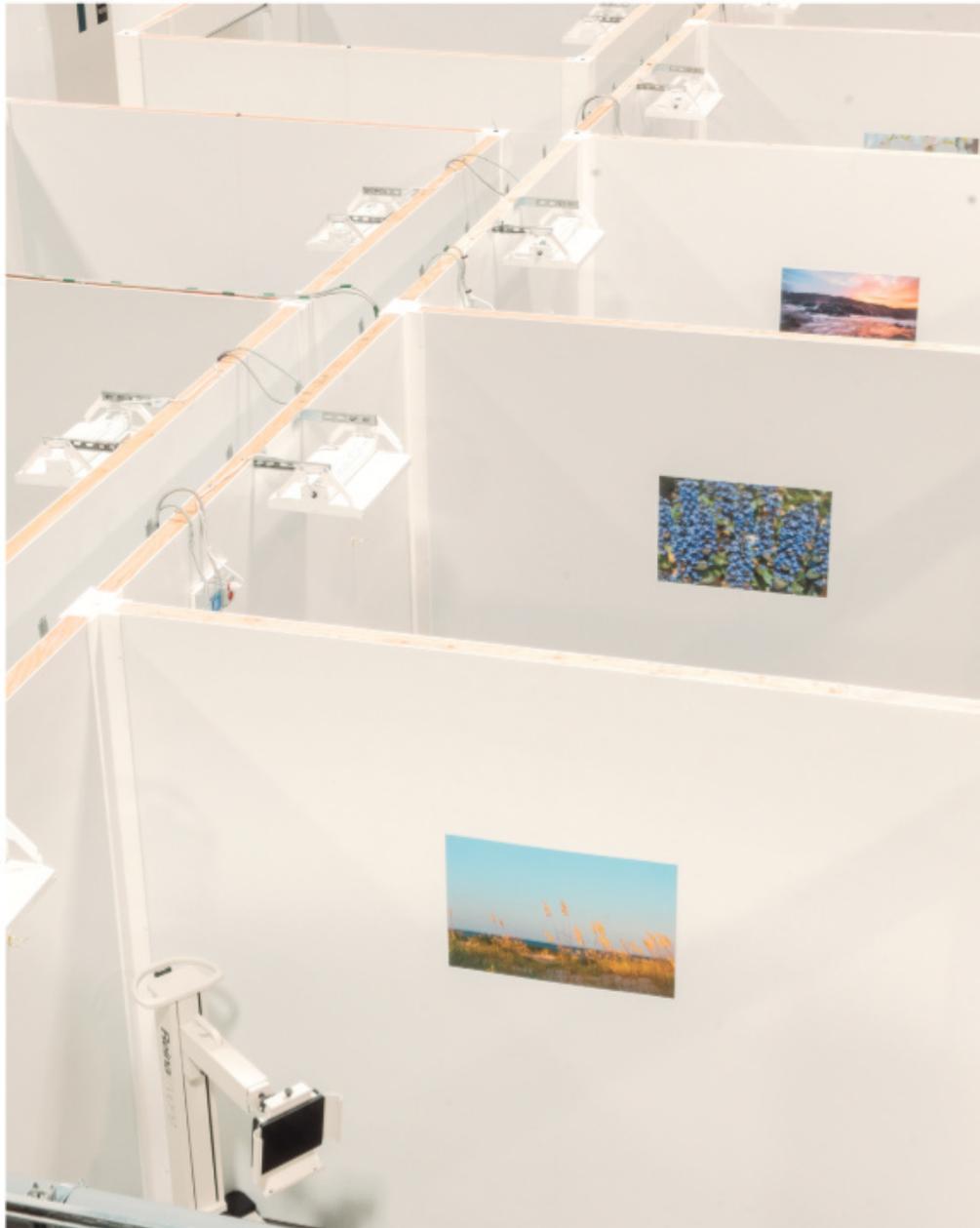
—You, too. Whatever “out there” means these days. ♦

## ANNALS OF INFRASTRUCTURE

## URGENT CARE

*As Trump flails in the pandemic, the Army Corps of Engineers gets it done.*

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS



The commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is Todd Semonite, a stocky three-star general who recently turned sixty-three. Every workday for the past forty-one years, he has served in uniform. On his left wrist is a FitBit; on his right, the kind of Casio calculator watch that he has worn since he was a teen-ager. In high school, in Vermont, Semonite wasn't the biggest guy on the football team, but he played varsity center; he told a newspaper that size is "not really a disadvantage if you work hard." Semonite and his wife, Connie, live in Washington, D.C., at Fort McNair. On weekends, they renovate foreclosed houses and flip them. They

have four children, all of them grown; Semonite, a civil engineer, made cradles for his grandchildren in his wood-working shop. "I mass-produced 'em," he told me, explaining that he would cut the slats and the rockers ahead of time and assemble them once a baby was born.

George Washington created the position of chief engineer at the outset of the Revolutionary War, to oversee the design and construction of military batteries and fortifications. The Corps was formally established in 1802. Combat engineers solve problems through math and physics: they move troops (build the bridge) and protect them from at-

tack (blow up the bridge). The military runs the Corps, but ninety-eight per cent of the agency's thirty-six thousand employees are civilians: geographers, biologists, ecologists, architects. The magazine *Undark* recently noted that the Corps, which operates under the Department of Defense, "has its fingers in everything from snowmelt modeling and wetlands plant inventories to research on stealth aircraft."

The Corps calls itself one of the world's largest public engineering, design, and construction-management firms. The agency, whose symbol is a castle, built the Pentagon, the Washington Monument, and the Library of Congress. The Corps also manages a vast network of waterways. This time of year—natural-disaster season—there is always a dam to fortify and debris to clear; sandbags don't stack themselves.

Like many government agencies, the Corps has had notable failures: the levees in New Orleans, which the engineers maintain, broke during Hurricane Katrina. And the Corps has been accused of mismanagement and bloat. In the early two-thousands, critics cited an investigation by the Army's inspector general, which found that the Corps had manipulated economic data to justify costly projects on the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. On "The Daily Show," Trevor Noah called the Corps "the place to go if you want something built—even if no one needs it."

Semonite has spent most of his career in the Corps, leaving it briefly for a combat tour in Afghanistan: in 2014, he took over a leadership position after Major General Harold Greene, a friend, was killed when an Afghan soldier opened fire at a construction site in Kabul. Semonite supervised the training of the Afghan National Army and worked to prevent corruption by withholding financial aid from government ministries unless they met strict conditions. He once said that he wanted his legacy in Afghanistan to be not "guns and ammo" but "processes and systems."

Semonite was named chief engineer in 2016, by President Barack Obama. He set out to "revolutionize" Corps operations, imposing, among other things, tighter deadlines on projects. Because Congress funded certain jobs incremen-

*In the pandemic, the Corps has set up thirty-eight "alternate care facilities."*

tally, work that should be completed in three years could end up taking twelve. Semonite told me he decided that “we can’t afford to have so much different red tape.” He demanded work of “exceptional quality,” produced “on time and on budget.”

Still, in 2017, after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, the Corps was denounced for being too slow to restore the decimated power grid. Semonite told reporters that the agency was facing a “massive logistics challenge,” including the transport, the installation, and the wiring of sixty-two thousand utility poles, often on mountainous terrain; if moving faster were possible, he added, “we would be doing it.”

These criticisms left Semonite with what a colleague described as something close to “scar tissue.” He thought of the Corps as a “bunch of expeditionary people” singularly capable of solving the “toughest engineering problems.” Semonite’s vision is driven more by what he calls a spirit of “ruthless execution” than by design theory: he will never be caught asking a brick, Louis Kahn-like, “what it wanted to be.” The Corps’s motto is the French term *Essayons*—“Let us try.” Semonite’s mantra is “Deliver the program.” And so this past spring, when COVID-19 overran the United States, Semonite was determined to provide vital infrastructure quickly. He told me, “America needs a capability to step up when something gets really, really hard.”

On March 13th, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, unlocking billions of dollars in coronavirus aid. Two days later, New York’s governor, Andrew Cuomo, published an open letter to Trump, saying that, without “immediate action, the imminent failure of hospital systems is all but certain.” Seven hundred and twenty-nine New Yorkers had tested positive for COVID-19, three had died, and hospitalizations and intubations were soaring. The state had fifty-three thousand hospital beds in its inventory but expected to need more than twice that number by mid-April. The problem was particularly acute in New York City. Cuomo envisaged “people on gurneys in hallways.”

During a national crisis, Semonite

likes to say, the Corps works as “FEMA’s engineer”: FEMA authorizes certain missions and pays at least seventy-five per cent of the expenses. Cuomo, in his letter, asked Trump to send in the Corps to expand hospital-bed space. On Wednesday, March 18th, Semonite flew to Albany, in a small jet belonging to the Pentagon. He was joined by Anthony Travia, a division chief at Huntsville Center, a Corps research-and-engineering hub in Alabama that was initially established during the Cold War, to develop missile-defense technologies. The unit headed by Travia builds military medical facilities. He once worked as the chief engineer of a major Veterans Administration hospital in Chicago, where the staff drilled for scenarios involving Ebola, H1N1, SARS, MERS, natural disasters, and terror attacks. “We were the hospital that stayed open if something horrible happened,” he told me.

Semonite had asked Huntsville Center engineers to draft a plan to “stand up” alternate care facilities as a relief valve for hospitals overwhelmed by the coronavirus. Colloquially, these were being called “field hospitals,” but this was inaccurate: a hospital offers such specialty services as surgery. Building a hospital takes years. Huntsville Center’s engineers had devised a quicker solution: convert existing structures. At Cuomo’s office, Semonite’s team presented a proposal that had been prepared almost overnight. The engineers asked the Governor to picture a budget hotel—say, a La Quinta Inn—with infrastructure that could be instantly marshalled: electricity, water, ice machines, showers, phones, Wi-Fi, laundry. A nurse-call system could be installed. The front desk could become patient reception. Each guest room could accommodate a patient and equipment, including a ventilator. The carpet would have to go—fabric collects bacteria. The sickest COVID-19 patients require abundant oxygen, which could be delivered via individual cylinders or through a manifold system in which gas is piped to various beds from an exterior tank of liquid oxygen. Rooms could be retrofitted with negative pressure—to control the spread of pathogens—by adjusting H.V.A.C. units and baffling doors. Negative pressure works

much like a chimney flue: air is drawn out of a room in a single direction and passes through a heavy-duty filter. When Cuomo asked about staffing and supplies, Semonite explained that the Corps’s job was to produce “the box”—it was then the state or local government’s responsibility to decide how and when to use it.

On Thursday, Corps engineers and New York State officials visited about two dozen potential sites. On Friday, they assessed each venue in detail. The hotel idea was discarded, in part because negotiations over private property can be complicated. (One of the state officials said, “How many La Quintas you think we’ve got in Manhattan?”) The Jacob K. Javits Center, a convention hall overlooking the Hudson, rose to the top of the list: the facility has two million square feet of floor space, and the state owns it.

Cuomo thought of the pandemic as “one of those moments of true crisis and confusion,” like 9/11. Trump had delayed taking federal action, forcing states to compete for ventilators and for personal protective equipment, which wasted crucial time. Two days in a row in March, as the pandemic worsened, the President golfed. (In the U.S., approximately a hundred and forty thousand people have now died of COVID-19.) When Americans’ “whole concept of life and society” was shaken, Cuomo said, they needed “to see government perform at its *best*.”

The Corps stood up Javits in four days. This was possible, in part, because the military sent medical units—doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and lab techs who could attend to hundreds of patients. Truckloads of supplies arrived hourly. Corps engineers were trying to figure out how best to partition Javits’s vast floor space when someone realized that they could erect the portable walls that were ordinarily used in the hall to create ten-by-ten-foot venter booths. Nearly a thousand cots appeared in nearly a thousand cubicles. Once built out, the floor resembled a trade-show arena, except for the privacy curtain across each cubicle’s entrance. Medical personnel arrived from Army bases as far away as Texas. New York National Guard members who days earlier were,

say, practicing dentistry in Saratoga Springs coordinated P.P.E. fittings and the assembly of floor lamps.

Initially, the state conceived of an alternate care facility as a place to treat patients who *didn't* have the coronavirus, allowing hospitals to focus on COVID-19. But to everyone's surprise the number of non-COVID hospitalizations plummeted; fewer people were getting shot or being injured in accidents, and many elective surgeries were postponed. Javits ultimately had room for twenty-five hundred patients but sat largely empty, even as city hospitals experienced crushing surges and trailer morgues filled up with the bodies of the dead. In early April, as New York hurtled toward its spring peak, Cuomo switched Javits from "non-COVID" to "COVID" status, calling in the Corps for an immediate upgrade.

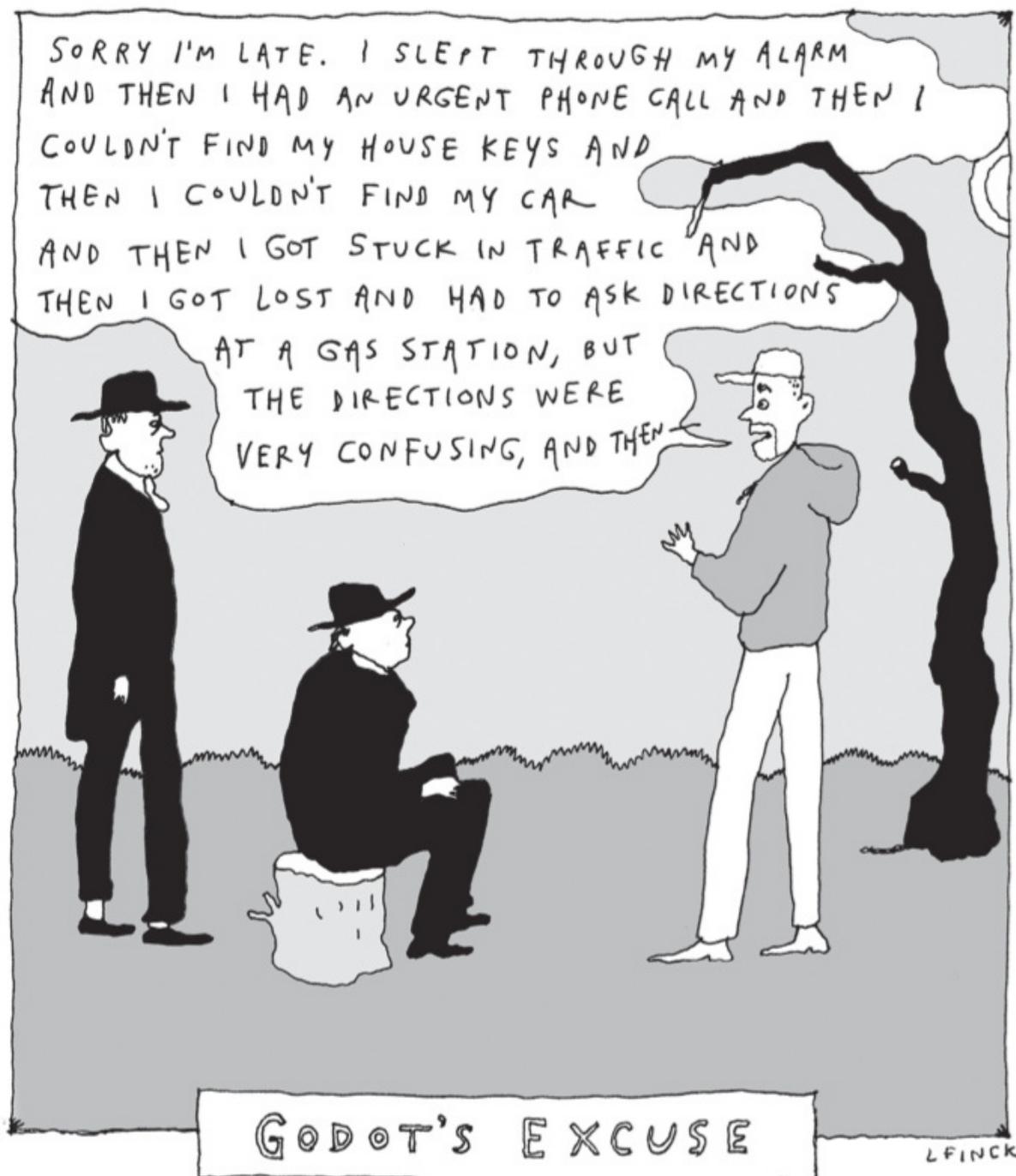
The Corps tends to respond to discrete regional disasters whose initial danger quickly passes; the coronavirus, however, could surface anywhere, and

all at once. On the flight home from Albany, Semonite had concluded that states other than New York would soon need help, and that the pandemic could last for a year or more. The best way to address such a complicated nationwide problem was with a template simple enough that it could be quickly implemented in a variety of locations. A state needed to be able to pivot, based on how many patients it had and how sick they were. Huntsville Center engineers began thinking about transforming not only hotels and convention centers but also gymnasiums and dorms. During the pandemic of 1918, the Army had converted barracks into hospitals; photographs show sickbeds in packed rows, a dispiriting image that New York officials wanted to avoid. To maintain "battle rhythm" as the planning progressed, Semonite held twice-daily teleconferences, sometimes involving hundreds of people. He demanded "the good-enough solution," warning engineers, "Don't make a science project out of it."

Semonite is known for his ability to succinctly convey complex material using picture-book phrasings like "a lotta, lotta rain" and "super-big sandbags." In practice, engineers use precise parameters in their work. Amanda Pommerenck, a Corps civil engineer who is a division chief in Huntsville, said that, if someone asks her the size of a window, she takes out a tape measure. Quickly subdividing a wide-open space into individual units suitable for potentially complex patient care *and* infection control was the kind of challenge that made engineers "see double." It is "not normal for an organization like ours to churn out" a project based on such an abstract directive, she told me. Yet engineers are also creative. Pommerenck and her husband, also an engineer, "MacGyver a lot of stuff," she said, adding, "If we don't have the right tool, we make the right tool."

They can also buy it. In late March, Semonite called the C.E.O. of a Florida-based company called PODS, which stands for Portable On Demand Storage. A PODS container is like a U-Haul without the truck: a steel-framed crate box with a bright-blue roll-up door. PODS delivers the box to the customer, the customer fills it up, and PODS hauls it to a desired location. PODS has tens of thousands of containers in inventory nationwide, and there are many similar companies. In the past thirty years, the U.S. has built fewer hospitals and, more recently, hundreds of rural health centers have closed. Semonite realized that containers modified to house COVID-19 patients could temporarily compensate for this gap. A besieged community, he told me, could "flex" in response to a wave of infection: a fleet of containers could be deposited wherever extra beds were needed.

The Corps's research-and-development team has been headquartered in Vicksburg, Mississippi, since 1929, two years after the Mississippi River caused the worst flood in U.S. history. David Pittman, who leads the Corps's Engineer Research and Development Center, described the array of laboratories in Vicksburg as "Disney World for engineers and scientists." The lab's tradespeople can build practically anything, including large-scale facsimiles



of rivers and ports, which facilitate the design of dams and other enormous structures. The first time Semonite toured the Vicksburg labs, he suddenly vanished; his hosts found him in a side room, admiring tools. “He was enthralled,” Mike Channell, an engineer supervisor, told me.

On March 30th, Semonite asked Vicksburg to turn a PODS container into a mobile negative-pressure room suitable for intensive care, saying, “Just see if it can be *done*.” Citizens were under orders to stay home, but within an hour of Semonite’s phone call sixteen men—electricians, welders, carpenters, model mechanics, and an H.V.A.C. contractor—reported to a warehouse marked “MODEL SHOP.” Brian Woodrick, a carpenter, had on jeans and a Carhartt T-shirt, a yellow pencil tucked behind one ear; Stanley McCollough, a welder, wore a faded baseball cap with an American-flag patch.

A PODS container arrived by truck from Jackson, about fifty miles east. Sixteen feet long by eight feet wide, it stood eight feet tall and weighed about twenty-five hundred pounds, a smidge more than a Mazda Miata. The container had a rubberized floor (easy to clean), and walls of smooth plastic panels (easy to alter). The short side, with the roll-up entrance, needed a transparent door that gave medical staff “line of sight”—the ability to visually monitor a patient without unnecessarily risking infection. The door also had to be wide enough to accommodate a hospital bed; Mickey Blackmon, who runs the fabrication shop, told me, “You don’t find *those* at Home Depot.”

The tradesmen went out for supplies, then returned with fifty-two hundred dollars’ worth of materials. By 6 P.M., they were building. They removed the roll-up door and crafted a replacement with sheet acrylic, a piano hinge, and a rubber handle, adding a louvered vent, for fresh air, and sealing it all into place with silicone. The electricians installed L.E.D. lighting. The H.V.A.C. guy inserted an exhaust fan in the rear wall, and just inside the door, at the ceiling line, he mounted a heating-and-air-conditioning unit. Contaminated air would be drawn out the back of the pod, through a HEPA filter. Oxygen could be supplied through

either pipes or individual cannisters. Mississippi’s coronavirus numbers were then low. (The state is now experiencing a spike.) As the tradesmen worked, one remarked that he hoped none of them would wind up *in* the container.

It took eight craftsmen ten hours to convert the PODS box. The team concluded that, with prefabricated doors and practice, a skilled four-person crew could finish the job in half that time. The tradesmen had used everyday tools: tape measure, level, table saw, drill, wire stripper, screwdriver, pliers.

There’s an old joke about an engineer being placed face up in a guillotine during the French Revolution: As the blade rises, the engineer says, “Hey, I see your problem!” Tradespeople have a similar compulsion to tinker. After modifying the PODS container, the Vicksburg technicians added corner brackets of angle iron and attached the kind of double-wheeled jack casters found on the hitch of a boat trailer. Now a handful of people could maneuver the unit without a forklift.

The Corps asked volunteers to test the prototype in the field. Three containers were used in a simulation one snowy morning in April, at Lake Superior State University, in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan. The testers reported that the unit worked well, though they suggested looking for ways to facilitate easier communication between the patient and the medical staff outside the acrylic door. Over all, according to a Corps report, the container approach was “scalable, economical, and effective.”

Six more PODS containers were placed in a parking lot at United Medical Center, a hospital in Washington, D.C. After a city health planner suggested design tweaks, the exhaust fan was moved to a lower wall position, to avoid drawing contaminated air toward a caregiver’s face.

Such changes hadn’t been hard to make, and Semonite was pleased. Showing me photographs of the prototype, he said, “*That’s* innovation!” He was already thinking about how modified mobile containers might be

used for crises other than COVID-19, including as temporary housing for homeless people.

Semonite admires what he calls “discovery learning”—stumbling onto a solution to a given problem. But he didn’t want the Corps to waste time during a public-health emergency grasping around for fixes that already had been figured out. Specs for the modified PODS container, along with photographs, were placed in an alternate-care-facility “playbook,” which subsequent clients could consult like a catalogue.

Cuomo, the vice-chair of the National Governors Association, was warning other states to learn from New York’s experience and to take the coronavirus seriously, saying, “We are your future.” Semonite had instructed the colonels who run the Corps’s domestic districts to reach out to governors and mayors, telling them, “Let’s get ahead of need.” At a Pentagon press briefing, he explained that governors who wanted the Corps’s help should nominate potential sites for assessment. Corps engineers ultimately completed more than eleven hundred such field evaluations, guided by a checklist: Electricity? Water and sewer? Is there mold? Are there vermin? How close is the nearest hospital? Surveying the capabilities of potential contractors, they asked, “Can you mobilize within forty-eight hours?” At any site where building commenced, Semonite ordered “beds on the ground” before the expected peak of the local curve.

Semonite often visits ongoing projects, because he likes to “look the local people in the eye.” He wears a white hard hat personalized with three silver stars. He has been known to show up unannounced at a job site and demand visual support for an engineer’s proposal. (“You’ve got two hours to convince me—go.”) A former aide-de-camp of Semonite’s, Lieutenant Colonel Justin Pritchard, said, “I would leave work exhausted, but he’s still got energy. He’ll crush some e-mail until midnight and be doing it again at six-thirty in the morning.” In e-mails,



Semonite urges his staff to “FINISH WHAT WE START.” Wes Trammell, a civil engineer who runs the Corps construction branch in Huntsville, said, “For an organization like ours, it’s good when your leader is hard-charging. That gives us confidence.” This spring, at a site in New Jersey, Semonite’s lightning-round questions sounded like both a fact-finding mission and a test: “How do these snap together?”; “Any penetrations of the floor?”; “Do you know where Bed 15 is at?”

As the Corps honed its response to the coronavirus, many alternate care facilities received hospital-grade materials. Such sites had to meet fire-safety and medical specifications. Stormwater had to drain well, to prevent mud and mosquitoes. Medical staff needed a dedicated space for donning clean P.P.E. at the start of each shift and removing dirties at the end. At the five sites that I saw being built, in New York and New Jersey, I heard discourses on Y-valves, sewer lift, sink splash, and perimeter hooks. On Long Island, I watched a contractor peer into the innards of a freshly dug trench and exclaim, “A hundred and thirty-six thousand linear foot of plastic pipe so far today!” More than once, I heard a foreman quietly mention that many construction workers had volunteered for the job, despite the risks of contracting COVID-19. Crew members guzzled an energy drink called True Eagle as they worked around the clock, in twelve-hour shifts. On Easter morning, during a conference call with managers in multiple locations, the speakerphone at a temporary command center in Nassau County began emitting snores.

By mid-April, with nearly three dozen alternate care facilities in progress or under consideration nationwide, Semonite was clocking each improvement. He had decided that he preferred hard walls to curtains, and he was extremely enthusiastic about MERV-13 air filters, which trap particles as small as 0.3 microns. One morning at a site in New Jersey, he demonstrated a wireless nurse-call system for Governor Phil Murphy. Someone pushed a button on a pendant, and a serene female voice on the P.A. system said, “Room 616, Bed A.” Se-

monite explained that the wireless setup represented a technological advance over work done mere days earlier: “A patient down at Javits has to pull a little string. A light comes on, and then the nurse has to look down and figure out who’s the person, just like on an airplane.”

The Corps built two of New York’s alternate care facilities on Long Island, at SUNY-Stony Brook and SUNY-Old Westbury, and one in White Plains, at the Westchester County Center. At the Stony Brook site, near Stony Brook University Hospital, the work started just after Cuomo shut down schools. On the first morning that I visited—a sunny Saturday in April—the campus’s athletic complex was crawling with construction workers. The previous day, the workforce had peaked, at nine hundred and thirty-five people. Loud machinery rearranged the landscape. The baseball and softball diamonds had disappeared. Subcontractors clustered like high-school cliques: the pavers, the steamfitters, the tin-knockers.

Five white tents the size of airplane hangars had materialized beside the track-and-field venue. Enormous HEPA filters were being molded onto the back of each tent. Workers spread resin with rollers and brooms, creating seamless floors that could be easily cleaned. Each patient cubicle needed a dedicated power source, and the contractors had devised a solution that resembled the docking stations at a drive-in theatre: knee-high posts fitted with electrical outlets, connected to wiring that ran beneath the raised flooring of the tent. One contractor said, “We’ve solved more problems in the last two weeks than in the last twelve months.”

Colonel Thomas Asbery, then the commander of the Corps’s New York District, toured the tents with executives from Turner Construction, which had won a fifty-million-dollar contract to provide a thousand and twenty-eight beds. Everyone wore a neon vest, a hard hat, and a mask. Asbery had on an N95 and, over it, a hibiscus-patterned mask that his wife had made from a Hawaiian shirt. Looking up at the sprinkler system, which had been installed within a week, he said, “To laymen, it’s, ‘Eh, O.K., fire sprinklers.’

To an engineer, this is, like, *amazing*.”

In Westchester County, a contractor named Billy Haugland told Asbery that the pace had been dizzying: “Your carpenters come, and then, ‘Oh, here come the electricians!’ And then, ‘Here come the plumbers!’ And then, ‘Here come the carpenters again!’” Haugland’s brother and business partner, Joe, later told me, “I feel like I’ve been drinking out of a fire hose for fourteen days.” The Westchester site was a forty-seven-million-dollar project: a hundred and ten negative-pressure units. The Westchester County Center, originally a theatre, has a red velvet curtain and a ceiling strung with Art Deco globe lights; it now housed bright white sterile cubes, each with an air-pressure monitor looming over its transparent door. It was easy to be awed by the sight of all the gleaming new H.V.A.C. ducts and copper oxygen piping, until you remembered why they were there.

At the scene of a crisis, Semonite likes to position an office trailer branded with the Army star and the Corps castle logo, which he believes can be as comforting as seeing “a red cross on a battlefield, or after a tornado.” He told me, “It’s, like, ‘Somebody’s here. It’s gonna be O.K.’”

Semonite grew up in Bellows Falls, in the Green Mountains. His parents, Bill and Jeanne, ran a Studebaker dealership. Jeanne also taught reading, and Bill, a Navy veteran, served as the president of the chamber of commerce and helped build the high school and a church. The Semonites built their own home, atop a long hill. In June, 1965, when Todd was eight, his older brother, Scott, was given a bicycle with hand brakes for his tenth birthday; for days, his parents watched him practice. On June 30th, Scott rode off alone to a swimming lesson, and crashed at the bottom of the hill. A neighbor found him. Scott died at the hospital the next day, of head injuries.

Todd became an Eagle Scout and class president, then attended West Point, the nation’s first school of engineering, on a full scholarship. Semonite is not inclined toward self-reflection, but when I asked how his brother’s death had affected him he teared up and said, “I think about him all the

time.” Publicly, Semonite often says that no American should die for lack of a hospital bed.

Semonite speaks in a booming half-growl and in swift, declarative sentences. Since the pandemic began, he has appeared at press briefings with Trump; watching him speak after the President is like swimming from turbulent water into a crystalline pool. He went on Rachel Maddow’s show in March, and she gushingly thanked him “for speaking and *moving* quickly,” adding, “It inspires confidence, sir.” Junko Yoshida, the former editor of the *Electronic Engineering Times*, wrote that when she first watched Semonite discussing the coronavirus on TV she almost shouted, “An engineer, at last. Thank God!” Semonite’s “refreshing directness,” she went on, reminded everyone that “politics and politicians have very little real power to battle the pandemic, because they don’t know jack about the nuts and bolts.” She praised his focus on elegant simplicity, noting that “the quest for perfection too often ends with a product that’s dead on arrival, too late, too expensive.” She also liked that Semonite’s name “sounds like an explosive.”

Semonite’s first public event with Trump was in October, 2018, when he joined the President in the Oval Office for the signing of the America’s Water Infrastructure Act. When Trump invited him to comment, Semonite noted the legislation’s overwhelmingly bipartisan support. Trump responded, “With that voice, he should be a politician!” After Semonite’s first televised COVID-19 briefing, the White House pressured him to appear regularly on Fox News. Semonite told his staff, “I cannot be the Fox general.” He went on Fox but also on CNN, CBS, and NBC, beginning each spot by expressing sorrow for the loss of life. When the actor James Woods, a zealous Trump supporter, tweeted, “How unbelievably great is the #ArmyCorpsOfEngineers?” an Ohio engineer shot back, “They’re awesome. Know why? They use SCIENCE to make decisions and don’t play games when lives are at stake.”

Trump has enlisted the Corps to work on his pet project: building four hundred and fifty miles of wall along the Mexican border by the 2020 Pres-



*“I guard them all except for that one. That one I don’t care for.”*

idential election. Trump has tried to leverage the popularity of Semonite’s coronavirus leadership as a way to amass more support for the wall. In March, during a COVID-19 teleconference with governors, the President introduced Semonite as a “very, very talented man who I’ve dealt with a lot on building different things throughout the country.” At one coronavirus media event, Trump declared that Semonite and public-health officials were “big stars.” At another, he praised Semonite—who was present, in his dress uniform—for being “so impressive.” Trump asked him to speak “on behalf of the services, and on behalf of the federal government.” After Semonite delivered a progress report on alternate care facilities, Trump added, “The General is in charge of the wall!”

The wall consists of vertical steel slats, spaced a few inches apart, that are as high as thirty feet and are topped with an “anti-climb” feature. In a sadistic flourish, Trump asked to have the wall painted black, making it scorching to the touch. The Corps advised against

this, noting that the painting and the maintenance could cost millions of extra dollars. Trump backed off, then changed his mind. The wall will be black.

Last year, the *Washington Post* reported that Trump “personally and repeatedly” pushed the Corps to hire a North Dakota contractor, Fisher Industries, to build part of the wall. The owner, Tommy Fisher, is a vocal Trump supporter; more than once, he told Fox News that his company could build the wall faster, better, and less expensively than competitors. When the company’s bids failed, Fisher challenged the Corps in the Court of Federal Claims, calling its procurement process unfair. A government official told me that the company had been “writing crappy proposals” and “couldn’t meet any of the specs.” The case was thrown out.

In 2018, Kevin Cramer, the representative from North Dakota, who was running for the Senate, received more than ten thousand dollars in donations to his campaign from Fisher and his wife; that year, Fisher accompanied

Cramer, another Trump ally, to the State of the Union address. Cramer lobbied on behalf of Fisher, pressuring the Corps to share the winning bids for wall contracts. Cramer's office told me that he requested the documents because the Corps's "contracting process did not value innovation" and "funneled awards only to existing contractors." The Corps, following protocol, refused to provide the bids.

Cramer used his position on two Senate committees that have jurisdiction over the Corps to formally request the documents. The Corps had no choice but to comply. Fisher's bids soon improved. In December, the company received a four-hundred-million-dollar contract to build thirty-one miles of wall in Arizona. The Pentagon's inspector general is conducting an audit of the contract.

Fisher went on to win more wall contracts, and to build other sections on private land. In July, ProPublica reported that there were erosion problems on the Rio Grande riverbank where Fisher had built three miles of wall. Marianna Treviño Wright, the executive director of a nearby butterfly conservancy, told the *Monitor*, a newspaper in McAllen, Texas, that a storm could topple the

wall's slats and shoot them downriver as "projectiles." (The conservancy has sued Fisher.) In an e-mail, Fisher said that he has "replanted additional grass," and that it is "common in construction to have a landscape maintenance period after a project." He added, "The wall is in perfect condition."

Semonite was scheduled to retire at midnight on May 18th. At Corps headquarters, in the Government Accountability Office building, he started organizing his personal effects in three cardboard bankers boxes. One was labelled "SEMONITE: SENTIMENTAL." The others were marked "COVID" and "WALL": missions representing opposite ends of the human capacity for empathy.

Semonite's public interactions with the President have led some people to speculate that he privately disapproves of him. During one coronavirus briefing, Trump invited Semonite to watch him field questions; Semonite replied, "Sir, I've got a lot of building to do. I'm going to leave, if you don't mind." Last fall, Trump asked him to describe the border wall's surveillance features, and Semonite said, "Sir, there could be some merit in not discussing that."

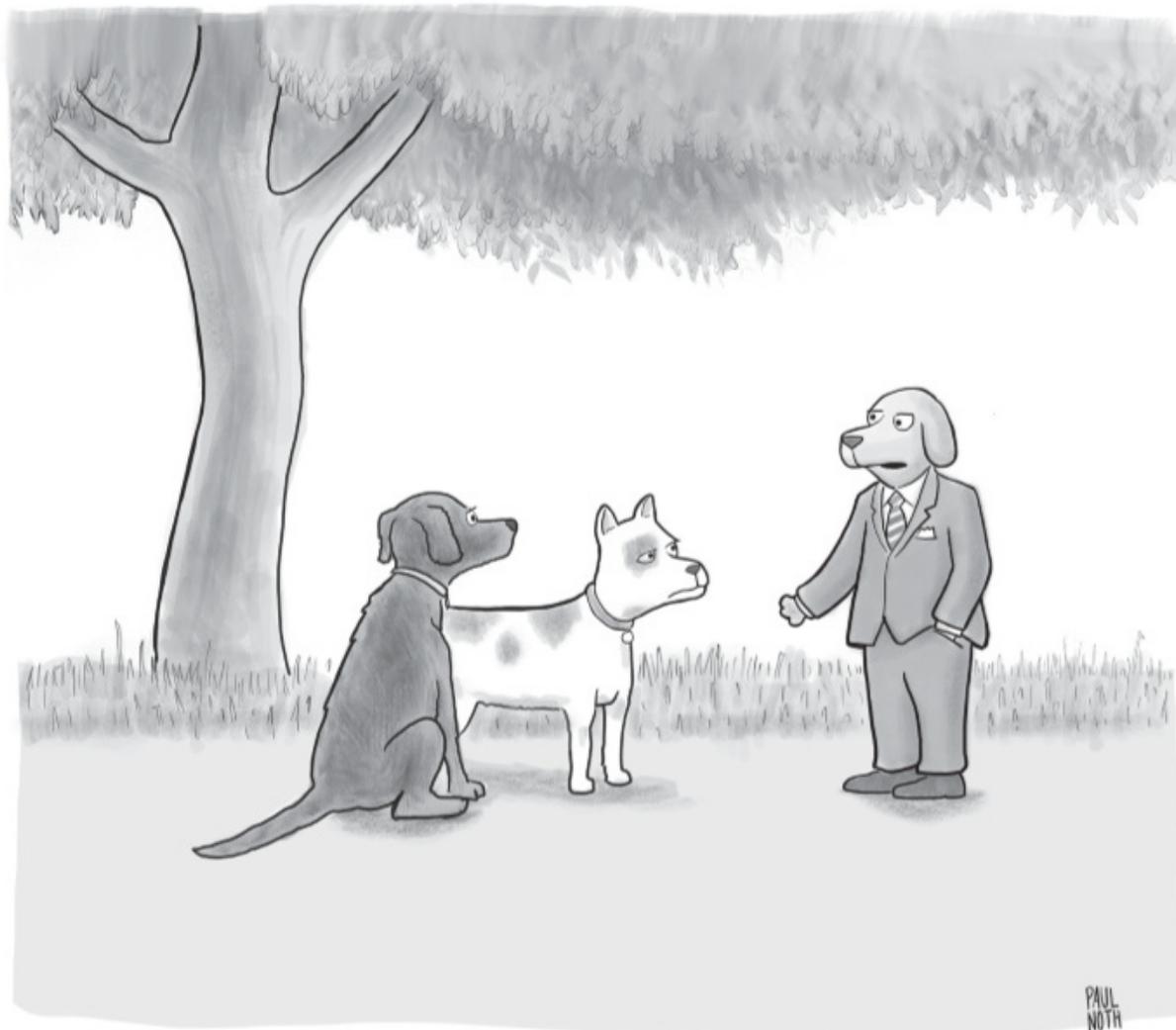
The Army oath reads, in part, "I will

obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me." Semonite cannot refuse a lawful order even if he morally opposes it. Defense Department policy prohibits active-duty military personnel from speaking or behaving politically in the public sphere. During a roundtable discussion at a Customs and Border Protection station in the border town of Calexico, California, Semonite, sitting next to Trump, maintained an inscrutable expression as the President lied about a "colossal surge" of migrants "overwhelming our immigration system."

Semonite speaks of the wall exclusively in terms of engineering, skirting its symbolism and its purpose. He likes to say, "My job is to salute." When I pressed him on this, he said that "command climate" is "exceptionally important," and asserted that the military must remain apolitical and be ready to "flex either way, based on where an Administration wants to go." He said, "We have to live to be able to serve another Administration." Recently, in a semi-private moment with Murphy, the New Jersey governor, Semonite said, "I got thirty-six thousand guys. We don't *care* about political agenda—we put the money where the biggest need is." Semonite tells his military staff, "If you're building a wall, you don't *have* an opinion on immigration." He tells them, "You're concrete and steel."

On Twitter, Semonite follows Trump and Ivanka Trump, but no former U.S. Presidents. He follows Fox News and CNN. His wife follows Trump and two of his children, along with Tucker Carlson and Fox News Politics. At the California event where Trump spoke of the "colossal surge" of migrants, Semonite began his remarks by thanking the Customs and Border Protection officers, who "protect America here from within." During a coronavirus briefing, Trump suggested an update on the border wall; Semonite responded, in part, "It's a very, very aggressive build," and said that the Corps hoped to "balance" fulfilling "the Administration's directive" with environmental and public interests, thus insuring that "everybody has a fair shake."

On May 12th, six days before he was scheduled to retire, Semonite notified



*"Everything that made me a bad dog has worked to my advantage in the private sector."*

colleagues that Trump and Defense Secretary Mark Esper had asked him to stay on for now. (When Semonite does leave, he will be replaced by Major General Scott Spellmon, the Corps's deputy commanding general for civil and emergency operations.) On the morning that was supposed to have been Semonite's first day of retirement, I met with him at his office, in Washington. He had stopped packing. That day, the *Post* happened to report that Fisher had won another border-wall contract—worth \$1.3 billion, it was the largest yet.

Veterans have expressed concern that Trump will try to co-opt the military for his reelection campaign. Trump likes to say that, because of the coronavirus, he is a “wartime President.” Semonite keeps a diagram of the Corps's castle logo and mission statement beneath the glass top of the conference table in his office. He called me over to look at it and said, “Pretend you are building a castle. It's got to have a very, very strong foundation.” The foundation, he went on, “is treating people with dignity and respect, making sure we don't have sexual harassment, making sure I don't have fraud, making sure that I'm following the law.” All these tenets, I mentally noted, have been violated by Trump. But Semonite may simply have been talking concrete and steel.

The pandemic's first peak in New York—as devastating as it was—did not prove as large as officials had initially feared, in part because lockdown measures and masks mitigated the rate of infection. The only Corps-related facility that opened was Javits. At least six people died there. The last of Javits's thousand and ninety-five patients were “clapped out” on May 1st, to live bagpipes. One man, sitting upright on a gurney, told his caretakers, “Thank you very much.”

FEMA has spent more than seven hundred million dollars constructing Corps alternate care facilities, including nearly three hundred and forty million dollars in New York. The final tally, factoring in labor and supplies, will be far higher. (Cuomo has requested a waiver for the state's share of the costs.) During an emergency, FEMA and the Corps can award “no competition” contracts, which bypass the requirement that the job go

to the lowest bidder. Construction contracts went to established partners of the Corps such as DynCorp, a defense contractor, and also to new collaborators such as Haugland Group, which specializes in roads and runways and hadn't built a building before. (The Corps's Web site posts the names of its coronavirus contractors but not the actual contracts; the Corps has not fulfilled a request for that information.)

One morning this past spring, in the command center of the Stony Brook site, a project leader listed equipment flowing into the unfinished facility. A muted large-screen TV, tuned to Fox News, showed Cuomo and a chyron: “All numbers are on the downward slope.”

The Corps's site manager, Ryan Ferguson, a civil engineer who typically spends his work hours filling Fire Island beaches with sand, said, “At the completion of the project, we're gonna have to turn over some sort of property list.” A Turner Construction executive asked whose name should go on all the warranties. A SUNY-Stony Brook official said, “Governor Cuomo?” Everyone laughed.

The warranty holder is indeed the State of New York. States now own much of the infrastructure that the federal government brought to each site. Nationwide, schools and hospitals and community centers were upgraded with everything from paved roads to air-conditioning. At East Orange General Hospital, in New Jersey, Semonite showed Governor Murphy where the Corps and its contractors had installed a powerful generator by running new electrical wiring beneath a road, to avoid disrupting ambulance service. “That's a *permanent* fix,” Semonite told Murphy. The project, he explained, represented an “insurance policy” against future waves of infectious disease. He added, “Even if you were to put regular staff back in here, and turn these back into offices, in a couple of days of moving people out you now have a two-hundred-and-fifty-person facility.”

Murphy said, “Huge.”

When an alternate care facility is no longer needed, the state decides whether to “bring it down” or put it in what Semonite calls “hibernation mode.” The 1918 pandemic came in three waves: the

second, which struck in the fall, coinciding with flu season, was far deadlier than the first. In some states, sites have already been dismantled. Travia, the engineer who flew to Albany with Semonite, told me, “If the city of New York, or Chicago, or New Orleans, asked, ‘What do you think we ought to do with our A.C.F.?’ my answer would be: Clean it, service the equipment, lock the doors, do maintenance checks, keep it warm. Because we're going to need it again.”

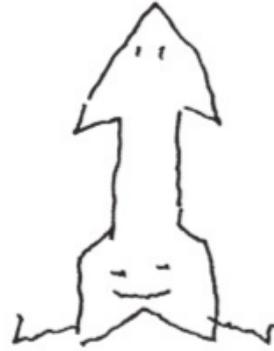
Craig Fugate, a former FEMA director, would often emphasize that during a national crisis it's better to “go big, go early.” Semonite told me, “What Fugate always said was that, at the end of a disaster, if there's some

things that we put somewhere that we don't use, it's O.K.—just have it available.” Semonite has said, “When you have a life at stake, most of the time we don't want to necessarily try to figure out how to save a lot of money.” During a visit to one site, I heard him tell his staff, “I don't have a problem if we didn't get this a hundred per cent right. We got this ninety-five per cent right—on time.”

Between late March and the end of June, the Corps built thirty-eight alternate care facilities nationwide, adding more than fifteen thousand hospital beds. More may be coming in states that initially declined the Corps's help but are now facing coronavirus surges. The conversions have included a Quality Inn (Florissant, Missouri) and a dressage arena (Loveland, Colorado). At a facility built inside the T.C.F. Center, in Detroit, patients could look up and see a large sign: “DON'T GIVE UP HOPE.” Once there is a vaccine, the Corps may be asked to help distribute it.

During the initial build-out phase, state leaders often thanked the Corps for standing out as competent and prepared at a moment when many Americans felt otherwise abandoned by the federal government. In New Jersey, Governor Murphy told Semonite, “The Army Corps was here in our deepest, darkest hour of need, and we'll never forget it.” He asked, “When will we see you again, General?”

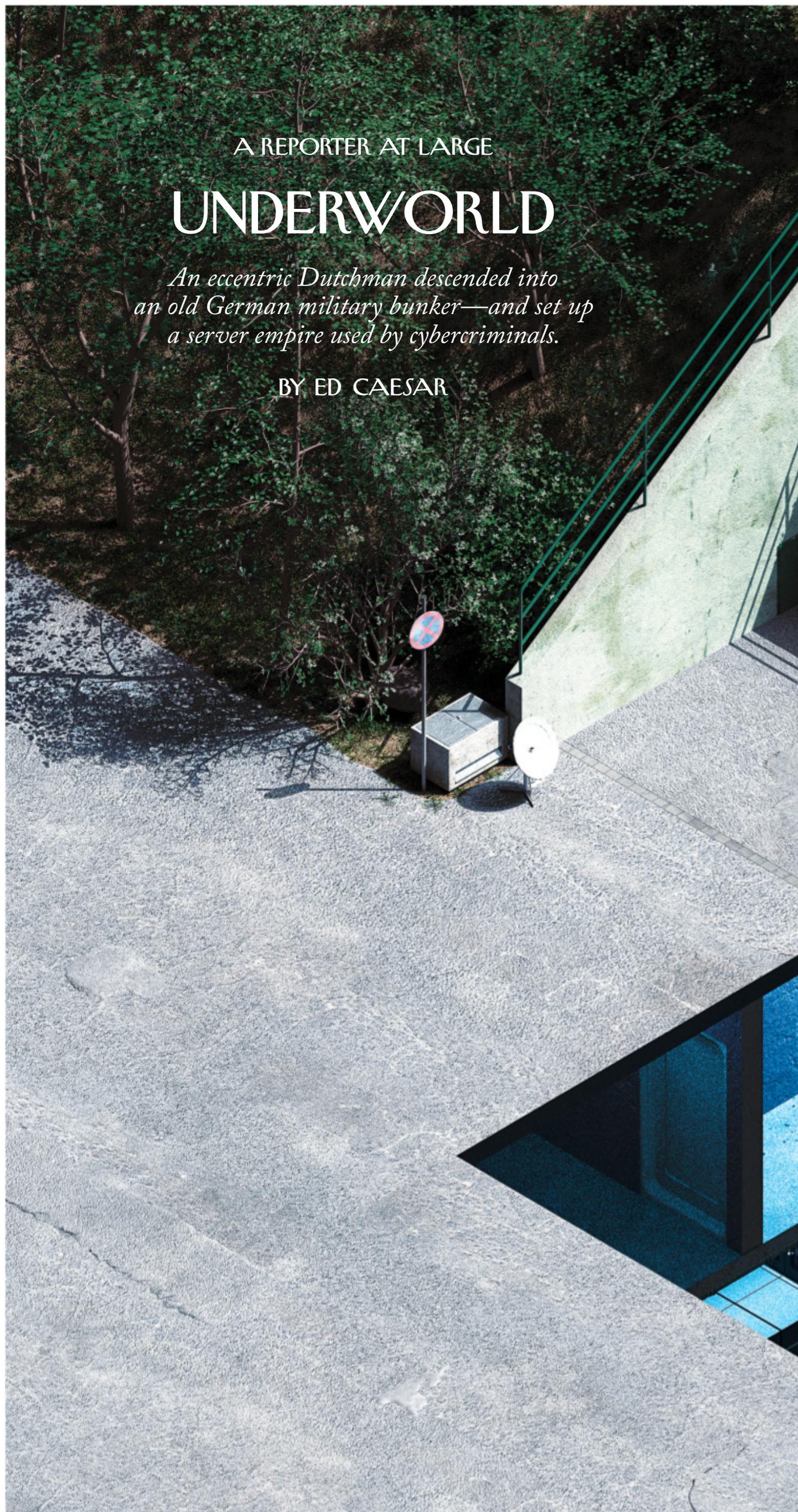
Semonite said, “Whenever you need me, sir.” ♦



In the mid-nineteen-seventies, the West German Army, the Bundeswehr, built a vast underground bunker near the town of Traben-Trarbach. It was five stories deep, had nearly sixty thousand square feet of floor space, and was designed to withstand a nuclear attack. Eighty days' worth of survival provisions were stored inside, including an emergency power supply and more than a million litres of drinking water. You entered the facility through an air lock; the interior temperature was set to seventy degrees. The walls were concrete, thirty-one inches thick, and some were lined with copper. The rooms were soundproof and transmission-proof. Between 1978 and 2012, the bunker was the headquarters of the Bundeswehr's meteorological division, and at any one time about three hundred and fifty civilian contractors worked there; most of them focussed on predicting and plotting weather patterns wherever the German military was deployed. New employees often got lost. On each level, the walls were painted a different color, to help people orient themselves—but the bunker was symmetrical, so one side looked much like another. There was no natural light. In winter, workers on day shifts arrived in the dark and left in the dark.

In 2012, the Bundeswehr moved its meteorological division to another site. Germany's federal real-estate agency, known as BImA, listed the bunker for three hundred and fifty thousand euros. The low price reflected the unusual nature of the property and the expense of maintaining it. The bunker sat beneath a plot of some thirty acres, in a forested area on a hill outside Traben-Trarbach, which is an hour east of the Belgian border. The perimeter of the property was marked by ramparts and a fence, and aboveground the site contained several large structures, including a gatehouse, an office building, a tall aerial with satellite dishes, a helipad, and barracks constructed by the Nazis in 1933. The Bundeswehr had employed twelve men, who worked in shifts around the clock, solely to insure that the bunker was properly ventilated and did not flood. The German government hoped that a technology business, or perhaps a hotel, might want the premises, but there were few prospective buyers.

The relocation of the Bundeswehr



A REPORTER AT LARGE

# UNDERWORLD

*An eccentric Dutchman descended into an old German military bunker—and set up a server empire used by cybercriminals.*

BY ED CAESAR

*CyberBunker, a business based near the German resort town of Traben-Trarbach, offered*



*“bulletproof hosting” for Web sites. The air-locked facility, five stories deep, was designed to withstand a nuclear attack.*

division was a blow to the local economy. Traben-Trarbach is a fairy-tale town that straddles a bend in the wide, teal-blue Mosel River. Traben is on the north bank, Trarbach on the south. The town, which is overlooked by a ruined fourteenth-century castle, is full of aesthetic quirks and highly caloric delicacies. Only about six thousand people live there, but thousands of tourists arrive every summer to hike, drink the local Riesling, and take river cruises. At the turn of the twentieth century, Traben-Trarbach was a wine-trading hub second only to Bordeaux, and also a center of the Jugendstil movement, the German iteration of Art Nouveau; many of its buildings reflect the wealth and the brio of that period. Near the hotel where I stayed in December, a Jugendstil relief of Rapunzel adorned the side of an apartment building. Her gilded hair fell in wavy lines from the fourth floor to the second.

The mayor of Traben-Trarbach, Patrice-Christian-Roger Langer, a garrulous man with a fine gray beard, worked

at the bunker complex for nearly thirty years, and for eleven of them he operated its mainframe computer. He enjoyed his time working underground. But, he told me, “not everybody could deal with working in a bunker,” adding, “It’s a mental thing . . . if you don’t have a *window*.”

In 2012, a foundation controlled by a fifty-three-year-old Dutchman named Herman-Johan Xennt proposed to buy the bunker complex. Xennt travelled to Traben-Trarbach to explain his plans to a closed session of the town council. He was a striking man, with a cascade of shoulder-length gray-blond hair, and wore a dark suit, which highlighted the pallor of his face. Xennt told the council that he intended to set up a Web-hosting business at the bunker complex, and promised to create as many as a hundred jobs for local people, but he was vague when pressed for details.

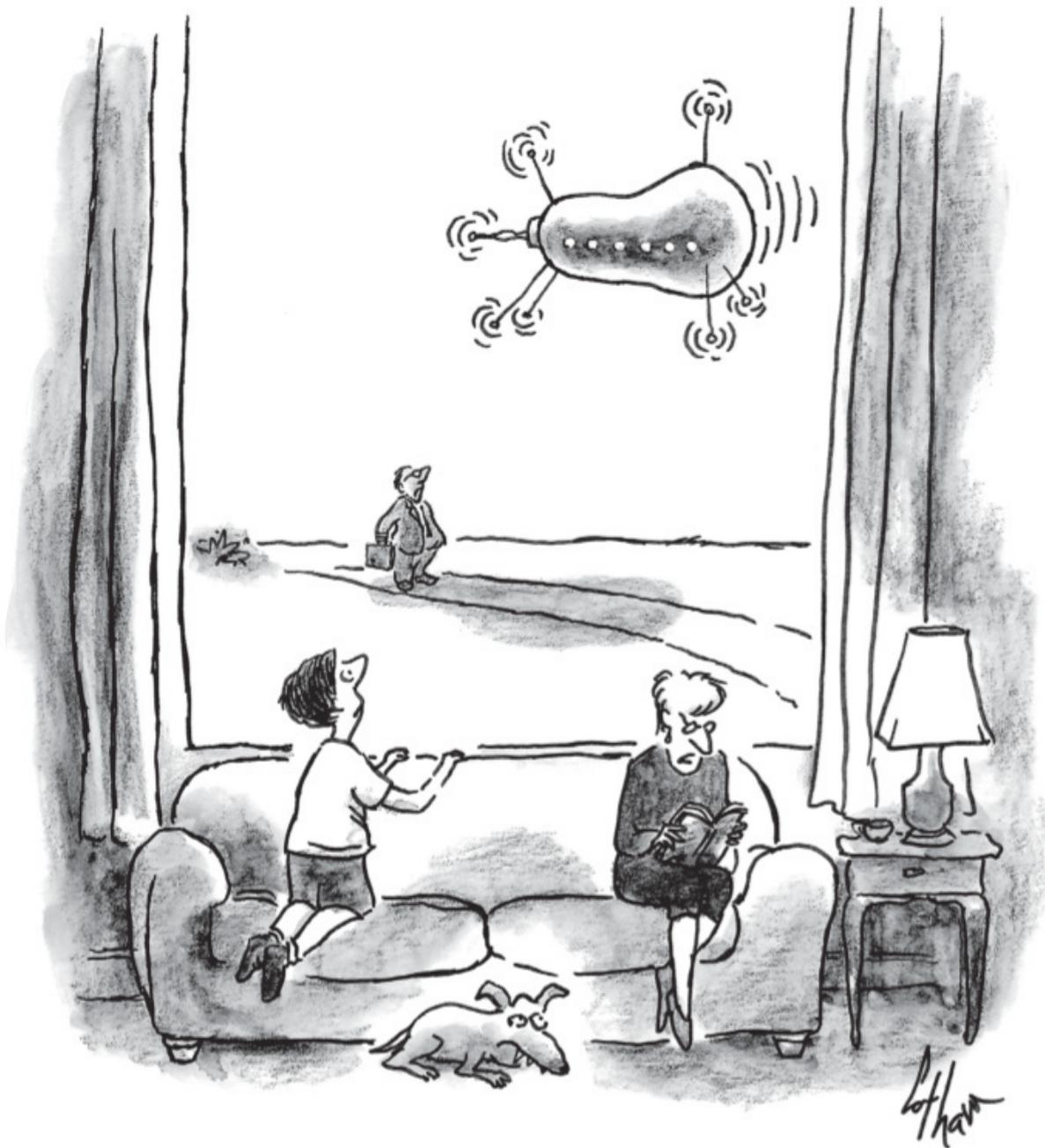
Several council members were concerned about Xennt’s credentials. Although he said that he had been in the Web-hosting business for years, he did

not name any blue-chip clients. But there were no other viable buyers, and so, in June, 2013, the property was sold to Xennt’s foundation. One of the council members, Heide Pönnighaus, later told a newspaper, “I didn’t have the best feeling about it.”

Xennt was born Herman-Johan Verwoert-Derksen, in 1959. He grew up in Arnhem, a small city in the eastern Netherlands which had been the site of intense fighting during the Second World War. As a teen-ager, he became interested in historical buildings, and several times he visited an old Nazi bunker on the edge of town. He also fell in love with science fiction, and began calling himself Xennt (pronounced “Zent”). When “Star Wars” was released, in 1977, he was enraptured by it. He decorated his bedroom to look like a spaceship, with blacked-out windows, jury-rigged electric doors, and speakers playing moody synthesizer music. In one corner of the room was an Apple II personal computer.

By his early twenties, he had officially changed his surname. Nothing irritated him more than being called by his given name, and he preferred to be called by his new surname alone. Even his parents knew him simply as Xennt. After graduating from college, in the early eighties, he started several personal-computer businesses in the Netherlands. A poster for a store that he owned, PC International, shows him with long brown hair, bushy eyebrows, and an unconvincing mustache. He is wearing a T-shirt with “Xennt” printed on it, and is standing behind a bulky monitor emblazoned with the store’s logo. During this period, he and a partner, a woman of Dutch Antillean heritage named Angelique, had two sons. They named them Xyonn and Yennoah: X and Y. Xennt and Angelique soon separated, and she retained primary custody of the boys. (Xennt also has a son who was born in 2019, to a different mother.)

In 1995, when Xennt was thirty-five, he bought a twenty-thousand-square-foot former NATO bunker in the Dutch town of Goes, near the North Sea coast. The bunker, built forty-one years earlier, had ceased being used for military purposes in 1994. Xennt settled in with some old friends, including Paul Scheepers, a computer technician with a bald pate, long curly hair, and a sweet laugh. Scheepers is now fifty-eight years old,



*“The pear-shaped object approaching the house isn’t your father?”*

and works in I.T. support for a Dutch badminton foundation, but he still introduces himself by the online sobriquet that he adopted in the eighties: Cytrax. “We were looking for some space to make a kind of futuristic environment,” Scheepers told me recently. “And what do you do when you have a bunker and you have a computer company? You put computers in the bunker.”

At the Goes property, Xennt started a new business, called CyberBunker, which offered “bulletproof hosting” to Web sites. All Web sites must be physically hosted somewhere, whether on a personal computer or a server; hosting is now a multibillion-dollar industry dominated by such companies as Amazon Web Services and GoDaddy. CyberBunker offered, for a steep price, a highly secure hosting environment for sites containing sensitive, or illicit, material. In the late nineties, most of CyberBunker’s customers ran pornographic sites. Xennt had a liberal outlook, but there were lines he would not cross. According to CyberBunker’s Web site, its servers would host all content except “child pornography and anything related to terrorism.”

I spoke to a former pornography distributor who used Xennt’s servers during this period. (He did not want me to publish his name, as he now works in finance.) He told me that his business brought in about a million euros a year, but that Xennt himself had relatively little money, because he had imprudently bought hundreds of servers—an investment in infrastructure that took several years to pay off.

A curious mixture of adolescent-male fantasia and techno-anarchist utopia, CyberBunker anticipated the current trend for apocalypse-ready hideaways owned by the rich and paranoid. The pornographer visited the Goes facility several times. Xennt’s taste in interior design had changed little since he had decorated his teen-age bedroom: the bunker was furnished with computer terminals, black leather sofas, neon-red lamps, and artificial plants. Ethereal music was often playing. The pornographer found the bunker’s atmosphere strange but “impressive”; its denizens were “alternative” people. Xennt had an odd diet. For breakfast, he ate *frikandel*—a skinless, deep-fried pork sausage, which is a popular snack in the Netherlands—along with an assortment of vitamins. “Xennt was a mysterious

guy,” the pornographer told me, laughing. Two other former colleagues remember that the Goes bunker had a “porno room” where there were sometimes live sex shows involving Xennt’s girlfriends.

In 1999, a young programmer named Sven Kamphuis, who went by the online handle CB3ROB, joined the CyberBunker collective. Kamphuis worked a day job at the Dutch Internet firm XS4ALL. He had unruly black eyebrows and a crazy mop of black hair, and his colleagues at XS4ALL thought that he looked like Bert, from “Sesame Street.” They also remember him as rude, childish, and prone to conspiracy theories. But Kamphuis’s talent for programming was undeniable. He soon became one of Xennt’s lieutenants.

At around the same time, Xennt rented part of the bunker to another group. On July 27, 2002, there was an explosion in that section, and in the fire that ensued Xennt suffered burns on his hands and his face. The police showed up, and in the charred ruins of the bunker they found the remnants of a laboratory for making Ecstasy. Xennt’s business license was taken away, but he was not charged with any crime. He maintained that he had known nothing about the drug factory, and that the subletting group had assured him it was a painting company. CyberBunker’s servers were moved to aboveground facilities, in Amsterdam and elsewhere.

Xennt encouraged the notion that CyberBunker was more than a business. Less than a week after the fire, on August 1, 2002, he and Kamphuis published a declaration of independence for a new state, which they called the Republic of CyberBunker. Citing a U.N. Security Council resolution from 1960, which said that “all people have the right to self-determination,” the Republic of CyberBunker—population six—seceded from the Netherlands. CyberBunker declared as its sovereign territory the five hundred acres containing the ruined bunker. The country’s official currencies would be gold, dollars, and euros, and each resident would pay a flat tax of fifteen thousand dollars a year. Unusually for a republic, it had a royal family. Its President was His Majesty King

Xennt von CyberBunker, and its minister of foreign affairs and telecommunications was His Royal Highness Prince Sven Olaf von CyberBunker-Kamphuis.

Kamphuis often acted as CyberBunker’s spokesperson, and he promoted anti-authoritarian, libertarian ideas. Among his tenets: free speech is supreme; everyone has a right to be online; the Internet erases the power of the state; copyright is twentieth-century bullshit. Such notions were in fashion during the nine-

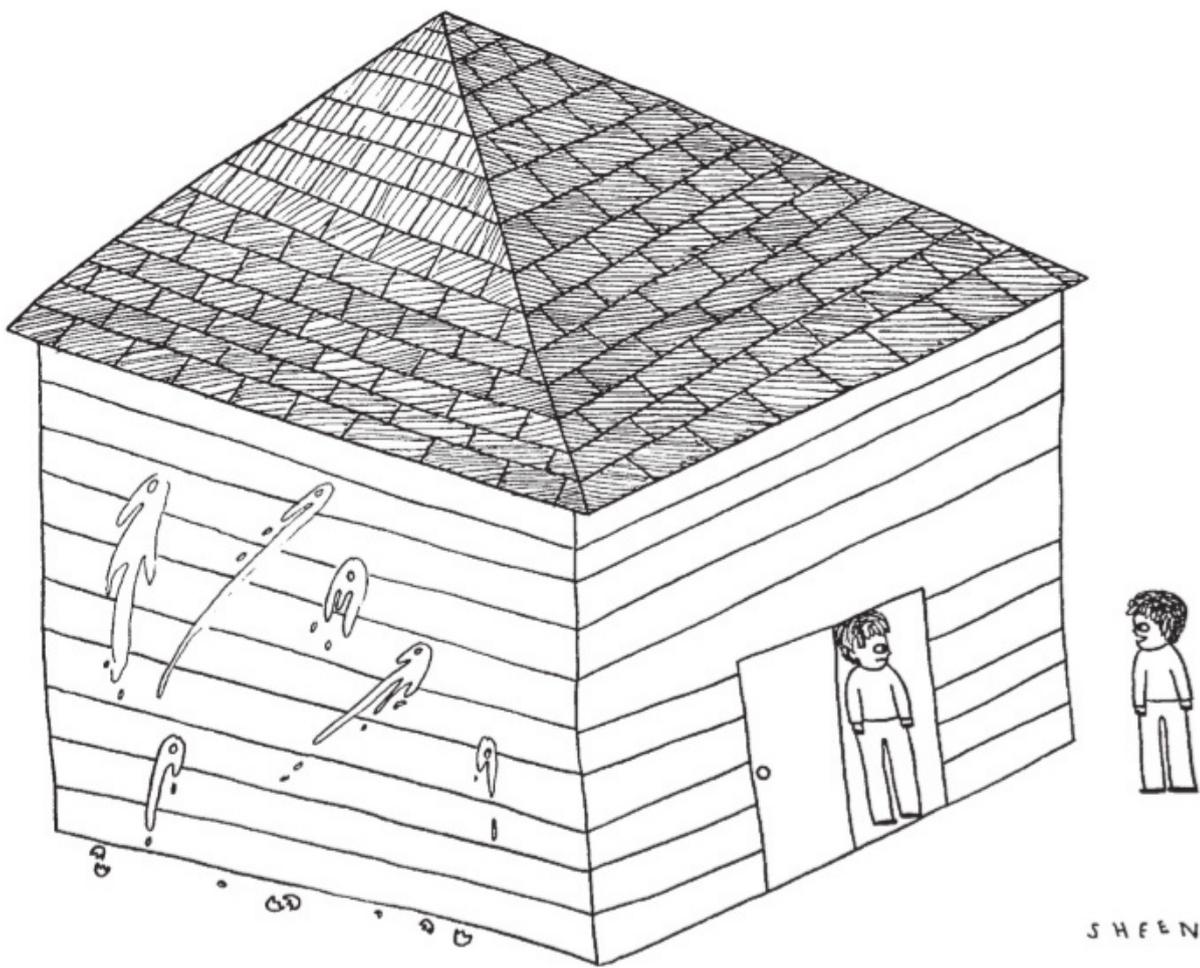
ties, when big technology firms had yet to dominate the Internet. In 1996, John Perry Barlow, the anarchist writer and a founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group committed to digital freedom and privacy, wrote an influential manifesto that began, “Governments of the Industrial World, you weary

giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of the Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.”

Several people told me that Xennt was not entirely sincere about his self-proclaimed regal status. (He recently called CyberBunker’s declaration of independence “a joke.”) But Kamphuis was serious about it—and remains so. Since 2002, he has more than once claimed to “enjoy personal and functional immunity” when faced with arrest, on charges ranging from driving offenses to cybercrime. Paul Scheepers, Xennt’s longtime friend, told me that Xennt’s world view was more pragmatic than Kamphuis’s: he simply wanted the freedom to pursue his own projects without interference. Xennt declined to be interviewed for this article, but agreed to give written answers to a dozen questions. He explained, “I am not interested in politics at all. I value privacy and I am against the ‘big brother’ policy of large corporations and governments.”

In the nineties and two-thousands, however, Xennt took part in some activism, helping to instigate what became known as the Public Root movement. He and an international group of investors and programmers tried to create their own roster of top-level domains—the suffixes that follow an





*"Do you have any more eggs I could borrow?"*

Internet address, such as ".org," ".com," and ".edu." They came up with various new domains—including ".schiphol," the name of Amsterdam's airport, and ".sex"—with the aim of selling them. Top-level domains are controlled by an American nonprofit organization called ICANN. At a time when the structure of the Internet still seemed to be in flux, Xennt and others in the Public Root movement chafed at ICANN's authority. In 2005, Xennt filed a patent application related to top-level domains, writing, "We state that each Internet user has the right to see all of the Internet."

The Public Root movement eventually fell apart, because of internal arguments over control, funding, and transparency. Martijn Burger, one of Xennt's former partners in the project, successfully sued Xennt for breach of contract. Burger told me that Public Root was "ideological," but added, "We also wanted to make some money."

Burger, who now works in private health care in the Netherlands, told me that Xennt has "brilliant ideas, but he's not a businessman." Peter Olsthoorn, a Dutch investigative journalist who has covered Xennt and CyberBunker ever since the Public Root contretemps, said

that Xennt was an "old-fashioned anarchist" with a specific gift: he understood "the Internet in its root, in the core." Scheepers told me that Xennt was an inspired designer who might have worked for Apple had he chosen a different path.

Another former colleague of Xennt's, a Dutch programmer named Frank Van der Loos, occasionally performed legal work for CyberBunker, despite having only paralegal qualifications. When we met in The Hague in March, Van der Loos wore a Bluetooth earpiece the entire time and spoke so quickly that I frequently misunderstood him. (He often finished his sentences with "Do you understand?") Van der Loos said that he and Xennt had argued about money, adding that Xennt's great weakness was that he was a "cheapskate." But Van der Loos also compared him to Steve Jobs. Although Xennt could code only in the rudimentary language BASIC, he was prescient about the kinds of change that a connected world would bring. Before PayPal became popular, for instance, Xennt had attempted to start his own online encrypted banking-transfer service, named Bank66. It had failed because

of Xennt's greed and lack of business acumen, Van der Loos said. Nevertheless, he called Xennt "a visionary."

Jörg Angerer, a senior German prosecutor, first heard that Xennt's foundation had bought the Traben-Trarbach bunker in the summer of 2013, after a council member conveyed his concerns to the local police. Angerer, who is based in Koblenz, an hour northeast of Traben-Trarbach, is a lean and affable man with a shaved head and an unshaven face. For the past few years, his office has specialized in prosecuting cybercrime. Soon after he began researching Xennt and his company, he told me, he concluded that some of CyberBunker's clients were manifestly illegal. But CyberBunker itself appeared to exist in a gray area between activism, business, and criminality.

In the two-thousands and twenty-tens, CyberBunker and Kamphuis's associated Internet-service provider, which was also called CB3ROB, had become notorious for hosting the spam e-mail operations of phishing sites—fraudulent criminal enterprises that lure people into disclosing their credit-card details—and of rogue pharmaceutical peddlers. At the same time, CyberBunker hosted WikiLeaks, the renegade operation devoted to exposing secret documents. (Xennt told me that this was not a political gesture on his part: "CyberBunker hosted WikiLeaks indeed. Why? Because WikiLeaks hired its services.") The Pirate Bay, a site for sharing movies and other copyrighted content, was a CyberBunker client until 2010, when the Motion Picture Association of America won a court ruling, in Hamburg, that forced Xennt and Kamphuis to remove the site from its servers. Kamphuis was indignant about the decision, telling a reporter, "Help us put these dinosaurs out of their misery!"

As Angerer continued to research CyberBunker, he learned that it could be very aggressive. Around 2010, the Spamhaus Project, a European volunteer-driven organization whose goal is to impede spammers, had begun listing I.P. and real addresses associated with CyberBunker and CB3ROB, and had lobbied Internet-service providers to block the company. In early 2013, this pressure led to CB3ROB's services being briefly taken off-line. In retaliation, Kamphuis and a loose group of hackers

in different countries, who called themselves the Stophaus Collective, hit Spamhaus with a distributed denial-of-service attack, which incapacitates a site by overloading it with traffic. Kamphuis was arrested shortly after the attack, but Xennt was not; he proceeded with moving into the Traben-Trarbach bunker.

Angerer told me that he didn't fully understand Xennt's acquisition of the property, except to say that he evidently had "a weak spot for bunkers." CyberBunker gained some mystique by operating out of a fortified underground facility, but there is little benefit for customers in physically protecting servers to such an extreme degree. Moreover, the ostentatiously secure location was bound to attract the suspicion of law enforcement. Xennt's promise of bulletproof hosting, Angerer suggested, could have been more effectively fulfilled by using regular servers in a more permissive jurisdiction, such as Russia.

Xennt's desire to live and work underground was not entirely rational. Van der Loos, the former associate, told me that Xennt was *bunkergeil*—a Dutch portmanteau that means "horny for bunkers." After the underground facility in the Netherlands was destroyed by fire, in 2002, Xennt concluded that the most likely country where he might find a replacement was Germany, which had many military hideouts from the Cold War era. In 2007, Van der Loos and Xennt visited a former NATO bunker in Börfink, a facility that had been used as a center for West German intelligence in the seventies and eighties. In some areas of the Börfink bunker, there were no lights, and so the two men toured the cavernous space in darkness, following fluorescent green arrows on the walls, like Egyptologists inspecting hieroglyphs. The biggest underground room, which had formerly housed NATO maps, was three stories high. Xennt was captivated. "I want to be buried here," he said. Van der Loos spent the night in a nearby hotel, but Xennt made a bed in the abandoned map room and slept there.

Xennt moved into the Traben-Trarbach bunker in June, 2013. Angerer kept an eye on Xennt's activities but did not authorize a full investigation of CyberBunker for more than a year. The inquiry presented many legal difficul-

ties. According to German legislation, it's lawful to host a Web site containing illicit material, as long as the hoster is unaware of the content and does not actively assist the site's owner in illegal behavior. Online privacy is an important principle in German law, and establishing that a hoster knows of or assists in the publishing of illicit content normally requires a communication tap, which a judge is unlikely to permit without prima-facie evidence of criminality. Before Xennt moved to Traben-Trarbach, no Web hoster in Germany had ever been successfully prosecuted.

Michel van Eeten, a Dutch professor of cybercrime at Delft University of Technology, recently helped the Dutch police in an investigation of another "bulletproof hoster," called MaxiDed. The Netherlands has laws similar to Germany's on such matters, and van Eeten told me that investigators were left in "a Catch-22": "We don't have the power to show that the hosters are actively facilitating crime, and so we don't have the power to actually collect the data." Van Eeten told me that the MaxiDed case, which was tried last year, turned on a piece of luck. A separate Dutch investigation of a child-abuse site revealed that it was owned by the same people who owned MaxiDed. The judge in the MaxiDed case then allowed some digital intercepts. In one e-mail exchange, which I have seen, a customer complained that his server had been shut down for "abuse" even though he had



paid a premium for permission to host "adult, erotic, movies, doorways, dating, vpn, blogs, xrumer, and zennoposter." (A "doorway" page is a means of manipulating search engines; XRumer and ZennoPoster are tools for spreading spam.) The MaxiDed representative asked the customer what he had been running on his server. The customer responded, "xrumer." The MaxiDed representative said, "OK. Proceed." The customer then acknowledged that he had also used the server as

a command-and-control center for denial-of-service attacks. The hoster replied, "Done . . . should be up in a few minutes."

Despite this damning evidence, the MaxiDed case was not easy to prosecute. The company was shut down and two of its administrators were arrested. One was tried in the Netherlands but was convicted only on a single count of money laundering. On all other counts, the prosecutors failed to show that MaxiDed had been a knowing accessory to crime. "The case sort of fell apart," van Eeten told me.

Angerer, the German prosecutor, knew that if he was going to bring down CyberBunker he needed both analog and digital evidence of wrongdoing. After Xennt set up shop in Germany, local police officers started monitoring the property, though they could not see much, because Xennt had added taller fencing to the ramparts, and dogs to guard the perimeter. The officers also enlisted someone connected to CyberBunker as an informant. At the start of 2015, a German cybercrime unit based in the city of Mainz began investigating Xennt's activities.

In December, I travelled to Mainz, which is about an hour east of Traben-Trarbach, and met with the cybercrime team. Three police officers and two civilian contractors worked out of a crowded room in a quiet area of the city. The unit's headquarters had the ambience of a nerdy frat house. Decorating one wall was a "Breaking Bad" poster featuring the show's antihero, Walter White—a disgruntled chemistry teacher who begins cooking enormous quantities of meth in a high-tech bunker. The officers asked that I not use their names, but they were happy to discuss their five-year investigation of CyberBunker. None of the men looked old enough to have been doing anything professional for half a decade.

The police officers told me that, later in 2015, German authorities granted them permission to intercept the bunker's Web traffic. The officers tapped a cable going into the facility; the inflow and outflow were "mirrored," or copied, but not stopped. A small portion of the information they captured—around ten or fifteen per cent—was unencrypted. On that "clear" portion, the police could see links to illegal Web pages that sold drugs, facilitated credit-card fraud, and conducted other scams. Although the police could not decode any of the encrypted

data, the size of the flow suggested that CyberBunker was offering bulletproof protection for a huge number of so-called dark-Web sites. Xennt, in other words, was hosting illicit marketplaces.

Most people use only a fraction of the Internet. A small percentage of Web content is accessed through search engines like Google, or discussion sites like Reddit, or news sites like cnn.com. Beneath the “clear” Web that most people use is a vast amount of non-searchable and password-protected content, including government reports, scientific material, and medical records. This section of the Internet is known as the deep Web. Beneath this level is the dark Web, which exists largely on Tor—software that allows users to communicate with one another without betraying their identities or their I.P. addresses.

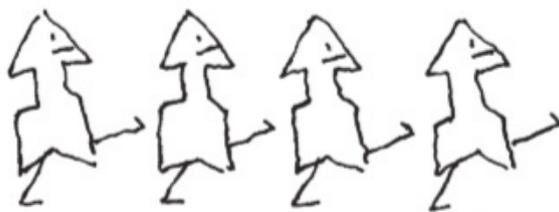
Tor is based on technology developed in the mid-nineties by employees of the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, with the intention of protecting online communications. (Tor is still partly funded by the U.S. government.) The first working version of the software was launched in 2002. Tor’s premise is simple and elegant. The Internet works by sending packets of information from one computer to another. The Tor browser routes all traffic through a network of relay nodes, in such a way that the starting point cannot be detected by the destination. As data pass through each of the relays, encryption is stripped away like the layers of an onion. Tor is an abbreviation of “the onion router.”

In repressive states, the dark Web has become a haven for political activists. Many journalists use Tor to send and receive information securely, or to communicate with sources. Some users like the fact that dark-Web pages are not subject to the same censorship as the regular Web, where there are limits on what you can say. Other users appreciate Tor because they can avoid offering up their private data to such giant corporations as Google and Facebook. Some legitimate news outlets, including the *Times* and ProPublica, maintain onion-router pages.

Yet a 2016 study by researchers at King’s College London found that sixty per cent of Tor sites contain illicit material. Between 2011 and 2013, the first

truly successful dark-Web bazaar, the Silk Road, processed hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of illegal drug transactions. The site, modelled on Amazon or eBay, used the U.S. Postal Service to deliver packages. The F.B.I. eventually closed the Silk Road, and its founder, Ross Ulbricht—an American who went by the online moniker Dread Pirate Roberts—is now serving a life sentence in an Arizona prison, without the possibility of parole. Before his arrest, Ulbricht had espoused a libertarian outlook, and had argued that the Silk Road was forging a path toward a world unfettered by repressive governments. Every transaction on his site, Ulbricht wrote to Silk Road users, weakened “the thieving, murderous” state.

It’s easy enough to access Tor. You can download a Tor browser onto a regular computer; or you can run an operating system, funnelled through Tor, from a USB stick plugged into your device. Dark-Web sites look much like the rest of the Internet, but they are generally much more difficult to navigate: you often find yourself scrabbling around like a hiker lost on a trail at night, trying to read a hand-drawn map with a flashlight. If you use a search engine to find a popular dark-Web site, you will see lists of recent links to that site, but some of the links will lead to error messages. Such addresses are characterized by a mess of numbers and letters, which makes memorizing them virtually im-



possible. (On Tor, the e-mail and chat provider Riseup appears as <http://www6ybal4bd7szmgncyruucpgfkqahzd-di37ktceo3ah7ngmcofnppyyd.onion/>.)

I recently spent some time on Dread, a forum accessed through Tor which is a kind of Reddit for the dark Web. In one thread, commenters used assumed names to discuss the selling of illegal drugs in the United Kingdom. They were talking about how the coronavirus outbreak would affect the importa-

tion of narcotics. “Would you see any of this moving to more attempts at UK based production?” someone using the handle Darknetpeach asked. “Surely MDMA and pills can be produced on home soil?” CoronaKid, apparently an importer, said, “We’ll be fine, shipments will still get thru . . . places like Holland will always be the main players for bulk production. . . . Just stock up now if you’re worried.” CoronaKid suggested visiting a dark-Web drug exchange, Empire Market, which he said was well provisioned. Darknetpeach was less sanguine, arguing, “100% there will be coke and heroin shortages.”

Xennt lived a peculiar existence in Traben-Trarbach. The bunker was not designed with domesticity in mind. The entrance to the complex was through a barrier gate, next to a Bundeswehr-era sign that said “HALT,” in giant letters. Inside, Xennt was joined by an ever-changing group of perhaps two dozen people, including programmers and technicians from various European countries, several girlfriends, a gardener, a cook, and, for a period in 2015, Sven Kamphuis. Employees and guests were generally given rooms in the old Nazi barracks, where the cook prepared meals. Xennt liked to tell visitors that the barracks had once housed part of Hitler’s eugenics program, but there is no evidence for that claim. There was only one shower in the 1933 structure, and the facilities were rudimentary. Xennt slept in the bunker, on the first underground floor. His bedroom was furnished with black satin sheets, an elaborate sound system, and a life-size figure of the Marvel character War Machine, which stood by his bed.

When Xennt bought the Traben-Trarbach property, he invited his sons, who were now young adults, to work there. Their mother, Angelique, came along, too, though she didn’t work at CyberBunker. According to a childhood friend of the sons, who visited the complex, the family didn’t fully reunite: Angelique and her sons stayed in the aboveground barracks with the other workers.

People from Traben-Trarbach remember Xennt driving into town in a white BMW X6. When Ajax, Amsterdam’s best soccer team, played in the

## LIMBO

I still wore the cut-offs I'd hurried into her room wearing that morning, and, as we inched toward an off-ramp in the valley after going to the mortuary and the cemetery to make arrangements for the mass, the music and the lowering, something shimmered,

hovered the way it had all day, the way a month or so ago when I'd walked into her room and awakened her, she told me her daughter had died, and I said, *No, I'm still here*. But she insisted because it was taking her longer and longer to come back from where she had begun to dwell, minutes later asking when were they coming for the body? My body, though she did not seem to know who I was, until finally, fully awake, she mused, *I think I'm the one who is supposed to die*. But

I think she was right, part of me did die with her. She took the stories she still told me, what she'd told herself her whole life to get by. She was all that held them here. They surface now, break up, winged bits of light, like the floaters in my eye one evening when every time I tried to focus they sped away.

—Maxine Scates

Champions League tournament, Xennt liked to eat pizza at the Costa Smeralda restaurant, then watch the game at a sports bar next door. Sometimes Xennt and his crew visited a strip club in the nearby town of Trier. The staff at the pizzeria and at other local restaurants recall Xennt and his colleagues tipping well. Traben-Trarbach is not a diverse place. Xennt, with his trenchcoat and long yellow hair, stood out, as did his multilingual and multiracial companions. The locals found the group strange but glamorous—like a pirate crew that had unexpectedly docked in town.

A rumor started that Xennt was cultivating cannabis in the bunker, and local people were alarmed by the guard dogs roaming the property. To reassure members of the city council, Xennt occasionally gave tours of the facility. Langer, the mayor who had worked at the complex for the Bundeswehr, vis-

ited twice, at Xennt's invitation. He remembers feeling aggrieved that the jobs Xennt had promised for local people had not materialized, but he saw no marijuana cultivation or any other obvious signs of illegal activity.

The bunker had not changed much since Langer had stopped working there, except that the grounds were a lot messier. There was the same color-coded scheme for differentiating floors. Old maps of Afghanistan hung on the walls. On the fifth level down were the water tanks. On the fourth level down were the generators. On the third level down, an old supercomputer used by the Bundeswehr was still hooked up to a giant screen. On the same floor, a room was filled with racks of Dell computer servers. The heat from these servers warmed the whole bunker, through the air-conditioning vents.

“There was always this funny feel-

ing—what was on those servers?” Langer told me. “And Xennt would say, ‘That’s my customers’ secret.’”

When Frank Van der Loos, the Dutch programmer, first visited the bunker complex, in the fall of 2015, he was bowled over by how enormous the property was. He was on the site for two days, and saw “maybe a third of it.” Xennt told Van der Loos that he kept finding new rooms.

Van der Loos also wondered what was on those servers. In 2014, Dutch authorities investigating the dark-Web marketplace Cannabis Road had seized a CyberBunker server housed in Amsterdam, at a facility owned by the company Leaseweb. A Dutch prosecutor explained that the server had been impounded because Xennt was suspected in the trafficking of drugs. Xennt reassured his colleagues at CyberBunker that he had merely leased the impounded server, and hadn't known what it was used for—a legitimate position, under both Dutch and German law. Xennt told Van der Loos that the Traben-Trarbach servers were, in a similar way, closed books to him. Nevertheless, he felt that he was being spied on by the German police. “I don't do anything wrong,” Xennt told Van der Loos. “Still, they are watching me.”

Van der Loos was surprised to see that Xennt's office was littered with phones—there were around thirty modified BlackBerrys on his desk alone. Xennt explained to Van der Loos that the phones were why he had been invited to Traben-Trarbach. He was expanding into an exciting new business.

Bulletproof Web hosting had originally been lucrative, but by 2015 most legitimate sites had migrated to conventional hosters, and competition had driven rental prices down, making the business model less viable. Xennt's server business generated annual profits of between two and three hundred thousand euros—enough to cover the maintenance costs of the bunker, but not much more. (According to USENIX, a non-profit that studies computing systems, MaxiDed, the Dutch bulletproof-hosting service that was shut down, accrued profits of no more than six hundred and eighty thousand euros in seven years, whereas a child-pornography site that



*"I didn't want to embarrass them by telling them I don't work here, so I told them it was a three-hour wait for a table instead."*

it hosted made more than four million in five years.) Xennt told Van der Loos that he was turning over the day-to-day supervision of CyberBunker's servers to his eldest son. Xennt's new project was building an encrypted-phone network, which he called "a money-maker." He asked Van der Loos to help him.

Around the time of Van der Loos's visit to the bunker, Nicola Tallant, an Irish crime reporter from the *Sunday World*, also arrived in Traben-Trarbach. She has a reputation for writing juicy, exclusive stories about Irish criminals. In 2015, she received a tip from a source that a major Irish drug dealer, George Mitchell, had moved from southern Spain to Traben-Trarbach, in order to work on an encrypted-phone business with Xennt. She had never heard of Xennt, but a tourist town in the Mosel Valley is a curious headquarters for a crime boss, and so Tallant decided to investigate.

Mitchell has a portly frame and a distinctive waddle, and is sometimes known as the Penguin. Whenever he visited CyberBunker, he went by Mr. Green. By the mid-nineties, he had become one of Ireland's most successful importers of illegal drugs. But he abruptly left for Am-

sterdam after he was linked to the attempted murder of a London gangster and to the creation of Ireland's first Ecstasy factory. In 1998, Mitchell was arrested in the Netherlands after he was caught unloading a shipment of stolen computer parts, and he spent a year in jail. According to a senior Irish police detective, Mitchell's drug-importation business thrived even after his Dutch jail term; in 2012, he facilitated the attempted shipment to Ireland of some four hundred kilograms of cocaine—an operation thwarted by the police. The detective told me that Mitchell remained a major figure in the European drug trade until about six years ago. "From '14 or '15 onward, we didn't see much from Mitchell in terms of the importing of drugs," he said. "It may be that he branched out into other areas." (In fact, European police intelligence suggests that Mitchell continued to organize large shipments of drugs after 2014. Mitchell has denied any involvement in criminal activities.)

Tallant had her own theory about the Penguin: he was approaching retirement age, and, as the father of several children, he was looking for a way to protect his dependents and his assets. In 2000, his son-in-law, a drug supplier named Derek (Maradona) Dunne, was

murdered in Amsterdam. And around the time Mitchell arrived in Traben-Trarbach a dispute among Irish gangs had turned bloody. In September, 2015, Gary Hutch, an Irishman who had previously worked with Mitchell, was killed by a rival group on the south coast of Spain. Mitchell, Tallant surmised, wanted to leave Spain and the gang feud behind, and to reinvest some of his money in a more legitimate-seeming enterprise.

Mitchell had known Xennt for many years, at least from the time of Mitchell's arrest for handling stolen computer parts, in 1998. (A person familiar with Xennt's computer business told me that Xennt had bought stolen parts from Mitchell; Xennt declined to comment on this accusation.) Martijn Burger, the businessman once involved in the Public Root movement, remembers Xennt and Mitchell spending time together around the turn of the millennium. Back then, Burger did not know of Mitchell's status in the criminal world, and teasingly called him Charlie Chaplin, because of his gait. Burger recalled that Mitchell was often accompanied by glamorous young women, and carried a small bag containing "ten to twelve" Nokia phones, each with its phone number written on the back.

When Tallant received her tip, Mitchell had not been photographed in more than two decades. She travelled to Traben-Trarbach twice in the fall of 2015, along with a *Sunday World* photographer. They watched his movements for several days. He rarely left the apartment complex where he was staying, on the Traben side of town. But on some mornings Xennt picked up Mitchell and took him to breakfast. The pair once ate lunch at a popular local restaurant, the Historische Stadt-Mühle—the Historic Mill. They remained there all afternoon as Mitchell ordered gin-and-tonics and Xennt drank hot chocolate. Tallant was fascinated by Xennt's appearance: he often wore a floor-length coat, and resembled a Bond villain. "He is *sensational-looking*," she told me. "I've never seen anyone as weird in all my life."

Tallant and the photographer eventually found their opportunity one morning, as Mitchell was leaving a restaurant after having breakfast with Xennt and Xyonn. The Penguin wore a navy suit and a black T-shirt; Xennt had on

a long black puffer jacket; Xyonn had his hair in dreadlocks.

Tallant walked up to Mitchell and said, “George, quick word—how are you?”

“Very good,” Mitchell replied instinctively, in his broad Dublin accent. Then, surprised at hearing another Irish voice, he peered under the baseball cap that Tallant was wearing, and evidently recognized her. “Fuck off!” he said.

The photographer got his shot. Tallant’s exclusive was published the next Sunday, under the headline “THE LOST GODFATHER.”

The encrypted-phone business is indeed a money-maker. Many people now use end-to-end encrypted-communication apps like Signal and WhatsApp on their smartphones. But, for a small subset of privacy-minded people, such apps are insufficient: they want a specialized, fully encrypted phone that operates on a private network. A “crypto phone” normally costs a user between fifteen hundred and two thousand euros for the handset, and biannual payments of up to a thousand euros for access to a private data network. The handsets—often reengineered Android or BlackBerry devices—tend to be sold with the camera, the microphone, and location services disabled. The phone typically uses only one end-to-end encrypted-messaging app, which runs on servers that the providers own. Many phones include a panic button that wipes all data from the handset when activated.

Providing or using an encrypted phone is not illegal in Europe or in America, but the devices appear to be used predominantly for illegal activities, and prosecutors have begun finding ways to break up some encrypted networks. In March, 2019, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of California brought racketeering-conspiracy charges against Vincent Ramos, the C.E.O. of a Canadian company called Phantom Secure. Six months later, he pleaded guilty to “leading a criminal enterprise that facilitated the transnational importation and distribution of narcotics through the sale of encrypted communication devices and services,” and was sentenced to nine years in prison. Many of Phantom Secure’s customers were members of the Sinaloa drug cartel, in Mexico. It was the first case in the United States in which an

encryption-service provider was jailed.

One of the best-known private phone networks is one that collapsed. In April, 2016, Danny Manupassa, the owner of a Dutch company called Ennetcom, was arrested, on suspicion of money laundering and possession of illegal weapons. The servers used by his network, which were housed in Toronto, were seized by Canadian authorities and passed on to the Dutch. Officials in the Netherlands were able to decrypt many communications by Ennetcom users, likely because the company had housed decryption keys on the same server where it stored messages—a catastrophic error. By 2017, the Dutch police had decrypted 3.6 million messages. Several people have since been arrested because of this trove of criminal evidence, including Naoufal Fassih, a Moroccan-Dutch gangster, who was sentenced to eighteen years in prison for attempted murder. (In early July, Dutch, British, and French police announced that they had infiltrated another popular network, EncroChat. This had led to more than eight hundred arrests, across Europe, and to the seizure of huge quantities of guns and drugs—and of some sixty-seven million dollars in “suspect cash.”)

In Traben-Trarbach, Xennt built his own encrypted-phone network and applications with the help of Sven Kamphuis and some programmers in Poland. Xennt explained to me that his apps are “sold and distributed under various



brands all over the world, by third parties.” One of the first encrypted-phone apps that Xennt developed, called Underground, was sold on a modified BlackBerry handset. More recently, he developed a messaging app called Exclu, which uses a novel encryption scheme and is sold on a Wileyfox Android device.

Many of Xennt’s initial encrypted-phone customers were in Ireland; his market subsequently spread throughout Europe. Xennt told me that his phone

business was more lucrative than his hosting business, although the extent of its profitability is hard to assess without seeing a balance sheet. The F.B.I. reported that Phantom Secure, the company that had facilitated the Sinaloa cartel, had earned annual revenues of eighty million dollars, but that network had between ten and twenty thousand devices—at least twice as many as Xennt’s—and server infrastructure on four continents; it also charged a much higher biannual renewal fee. The yearly profits of Xennt’s phone business likely never went much beyond a million dollars.

During Frank Van der Loos’s 2015 visit to the bunker, Xennt asked him to help develop software for his phones that would include the ability to send money to other users of the private network. According to a former colleague, Xennt also wanted to include a “back door,” so that if a phone was seized, or the network was disabled, Xennt could drain all the funds stored in the application’s escrow account. Van der Loos refused, on ethical grounds. (Xennt told me that he never would have asked for a back-door feature, because it clashes with his “views on privacy.”)

According to two people close to CyberBunker, George Mitchell was not the only investor interested in Xennt’s encrypted-phone business. Danny Manupassa, the former boss of Ennetcom, also travelled to Traben-Trarbach to see Xennt. According to the sources, Manupassa wanted to invest a million euros in Xennt’s network. It seems unlikely that Manupassa did so: after he was arrested, in April, 2016, Ennetcom was shuttered and turned inside out by the Dutch police in a search for information.

The German police’s interest in CyberBunker intensified after the sighting of Mitchell in 2015. They suspected that he might be the guiding figure behind a large criminal enterprise, based in the bunker. A judge allowed the police to tap sixteen of Mitchell’s non-encrypted phones. But, despite glimpses into his criminal dealings, including mentions of shipments of “oranges”—which the police assumed was a coded reference to drugs—there was never enough evidence to charge Mitchell with a crime. In 2016 or 2017, perhaps sensing that he was being watched, he left

Traben-Trarbach. Mitchell's most obvious role before then was as a salesman for Xennt's encrypted-phone business, which he marketed to members of Colombian drug cartels and to biker gangs in Majorca. "It's the only way, all my friends use it, everybody," he told a prospective client on a recorded call.

The police unit in Mainz decided to focus on CyberBunker activities that were provably criminal. Running an encrypted-phone network is not illegal, even though it very often brings providers into contact with known criminals. Similarly, hosting dark-Web sites is not against the law. But if police officers could demonstrate that Xennt and his team were actively assisting the administrators of dark-Web sites that traded in illicit substances or services, they could build a strong case against CyberBunker. Conveniently, Xennt's operational security was often poor. In the early days at Traben-Trarbach, he and his team occasionally used unencrypted e-mail, which the police were able to monitor. But the authorities needed a better way to establish the relationship between Xennt and his dark-Web clients.

The cybercrime unit developed a bold scheme. With the permission of high-level German authorities, it created its own dark-Web site on Tor: a scam, involving lottery numbers, that accepted payment in bitcoin. The unit's members made sure that nobody who used the site could lose money—otherwise the officers themselves would be committing a crime—but the site was designed to look as realistic, and as shady, as possible. Designing it was "kind of fun," an officer admitted to me.

The Mainz team members received permission from their superiors to buy thousands of dollars' worth of bitcoin, then e-mailed CyberBunker, asking to rent a server. A representative from the company readily agreed, and the undercover officers engaged in a long dialogue with a CyberBunker salesperson. The officers would not share details of that discussion with me, because it would reveal "police tactics," but they ascertained that Xennt's company actively assisted clients it knew to be engaged in illicit transactions. CyberBunker even offered some clients tips for hiding their real identities.

The police, meanwhile, began ensnaring Xennt in a more direct fashion. When Frank Van der Loos visited the bunker

in 2015, he chastised Xennt for using cheap technology that compromised his operational security. Xennt's servers were not connected by a virtual-LAN cable, which allows the digital traffic from individual servers to remain separated, even if the servers are using the same physical cable. Van der Loos told me that if someone wanted to "listen" to the activity on CyberBunker's servers, all it took was secretly adding another server to the group. Separately, I learned that in 2018 a young intern at CyberBunker discovered a server on the third floor which looked nothing like the others. Hidden underneath the floorboards, it was connected to the rest of the server bank. When I asked the leader of the Mainz team whether he had asked an informant working in the bunker to install the extra server, as a spying device, he stifled a laugh, then said, "I cannot answer it, and I cannot deny it." (Xennt told me it was "impossible" that the police had surveilled him in this way.)

By various methods, the police came to believe that CyberBunker was the biggest hoster of illegal Web sites in Germany, and perhaps anywhere in the world. In 2014, it hosted Cannabis Road, the dark-Web marketplace. Between March, 2016, and February, 2018, it hosted the forum Fraudsters, through which counterfeit money, fake I.D.s, and prescription and illicit drugs were traded. Between 2015 and 2018, CyberBunker hosted Flugsvamp, a dark-Web market that ac-



counted for roughly ninety per cent of the online illicit drug trade in Sweden. Xennt's most significant dark-Web client was a site called Wall Street Market. Between 2016 and 2019, it sold more than thirty-six million euros' worth of drugs. The site's administrators took a commission of three per cent on each transaction.

While the Mainz cybercrime unit was building its case against Xennt, a separate international investigation—led by federal police in the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands—targeted

Wall Street Market. Jörg Angerer, the Koblenz prosecutor, told me it was vital that the prosecution of Wall Street Market proceed before the German police moved against CyberBunker. "There is a chain," Angerer said. "The hosters are facilitating the real criminals. . . . But first you have to process the real criminals."

In April, 2019, the police arrested three German men accused of being Wall Street Market's administrators. On the dark Web, the defendants were known by pseudonyms: Tibo Lousee was coder420; Jonathan Kalla was Kronos; Klaus-Martin Frost was TheOne. Led by officers from Germany's federal cybercrime unit, which is based in Frankfurt, the police in the three countries worked together to decipher the identities of the administrators, through undercover chats and through clues left by the men online. In a complaint filed in the Central District of California, the three principals were charged not only with running the site but also with planning an "exit scam," in which they intended to abscond with some eleven million dollars being held in users' accounts. All three men are awaiting trial.

A week after Wall Street Market was broken up and its leaders arrested, several officers from the B.K.A., Germany's federal police force, arrived at the Traben-Trarbach bunker to seize evidence relating to the case. A manager at the bunker expressed surprise and readily complied, escorting the officers to the server bank on the third floor. The officers took away the servers used by Wall Street Market, and left the rest.

After Wall Street Market was taken down, Angerer fixed CyberBunker itself in his sights.

On September 26, 2019, everybody at the bunker complex—nine people, including Xennt, his sons, and his girlfriend, Jacqueline—went out for an early dinner at the Historic Mill, leaving the bunker unguarded. It was unusual for all the residents to be gone at the same time, but Xennt's gardener, Harry, had unexpectedly come into an inheritance, and wanted to celebrate. The leader of the Mainz cybercrime team told me his unit had gathered intelligence that made them "pretty, pretty sure" nobody would be in the bunker during the meal.

At the Historic Mill, antiquated cook-

ing utensils and old guitars hang on the walls. Through a glass panel on the floor, diners can look at the stream that once powered the old mill. Xennt's group had booked a private area on the mezzanine. It was a Thursday evening at the end of the summer season, and the main dining room, on the ground floor, was nearly full. At around 6 P.M., as the members of Xennt's party were starting to eat, several patrons on the ground floor revealed themselves to be armed undercover police officers. The officers went upstairs to arrest Xennt and the others. Several armed units of police massed outside the front door. A helicopter buzzed nearby. A Belgian tourist was almost caught up in the arrest when he tried to visit the bathroom on the mezzanine just before Xennt was placed in handcuffs.

A few minutes later, about a hundred police officers—including a contingent from Germany's federal paramilitary police unit—raided the bunker. They seized four hundred and twelve hard drives, four hundred and three servers, sixty-five USB sticks, sixty-one laptops and computers, fifty-seven phones, piles of paper documents, and about a hundred thousand euros in cash. Some six hundred and fifty officers were involved in the arrests and the raid.

At a press conference the next day, German authorities were jubilant. Jürgen Brauer, the chief prosecutor, declared that it was the first time in German history that arrests were “not directed against the operators of marketplaces but against those who make the crime possible.” CyberBunker was a haven for the world's worst dark-Web sites, established to help its clients “exclusively for illegal purposes.” Moreover, its operators were connected to people involved in organized crime. (Brauer didn't name the Penguin—whose current location remains unknown—but he was clearly in his thoughts.) Xennt had been arrested, alongside his two sons, Jacqueline, two Germans, and a Bulgarian. Six other suspects remained at large.

The prosecutors reported that, in November, 2016, the bunker had also provided the command-and-control servers for an attack against Deutsche Telekom, one of Germany's largest communications companies. The attack had deployed a new weapon called a Mirai-botnet, which harnesses smart appliances



*“And isn't it true, Mr. Robertson, that you habitually leave ridiculously small amounts of cereal in the box and then return it to the cabinet?”*

and other wireless devices. An attempt to capture the company's routers failed but caused the network to crash. More than a million Deutsche Telekom customers lost their Internet connection in the attack, costing the company at least two million euros. The incident occurred only a few weeks after an even larger Mirai-botnet attack in Europe and the United States, which disabled Amazon, Netflix, and Twitter, among other sites. Brauer, the prosecutor, said that the people from CyberBunker who had been arrested were accused of “hundreds of thousands of offenses,” ranging from “drugs, counterfeit money, and forged documents” to being “accessories to the distribution of child pornography.”

Sven Kamphuis, the Prince of CyberBunker, was not arrested in the raids of September 26th; nor is he one of the six suspects still at large. After the raid, he claimed that the German police had

engaged in “an act of war”—yet he had survived with barely a scratch. The police arrested almost everybody with a connection to the bunker. Given the comprehensiveness of the investigation, the prosecutors' lack of interest in Kamphuis seemed strange.

Xennt insisted to me that Kamphuis “was not involved in the data center in Germany.” But Kamphuis told me that he had engineered much of the Traben-Trarbach bunker's infrastructure, and, according to several people, he had also been important in developing the encrypted-phone business for Xennt. Even if Kamphuis's work was not technically illegal, he was deeply knowledgeable about an organization that the German state believed to be criminal. When details of an indictment were published, in April, the mystery of Kamphuis's treatment deepened. In the document, prosecutors noted that a search engine had been hosted on the

Traben-Trarbach servers: cb3rob.net/darknet. It listed more than sixty-five hundred dark-Web sites, including “marketplaces for narcotics, weapons, counterfeit money, murder orders, and child pornography.” I recalled that CB3ROB is Kamphuis’s online handle.

When I asked Patrick Fata, a senior police officer who oversaw the CyberBunker investigation, why Kamphuis was not accused in the case, he said that Kamphuis’s role in the organization had diminished since 2014, and that the police did not have enough evidence to link him to the administration of Wall Street Market or other illegal sites. I asked Fata if the police had spoken to Kamphuis during the exhaustive six-year investigation. “No,” Fata said, adding, “We don’t know where he is.”

It was surprising that the German police, who had proved so competent in this investigation, had lost track of Kamphuis. After his arrest for the denial-of-service attack on Spamhaus, in 2013, he had spent fifty-five days in a Spanish jail while awaiting extradition to the Netherlands. Ultimately, a judge had placed him on probation for two years. The German and Dutch police coöperated extensively in the early days of the investigation into CyberBunker, and during Kamphuis’s probationary period it would have been easy

enough to place legal pressure on him to talk to the German police.

I found Kamphuis without too much difficulty. He agreed to meet me in March, in a train-station café in Middelburg, a pretty Dutch city near the first CyberBunker site. Kamphuis, who was wearing a blue Adidas tracksuit, had piercing blue eyes and a scraggly beard. Some of his teeth were blackened, and a few were missing. Using a tissue, he frequently dabbed at pus weeping from a sore on his eyelid. He drank three strong coffees in about ninety minutes, and his hands kept shaking.

Kamphuis posts on the social-media site Gab, and his stream is a litany of conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic assertions. He told me that he was part of the “libertarian extremist right,” and suggested that a “disproportionate number of Jews” held powerful positions in Europe and America. He often laughed at his own jokes.

I asked him if he had created the dark-Web search engine that had been hosted on Xennt’s servers. He said yes. Later, by text message, he explained that he bore no responsibility for the results of the search engine, because it “finds things indiscriminately,” adding, “That is what search engines do.”

Kamphuis insisted that he had not been an informant against Xennt. He

accused a manager at CyberBunker, Tom Funken, of planning the dinner trap at the Historic Mill—even though I had been assured by Xennt’s family that the meal was a setup arranged by the gardener. Xennt told me that he also blamed the gardener, and maintains that there were “no informants” inside the bunker. (Funken was arrested and awaits trial. A recently leaked legal file suggests that, between 2018 and the raid, the gardener was an undercover policeman.)

Although Kamphuis said that he hadn’t been involved regularly with CyberBunker since 2014, he still considered himself “the prince, and currently the head of state,” of the organization. He felt under no legal pressure, he said, because both Spain and the Netherlands “respected his diplomatic immunity.” Kamphuis inveighed against the German police, but he appeared to have profited from their prosecution of Xennt: he said that he was now helping to run Xennt’s encrypted-phone business, which had not been shut down.

After our interview, I texted Kamphuis, and asked him again if he’d ever spoken to the German police. “We don’t negotiate with terrorists,” he said.

Xennt has been imprisoned in Ko-blentz since his arrest. Although his lawyer would not discuss a legal strategy, Xennt’s defense appears to be that he didn’t know what was on his servers. He told me, “I do not believe that a hoster should accept all kind[s] of content. . . . As soon as a hoster [has] a clear indication that illegal content is hosted then the hoster should cancel the service.” CyberBunker’s willingness to hand over the Wall Street Market servers might buttress that defense. However, a report by *Der Spiegel* claims that, a day after his arrest, Xennt became emotional and apologetic in a police interview, saying that he was “troubled” by how much illegal activity had flowed through the bunker.

Xennt won’t stand trial until this fall at the earliest, because of delays caused by the coronavirus crisis. Even then, prosecutors will have an incomplete picture of what went on in the bunker. Since the raid, analysts have attempted to sift through the data stored at the facility, which may amount to two thousand terabytes—a herculean task. It would take a large team many years to read a



SIPRESS

“Hey! You’re in the bike lane!”

fraction of what was recovered in Traben-Trarbach. In April, however, the prosecutors said that they had identified dozens of CyberBunker clients—and not one of their enterprises was legal.

I wondered what good would come of all the data. A spokesman for the German federal cybercrime unit that led the international investigation into Wall Street Market told me frankly that the war against dark-Web bazaars was unwinnable. Just as Wall Street Market had flourished after the Silk Road's demise, new markets would grow in the place of Wall Street Market. People would continue to have illicit desires, and the Internet would find ways to satisfy them. Nevertheless, the penetration of the Traben-Trarbach bunker had offered valuable insight into how nefarious elements operated online. "I do not recall any case where this huge amount of criminal-infrastructure data was gathered," one of the officers in Mainz told me. "We want to learn how the other side is behaving."

Xennt was formally indicted on April 6th. German authorities stated that he had "made all the business decisions" for CyberBunker, and described him as the head of a "criminal organization." This depiction was a bit difficult to square with the stranger, more complex reality of Xennt. A patina of idealism, however misguided, seemed to be essential to him. A police officer who monitored him for several years said that Xennt's seedier qualities were accompanied by a utopian outlook—"free Internet, freedom of speech, nobody controls what's out there, stuff like that." The officer conceded, "This is no bank heist. It's not like he's a billionaire."

**I**n March, I visited Xennt's sister and brother-in-law, Anna and René Van Wolferen, in a village near Arnhem. The Van Wolferens have a tidy, well-appointed home, with a wood-burning stove in the sitting room. René works for a pharmaceutical company and is an auxiliary firefighter. He wore a beeper on his belt, and a T-shirt with the slogan "We Face What You Fear." Anna is a tall woman with auburn hair and a friendly, anxious manner. They showed me an Exclu phone that Xennt had sent them from the bunker. Neither of them had ever unwrapped it; to show me how

it worked, they had to charge it for twenty minutes.

The Van Wolferens explained that Xennt had always lived "on the edge," but was hardly a cackling mastermind. (The *Sunday World*, the Irish tabloid, recently called Xennt the "lord of the darknet.") Rather, he was a brilliant, dreamy, somewhat naïve person, who had swum out of his depth. They worried about his state of mind in prison, where he played chess against himself all day, and had almost no contact with the outside world. Xennt and Anna's father died in January, and Xennt's lawyer had asked permission for her client to attend the funeral. The request was denied. Xennt then asked for a laptop to watch a live stream of the service, and this was also refused.

The Van Wolferens spoke again and again about Xennt's childhood bedroom in Arnhem, and how he had always been fascinated by a futuristic aesthetic. René said that, in late middle age, Xennt had begun dabbling in cannabinoid treatments, because he was interested in remaining "forever young." He described his brother-in-law as someone with arrested development. "His *whole world* was science fiction," René said.

This was an astute observation. People connected to CyberBunker spoke about the world purely in terms of what was online. They didn't talk about the Netherlands, a country of seventeen million people. They called it by its domain name: ".nl." Similarly, they spoke of "kinderporno," an Internet term for child pornography. In many jurisdictions, there is no such thing as child pornography; any image of a child having sex is considered evidence of abuse. It was in Xennt's commercial interest to ignore the link between the three-dimensional world and what appeared on computer screens. But his many years in windowless rooms may have blinded him to the link altogether. When I asked Xennt if CyberBunker knew that it was hosting the Pirate Bay, the content-sharing site, he responded with the kind of dodge that could be applied to even the darkest material: "If a customer does not reveal its name to CyberBunker, then the CyberBunker crew does not know who the customer is."

When Anna was out of the room, René admitted that Xennt had appar-

ently sometimes gone "over the edge." For reasons that were unclear to René, Xennt often hid his business interests behind charitable foundations. The Van Wolferens' home was listed as an address of one of those foundations. As a result, the couple had been visited more than once by the Dutch police, who asked René about illegal content hosted on CyberBunker's servers. And an Irish criminal connected to Xennt's phone business had once arrived at the Van Wolferen home. René recognized him as a gangster of some kind, and ejected him. René was fond of his brother-in-law, but he told him that his businesses led him to mix with "people who are not legal."

In April, I wrote a letter to Xennt in prison, which was delivered by his lawyer. The sole condition of our correspondence was that we could not discuss matters that might directly affect the trial. Xennt replied to me in May. He wrote in English, in blue pen, on grid paper. His writing was capitalized, except when he used the word "I." He told me he believed that the authorities had targeted his hosting business as a means to "stop the development of the secure communication app." He added, with a few misspellings, "The next version would have a wallet that would have enabled its users to make unlimited instand anonymous payments. That—of corse—would not make authorities very happy." Xennt was passing the time by writing a book about "privacy and what happened to me." He said that he had already "sold the exclusive rights to a movie studio." (I could find no evidence of this.)

In my letter, I asked Xennt about the infatuation that had dominated his unusual life: bunkers. He told me about his childhood visits to the Second World War complex in Arnhem, and about how that space had bewitched him. "I instantly fell in love with it," he recalled. He said that the first CyberBunker, in Goes, was the realization of "a dream" to own "one of these facilities and to renovate it to make it a modern hi-tech stronghold." But he could go no deeper. Xennt wrote, "I am unable to explain why I like bunkers. Why does someone like a hamburger? Why do they like motor sport? I cannot answer that. I just like bunkers. That is all." ♦



DEPT. OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

# THE BLUE WALL

*Amid calls for reform, police unions fight to keep their power.*

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN

In May, just days after a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, Lieutenant Bob Kroll, the bellicose leader of the city's police union, described Floyd as a violent criminal, said that the protesters who had gathered to lament his death were terrorists, and complained that they weren't being treated more roughly by police. Kroll, who has spoken unsentimentally about being involved in three shootings himself, said that he was fighting to get the accused officers reinstated. In the following days, the Kentucky police union rallied around officers who had fatally shot an E.M.T. worker named Breonna Taylor in her home. Atlanta police staged an organized sick-out after the officers who killed Rayshard Brooks were charged. Philadelphia police sold T-shirts celebrating a fellow-cop who was caught on video clubbing a student protester with a steel baton. The list goes on.

Along with everything else about American society that was thrown into appalling relief by Floyd's killing, there has been the peculiar militancy of many police unions. Law enforcement kills more than a thousand Americans a year. Many are unarmed, and a disproportionate number are African-American. Very few of the officers involved face serious, if any, consequences, and much of that impunity is owed to the power of police unions.

In many cities, including New York, the unions are a political force, their endorsements and campaign donations coveted by both Republicans and Democrats. The legislation they support tends to get passed, their candidates elected. They insist on public displays of respect and may humiliate mayors who displease them. They defy reformers, including police chiefs, who struggle to fire even the worst-performing officers. In an era when other labor unions are steadily declining in membership and influence, police unions have kept their

numbers up, their coffers full. In Wisconsin, the Republican governor, Scott Walker, led a successful campaign to eliminate union rights for most of the state's public employees. The exceptions were firefighters and police.

Police unions enjoy a political paradox. Conservatives traditionally abhor labor unions but support the police. The left is critical of aggressive policing, yet has often muted its criticism of police unions—which are, after all, public-sector unions, an endangered and mostly progressive species.

In their interstitial safe zone, police unions can offer their members extraordinary protections. Officers accused of misconduct may be given legal representation paid for by the city, and ample time to review evidence before speaking to investigators. In many cases, suspended officers have their pay guaranteed, and disciplinary recommendations of oversight boards are ignored. Complaints submitted too late are disqualified. Records of misconduct may be kept secret, and permanently destroyed after as little as sixty days.

With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, criticism of the police has become less muted. Calls resound to defund police forces, and to abolish the unions. But the United States has eighteen thousand nonfederal police agencies in its hyperlocalized system, with more than seven hundred thousand officers represented by unions. They will not be easily dislodged.

The Police Benevolent Association of New York City, which represents rank-and-file officers in the N.Y.P.D., is the largest municipal police union in the country, with twenty-four thousand dues-paying members. When the P.B.A. was founded, in the eighteen-nineties, it was a feeble thing, dedicated to raising money for the widows of fallen officers. The job was brutal then. Officers



*Police unions have spent decades amassing*



*influence. They have often used it to combat what Patrick Lynch, the head of New York City's P.B.A., calls "pro-criminal advocates."*

were badly paid, untrained, overworked—and thrown out of their jobs every time political power changed hands. They could plead for a living wage or an eight-hour day, but the rising labor movement wanted nothing to do with them. Cops were strikebreakers or worse; the first unionists killed in the American labor struggle, in 1850, were tailors clubbed to death by the New York police, at Ninth Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street.

After the First World War, the American Federation of Labor began issuing charters to police locals—in Cincinnati, St. Paul, Boston, Los Angeles. Management was horrified. Police were not ordinary workers, the argument went; they were more akin to soldiers or sailors, and unions would divide their loyalties, undermining the chain of command. The Boston Police Strike of 1919, when the nascent union demanded recognition from the city, forced a reckoning. There was extensive looting and reported rape; eight people were killed by the state militia. President Woodrow Wilson called the strike “a crime against civilization,” and most of the city’s po-

licemen were fired. The fledgling unions in other cities were destroyed, and the cause of police unionization was set back for generations. It didn’t help that, in 1937, Chicago cops fired on striking steelworkers and their families, killing ten.

In the early sixties, white racial anxiety helped strengthen the unions’ position. The civil-rights movement was gathering force, street crime was increasing, and white flight was transforming cities. Public-sector unions were also flourishing. In New York, the teachers’ union secured the right to collective bargaining in 1961—a major victory. The city’s police were next. In 1963, Mayor Robert Wagner, Jr., a progressive, signed an executive order granting them collective-bargaining rights. Other cities followed, and police unions were eventually accepted in much of the country.

The N.Y.C.P.B.A. reassured politicians by promising not to strike or to affiliate with any other union, but it quickly asserted its power in other ways. The next mayor, John Lindsay, a Kennedyesque Republican, came into office vowing to establish a strong civilian

complaint-review board, to provide police oversight. The P.B.A. mounted an overwhelming campaign against the plan. One poster showed a young middle-class white woman emerging from the subway onto a darkened street, looking frightened, with an accompanying text that read, “The Civilian Review Board must be stopped! Her life . . . your life . . . may depend on it.” A TV commercial surveyed damage from rioting in Harlem in 1964, with a voice-over intoning, “The police were so careful to avoid accusations that they were virtually powerless.” The P.B.A. leadership was, if anything, blunter. The president, John Cassese, said, “I am sick and tired of giving in to minority groups, with their whims and their gripes and shouting.” In a citywide referendum, Lindsay’s side was defeated, by a margin of nearly two to one, and New York’s mayors have been on notice ever since.

In the city’s large, and largely segregated, Black community, police brutality had been a first-order issue for decades. The 1964 riots had been sparked when an off-duty policeman killed a fifteen-year-old Black student, James Powell. Activists, led by the N.A.A.C.P. and by Black newspapers such as the *Amsterdam News*, had been calling for more police accountability since at least the twenties, and for civilian oversight since the forties. Another frequent demand was for the hiring of more Black officers. One of the less-remembered lines in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s soaring speech at the March on Washington, in 1963: “We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”

When Mayor David Dinkins sought to install a civilian review board, in 1992, the P.B.A. staged a ferocious protest at City Hall, with ten thousand off-duty officers, virtually all white and many carrying guns and drinking alcohol. Demonstrators waved racist placards—“Dump the Washroom Attendant”—attacked reporters and bystanders, vandalized City Council members’ cars, stormed City Hall, and overflowed onto the Brooklyn Bridge, where they stopped traffic and jumped on occupied cars. It was a wild performance of police impunity, and the on-duty officers did nothing to stop the mayhem.

Jimmy Breslin was there, reporting



*“Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Targeted ads based on your search history!”*

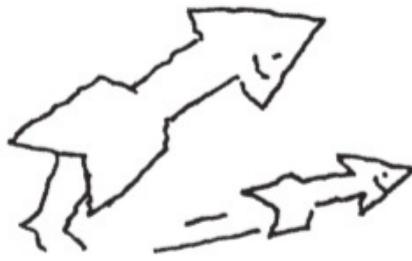
for *Newsday*, and he described a scene of toxic racism. “The cops held up several of the most crude drawings of Dinkins, black, performing perverted sex acts,” he wrote. *Newsday* had more. A city councilwoman, Una Clarke, who is Black, was prevented from crossing Broadway “by a beer-drinking, off-duty police officer who said to his sidekick, ‘This nigger says she’s a member of the City Council.’” As the rally surged, Rudolph Giuliani, a former prosecutor, stood on a car, leading obscene chants through a bullhorn. He defeated Dinkins the next year and went on to two terms as mayor.

By the end of the sixties, a racialized law-and-order ideology had emerged as a sort of unexamined American consensus, and it has basically prevailed since then, providing the political context in which police unions thrive. In the N.Y.P.D. today, with the arc having bent toward inclusion, people of color constitute slightly more than half the uniformed force. And yet the unions—there are five, for various ranks, with the P.B.A. the largest by far—give a different impression. Their leadership, their politics, and their occasional mass protests, not to mention the N.Y.P.D.’s riot squads, still read as overwhelmingly white. White cops, Black and brown suspects: that remains the dominant paradigm.

Patrick J. Lynch is the president of the N.Y.C.P.B.A. He is fifty-seven, and was recently elected, unopposed, to a sixth four-year term. Lynch, who grew up and still lives in Bayside, Queens, is a cop’s cop, banty and brash, clean-shaven, with hair gelled straight back. He’s wound tight, and has a commanding shout that he can sustain for long periods at no-questions-taken press conferences. Outrage is his default mode. His officers are never wrong. Anybody who criticizes them is wrong. Mayors are the enemy. Police brass are the near-enemy. Recently, Lynch said, “Pro-criminal advocates have hijacked our city and state. Law-abiding New Yorkers are suffering, and the police officers who protect them are under attack.” That was in March, but it could have been anytime in the past twenty years. “Pro-criminal” seems to be code. Lynch says it a lot.

Lynch and the P.B.A. deliver solid

contracts for their members, with generous pay, especially for overtime, and good benefits. New York cops often retire after twenty years of service, with pensions that, according to a 2018 analysis by the nonprofit Citizens Budget Commission, average \$74,500, and with plenty of time to start a second career, typically in security. The union—with its hefty political budget, its ability to launch fierce media campaigns, and the fear it can inspire in every politician



who does not want to be painted as soft on crime—has also delivered when it comes to public policy. In the sixties, the N.Y.P.D. dropped a longtime requirement that its officers live in the five boroughs, and the P.B.A. has fought off every suggestion that the requirement be revived. And so a majority of its white members live on Long Island or in other suburbs. Dinkins ultimately succeeded in installing a civilian complaint-review board, but its disciplinary recommendations to the department are rarely followed. In public, the union trashes its every step.

The N.Y.P.D. is not the most insular, lawless police department around. It is, in fact, one of the least violent police agencies in the country’s hundred largest cities. During the past seven years, according to a database built by a group called Mapping Police Violence, the police in St. Louis have killed fourteen times more civilians, per capita, than New York police have. In New York, police kill Black civilians at 7.8 times the rate of white civilians. In Chicago, the factor is 27.4.

In June, Lynch denounced George Floyd’s killing as the “murder of an innocent person.” But, even in New York, police killings have gone unprosecuted to an extraordinary extent. In 2014, the *Daily News* looked at the hundred and seventy-nine killings committed by on-duty N.Y.P.D. officers in the previous fifteen years and found that all those

deaths had produced only three indictments and one conviction—which brought no jail time. The reluctance to indict stems partly from the close relationships between the police and local district attorneys—many of whom take campaign donations from the unions—but also from prosecutors’ awareness that juries tend to believe police officers.

Lynch’s time at the N.Y.P.D. has coincided with a spectacular decline in violent crime. His first assignment when he joined the force, in 1984, included the Ninetieth Precinct, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The Ninetieth was a bad neighborhood then, with dozens of rapes and murders and more than a thousand robberies a year. Today, it’s . . . Williamsburg. The causes of what is often called the New York Miracle are complex and hotly debated; violent crime has fallen in nearly every major American city. New York’s police claim credit. Young, white, middle-class protesters, fired up by Black Lives Matter and chanting “I can’t breathe,” tend not to acknowledge that their gentrified neighborhoods owe something to the cops behind their polycarbonate riot shields.

A sense of being unthanked runs deep in the N.Y.P.D. People protesting police brutality, according to Lynch, “obviously do not appreciate the risk and sacrifice we make for them.” Mike O’Meara, who heads the transit-police union, scolded state officials at a recent rally, shouting, “Stop treating us like animals and thugs and start treating us with some respect!” In February, after Mayor Bill de Blasio expressed his sympathies to two police officers who had been shot, the Sergeants Benevolent Association tweeted, “Mayor DeBlasio, the members of the NYPD are declaring war on you! We do not respect you, DO NOT visit us in hospitals. You sold the NYPD to the vile creatures, the 1% who hate cops but vote for you.” The S.B.A. was also responsible for doxxing the Mayor’s daughter, Chiara; after she was arrested during a peaceful demonstration in late May, it published the police report, including her height, weight, and address, on Twitter. The City Council member Ritchie Torres described the S.B.A. as “a hate group masquerading as a labor union.”

Lynch, for all his choler, is more strategic. He frames every question, whether

it's officers' salaries or police violence, as a simple binary. "This is not an issue that's Republican or Democrat," he told a crowd on the City Hall steps last year, about a contract demand. "This is a right-and-wrong issue." At the same event, Justin Brannan, a progressive city councilman, offered another binary: "Don't tell me you're a union guy if you don't support the cops and the P.B.A."

For members, it's possible to appreciate the work the unions do while deploring their rhetoric. Kirk Burkhalter comes from a police family. His father grew up poor, in the South, and joined the force young. Burkhalter joined at twenty-one, a few years after his brother. "It was all I knew," he told me. He was always grateful for the unions' bargaining power: "If it wasn't for that legislative lobby, I wouldn't have grown up with all the benefits I did, the health care, the pension." He started as a patrolman in 1984, the same year that Lynch joined, made his way to detective first grade, and served as a union delegate. He went to college and law school on his own time and, after retiring, became a professor at New York Law School. "It pains me to see what's going on in the Police Department now," he told me. "Those are some of my best friends, the people I grew up with." He says that he understands the unions' defensiveness, but not their vitriol: "Imagine a nurses' union that hated patients, that went on TV and talked about how much trouble the patients give them."

Police unions are prohibited from striking, but they impose themselves through illegal work slowdowns—a tactic known as the "blue flu." New York has staggered through many of them, including at least one directed at de Blasio. It is a protest, typically, against a perceived injustice to the police, but also a taste of the lawlessness to which police could subject their city. How do you like a languid, foot-dragging response to your 911 calls? Feeling unappreciated, officers may even consider deserting their posts entirely. In June, police in Buffalo shoved an elderly demonstrator to the ground with enough force to crack his skull, and then marched past him, expressionless, as he lay bleeding. After the two officers who did the pushing were suspended, pending an inves-

tigation, all fifty-seven members of an elite Emergency Response Team resigned in solidarity.

The gradual departure of beat cops, who knew everybody in the neighborhood and whom everybody knew, at least in sentimental memory, has been a big step toward the alienation between police and civilians that one can feel in nearly every big American city. Cops today, sequestered in their patrol cars, are anonymous, minatory, and much more heavily armed than their predecessors. But the good old days of the beat cop were in many ways not so good. One of New York's most famous policemen in the nineteenth century was Alexander (Clubber) Williams, who claimed to have bludgeoned hundreds of miscreants into submission, and was celebrated as a hero in *Harper's Monthly* in 1887. Violence was—and is—part of the job.

In other developed nations, there is nothing comparable to the rate of police killings that we experience—or, in richer communities, countenance. In England and Wales, three or four civilians die at the hands of police in an average year. The U.S. population is larger, of course, but not three hundred times larger.

According to Paul Hirschfield, a Rut-

## WE ARE GONE

Even the night cooling down is slick with heat.  
Even the sheet we share like a humming skin.

From three stories up the sounds of the street,  
drinkers at the curb, a wet hiss of dry tires,

is a rhythm through our box fan, like panting.  
When we sleep it is piecemeal until morning.

\*

Listen, the years are short. They are nothing.  
I write each morning, while you are at work.

In the heat of day, I walk to the library, cold  
water at the fountain, air-conditioned air; walk

with a new book back in the elm-lined shade.  
At night I meet you at the top of the stairs.

gers sociologist who has written about international law-enforcement practice, the difference is partly in the basic work environment. "American police encounter conditions that are more like Latin America than northern Europe," he told me. "These vast inequalities, the history of enslavement and conquest, a weak social safety net. The decentralization. Police are more likely to encounter civilians with firearms here. We don't have the levels of police corruption they do in Mexico, but we are not like other developed countries. The legal threshold for the use of force is lower." Another difference is training. In some Western European countries, police academies are as selective as a good American college. Recruits in Germany study for a minimum of three years, with professors who are experts in their fields. Officers in the U.S. often start work with as little as eleven weeks of training, mostly in firearms and survival. Burkhalter has proposed that existing training be replaced with a two-year curriculum that includes courses in a range of subjects—law, sociology, psychology—and that not all classes be taught, as is current practice, by law-enforcement personnel. "A clear understanding of the nature of the society they will serve, and all its complexities, is fun-

\*

Where are you gone, who loved me so long  
one summer far from home? Days are long.

Even the heat is lovelier there, as memory is.  
We make lemonade from powder. Little wonder

the years are less than a breath, like a song  
on the radio heard as the rhythm of languor.

\*

Whistle of the ice-cream truck. Drinkers at the curb.  
Days and nights of heat, of sex, such tenderness.

When we sleep sometimes it is to dream of the days.  
Where are they gone? Meeting on the stairs,

laughter and light, a small meal, a bottle of wine.  
When we wake it is piecemeal, until we are gone.

—David Baker

damental to any member of a service profession,” he has written.

Police work is indisputably difficult. Patrol officers are often confronted with people at their worst and their most trying; in a country that has more firearms in private hands than it has citizens, the threat of being shot is real. But, statistically, law enforcement does not make the list of the ten most dangerous jobs in America. Commercial fishing is worse, as are roofing and construction. Studies of patrol officers’ service calls have shown that less than five per cent are related to violent crimes.

Seth Stoughton, a former police officer who now teaches law at the University of South Carolina, argues that law enforcement’s “warrior problem” begins in the first days of training. “Would-be officers are told that their prime objective, the proverbial ‘first rule of law enforcement,’ is to go home at the end of every shift,” he wrote in the *Harvard Law Review* in 2015. “But they are taught that they live in an intensely hostile world. A world that is, quite literally, gunning for them. . . . As a result, officers learn to be afraid.” This message is then drummed into young cops on the job. The only way to survive is by hypervigilance, addressing civilians in a tone of “unquestioned com-

mand,” and identifying those who don’t readily accede to authority as enemies.

In June, three N.Y.P.D. officers bought milkshakes downtown and didn’t like the taste. After they mentioned the incident to their sergeant, they were rushed to Bellevue Hospital. The Detectives’ Endowment Association tweeted out an “URGENT SAFETY MESSAGE”: “Tonight, three of our fellow officers were intentionally poisoned by one or more workers at the Shake Shack at 200 Broadway.” The union went on to excoriate the cowards and criminals and pandering elected officials presumably behind the attack. The P.B.A. also got into the act. The officers “discovered that a toxic substance, believed to be bleach, had been placed in their beverages,” the union tweeted. “We cannot afford to let our guard down for even a moment.” Sean Hannity expressed his horror.

Upon further investigation, there was no poison in the milkshakes. Maybe there had been some residual cleaning solution in the shake machine. It happens. The officers were fine, the unions deleted their tweets, and the terrorized Shake Shack workers shrugged it off. The cops reportedly got vouchers for free food and drinks. Police hysteria about fast-food workers tampering with their orders is not limited

to the N.Y.P.D.; it has been spreading across the country, to Kansas and Indiana and Georgia. So far, it’s all been imaginary.

In less agitated times, police have a more banal reason to be wary of restaurants. “Cops avoid eating in public because they don’t want to pick up jobs,” Lieutenant Edwin Raymond, of the N.Y.P.D., told me. “People come up to you, want to complain about their landlord, get you involved, when you just want to eat.”

Traditionally, the galvanizing issue for social critics of the police was corruption—straight-up graft. Patrick Lynch was first inspired to run for union president by a corruption scandal, involving the P.B.A.’s lead negotiator and crooked lawyers, which sent several people to jail. He was elected, at thirty-six, on a reform ticket. The only serious competition he has faced came in 2015, after a faction of officers was unhappy with his weak defense of the miscreants in a ticket-fixing scandal in the Bronx. They wanted more solidarity around corruption. They lost.

Brutality is different. If we ask for stronger regulation, we’re siding with the bad guys. Last year, Lynch told *City & State* magazine that anti-brutality protesters didn’t actually want “reform” (his scare quotes): “Their goal is the end of any law enforcement in New York City, period.” Bill de Blasio got crosswise with the police during his first campaign for mayor, when he promised reform. In office, he hastened the end of a stop-and-frisk policy that was rife with racial profiling, and sharply reduced the city’s jail population. He also talked about warning his biracial son, Dante, about the perils of being a young man of color navigating police stops—a bit of paternal realism that police received as a slight. But it was the Eric Garner tragedy that really blew up de Blasio’s relationship with the N.Y.P.D.

On July 17, 2014, on Staten Island, Garner was allegedly selling loose cigarettes to passersby. Police regarded him and the other cigarette sellers on Bay Street as a quality-of-life problem—a “broken window” that needed to be fixed. Garner was a big man, a Black man, and he shied away from police who came to arrest him. He had done nothing wrong, he said. His friend Ramsey Orta began to film the encounter; without his video,

we would not know Garner's name. Officer Daniel Pantaleo, in plain clothes, seized Garner, drove him to the ground, and put him in a choke hold. On the video, we hear Garner cry "I can't breathe" eleven times, as Pantaleo and four colleagues take their time cuffing him. By the time they finished, Garner was inert. An hour later, he was pronounced dead at a hospital. After an autopsy, the city's medical examiner ruled the death a homicide, caused in part by the choke hold.

Patrick Lynch maintains that it was not a choke hold but a "seatbelt"—a non-strangling takedown, which is permitted by the N.Y.P.D. The arrest report filed by Pantaleo's partner said, falsely, that no force was used. On Staten Island, a grand jury declined to indict Pantaleo. Witnesses who had been called to testify later described the proceedings as focussed less on police malfeasance than on what Garner had done. Pantaleo remained on desk duty. The city rebuffed calls by activists and lawyers for the Garner family to release the officer's disciplinary record. The department slowed its own investigation to allow a federal civil-rights investigation to proceed. This was evidently a political decision, to let passions cool. The Department of Justice took four and a half years to examine the case, and then, after William Barr was installed as Attorney General, quashed it.

But passions had not cooled. In December, 2014, a drifter with a long criminal record came to New York and murdered two police officers, purportedly to avenge Garner and others, before killing himself. Lynch was incensed. He had been feuding with de Blasio, whom he considered "anti-police." Now he encouraged on-duty cops to turn their backs on the Mayor when he came to the hospital in Brooklyn where the officers had been taken. At the officers' funerals, hundreds of police again turned their backs on de Blasio. Polls showed that most New Yorkers disapproved of this display, and many officers apparently felt it was disrespectful of the dead, but none would say so publicly. At a televised news conference, Lynch said that the officers' deaths had left blood on many hands, but "that blood starts on the steps of City Hall, in the office of the Mayor."

De Blasio's enthusiasm for police re-

form seemed to vanish that night. The rank and file followed up with a two-week slowdown, during which arrests fell by fifty-six per cent. Lynch continued to defend Pantaleo. "He's a model of what we want a police officer to be," he told CNN. "He literally is an Eagle Scout." Pantaleo's disciplinary record was eventually leaked, and showed a



high number of what are called substantiated complaints, including two that helped lead to a lawsuit, which the city was obliged to settle.

After the Justice Department quit the case, in 2019, the N.Y.P.D. finally completed its investigation. That August, more than five years after Garner's death, the police commissioner, James P. O'Neill, fired Pantaleo. Firing an officer is very rare, even on a force of thirty-six thousand. Lynch's response: "The job is dead. Our police officers are in distress. Not because they have a difficult job, not because they put themselves in danger, but because they realize they're abandoned." Pantaleo is now suing, with the P.B.A.'s support, to get his job back.

Pro-police analysts always talk about bad apples; it's only a few cops who misbehave—ten per cent, tops. But the problem is that the other ninety per cent inevitably know about their misconduct and thus are made complicit. Why don't they come forward? Everybody hates a rat, and everybody mentions the Blue Wall of Silence, or something called "police culture." Frank Serpico, the N.Y.P.D.'s best-known whistle-blower, got shot in the head during a drug raid, under disputed circumstances.

The Wickersham Commission, the first of many Presidential commissions set up to study and explain lawlessness and civil disorder, observed, in 1931, "It is an unwritten law in police departments that police officers must never testify against their brother officers." In what modern urban police officers experience as an increasingly hostile environment,

both in the workplace of the low-income neighborhood and in the crosshairs of constant criticism by clever academics and articles like this one, it should not be a surprise that cops feel that they have no choice but to cover for one another. No one else has their backs.

Kirk Burkhalter does not see reform as the responsibility of the unions alone. "Police culture," he says, is the product of a "symbiotic relationship" between the police and prosecutors and legislators, and the practice of "putting handcuffs on everyone for every little thing" does not originate at street level. "The officer does not have discretion on whether to arrest in many cases," he told me.

At times, the code of secrecy spreads to elected officials. In Chicago, in 2014, an officer named Jason Van Dyke shot a teen-age boy named Laquan McDonald sixteen times. The police report said that McDonald had advanced on officers with a raised knife. More than a year later, after an activist and a freelance journalist sued under the Freedom of Information Act, the city released a dash-cam video, which showed McDonald not advancing with a knife but walking away. This coverup wasn't perpetrated by the police alone. City leaders knew what was on that video. Mayor Rahm Emanuel, though he denied having watched it, fought for thirteen months to prevent its release.

**I**n the modern labor movement, police unions are outliers, their politics well to the right of even the Teamsters and the building trades. They can make common cause with the movement when union-killing legislation looms, as it briefly did in New York State a few years ago. But when they know they will be spared, as in Wisconsin, they stay quiet even while teachers and nurses and sanitation workers are being squashed.

For the left, one problem with hammering police unions is that the right is doing the same thing. *National Review* and the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page recognize the problems with police unions and accountability, and they duly extend the argument to teachers' unions and municipal workers. Their sentiment is: bust them all. Benjamin Sachs, a professor of labor and industry at Harvard Law School, points to new data showing that, when police

have greater access to collective bargaining, it correlates with a long-term increase in police killing of civilians, specifically nonwhite civilians. Strong union towns like Chicago often have a more dangerous police culture than cities with weak labor laws do. In Dallas, for instance, the main police union is not the sole bargaining agent. Several different groups, including fraternal organizations of African-American and Latino officers, sign off on union contracts. The result is both more transparent and markedly less violent policing.

Ben Brucato, a sociologist at Rhode Island College, argues that police unions are crucially different from other labor unions. “These organizations function as lobbies to both resist accountability legislation and shield implicated officers,” he writes. A public-sector union is distinct from its private-sector counterparts; its negotiations necessarily include, at least morally, a third party—the public, the taxpayer. And yet many police unions, in their contracts and their ideology, seem to make no provision for this invisible third party. They defend their members against the public, and punish whistle-blowers with even greater zeal than management does. Police unions “represent hundreds of thousands of people, and, except in a very few states, have the ability to organize without any opposition from government,” Brucato told me.

Brucato believes that the solution is to abolish police unions. He has a list of ten steps toward that end, including cancelling contracts, mass firings in the event of illegal slowdowns, and federal prosecutions for persistent obstruction of justice. Other abolitionists want to see major labor federations, such as the A.F.L.-C.I.O., sever ties with police unions. Sachs agrees that there is an urgent need for reform, but he suggests considering more procedural steps: limiting collective bargaining to non-disciplinary matters; opening bargaining sessions to the public; encouraging departments to have multiple unions, representing more diverse views. Many analysts emphasize the need for new use-of-force protocols that are known to save lives but that the unions reject.

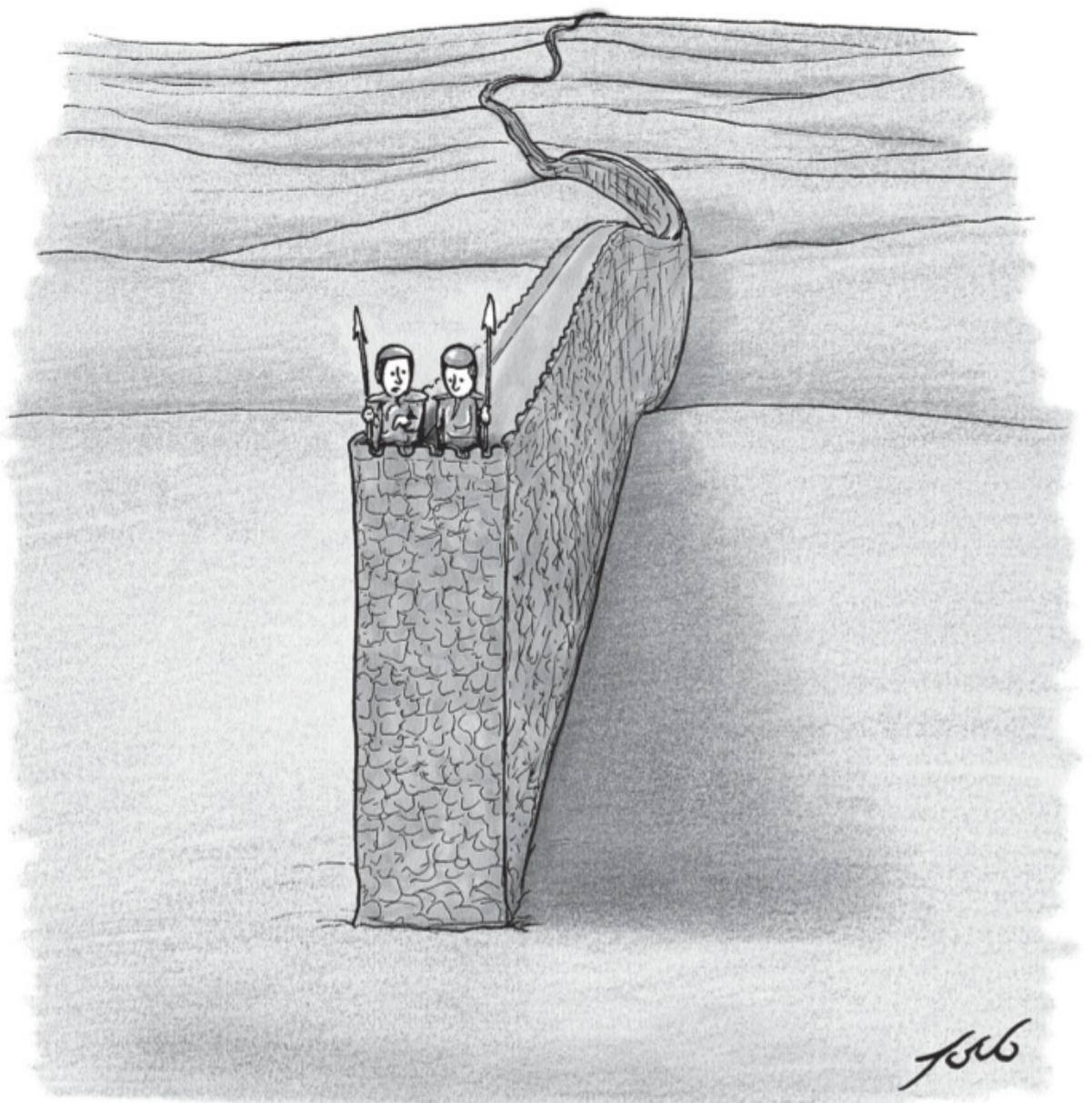
All of this would require political will of a kind that until very recently seemed unthinkable. In 1994, Senator Joe Biden

worked closely with the police unions to help get his big crime bill written. He later gave full credit to the National Association of Police Organizations: “You guys sat at that conference table of mine for a six-month period, and you wrote the bill.” (The unions abandoned Biden during the Obama years, when they saw him working on criminal-justice reform.) And who can forget President Trump’s performance in 2017, when he leeringly told a law-enforcement crowd on Long Island that he personally didn’t mind if they bumped some suspects’ heads on car-door frames. The officers applauded. Trump knew his audience. During the 2016 campaign, the Fraternal Order of Police, a national union with three hundred and fifty thousand members, had formally endorsed him. In 1968, it endorsed George Wallace.

In early June, something remarkable happened in New York. As the city erupted in protests against police brutality, the N.Y.P.D. responded with vivid displays of more police brutality. Much of the violence was caught on video.

Officers were injured by thrown bricks and bottles, and often seemed tactically confused. They managed the perimeters of some protests calmly, and charged others with batons and pepper spray. Many had tape over their names and badge numbers. Whole lines of police in riot gear seemed to be white. De Blasio, confronted with video of two police S.U.V.s driving into a throng of protesters, blamed the protesters for crowding in. When serious looting broke out for three nights in midtown and lower Manhattan, the police seemed to vanish. One heard that they were told to stand down but not why.

They had been busy elsewhere, certainly, arresting some twenty-five hundred people. Charges ran the gamut. At some point, reflecting the Justice Department’s interest in what Attorney General Barr called “outside agitators,” the F.B.I. got involved in the questioning of detainees. As the demonstrations entered their second week, an 8 P.M. curfew, the first imposed in New York since the Second World War, gave police a wide field in which to make arrests, some



*“Here’s the weak point.”*

of them seemingly arbitrary, others clearly targeting protest organizers. In the Bronx, police singled out legal observers from the National Lawyers Guild.

In Albany, though, a momentous shift occurred. Civil libertarians, police reformers, and their allies had been trying for years to repeal a state law, known as Section 50-a, that sealed police disciplinary records, making it impossible to know if an officer had a history of misconduct. The public's right to know if its armed employees were abusing their monopoly on violence seemed indisputable, but the police unions had fought hard to keep 50-a on the books. It had never even come up for a vote in committee. Politicians like de Blasio agreed that it should be repealed, but did nothing about it. Antagonizing the police unions just wasn't worth it. Michael Sisitzky, the head of a police transparency and accountability project at the New York Civil Liberties Union, worked on the issue for years. "We didn't know how to frame it," he told me. "It just sounds so wonky—'Repeal 50-a.' Then, suddenly, we started seeing banners at the protests, 'Repeal 50-a.'"

The ideals of Black Lives Matter were now in the political mainstream. Governor Andrew Cuomo said that he would sign any reform bill that state legislators sent him, and a few days later

they sent him the 50-a repeal, a new ban on choke holds, and more. He signed. Activists like Sisitzky had prepared the legislation, and the families of those killed by the police, including Eric Garner, had advocated tirelessly; the Legislators of Color caucus had given it a crucial final push. But, Sisitzky told me, "what moved those bills was the massive outpouring of people into the streets demanding action."

For many years, the P.B.A. and its fellow-unions argued that opening police-misconduct records would endanger not only officers but also their families. This was fearmongering: misconduct records would not include home addresses or phone numbers. After these reform bills passed, the unions held a rally under the highway on Randall's Island. Lynch and O'Meara raged, backed by rows of glowering police. After all their service, all their sacrifice, they could not believe that they *didn't even get a seat at the table*.

I asked Sisitzky about that. "No seat at the table?" he said. "They've always been represented in ways that other organizations can only dream of." Anyway, it wasn't as if they were going away. "The unions will try to reassert themselves, of course." He was right. In July, the P.B.A. sued New York City to block the release of misconduct records, and a federal judge quickly granted a temporary restraining

order. Sisitzky's office was barred from releasing records it had already obtained.

But Kirk Burkhalter felt that, at least for the moment, the momentum toward reform was strong enough that the unions should consider compromise. "There's no need for this rift between the unions and the Black community," Burkhalter, who is Black, said. "Black Lives Matter and the P.B.A.—they can each get some of what they want. It's not zero-sum." But time may be running out for the unions, he said: "How long are these lifelong benefits going to last in this climate? You better get on your horse and insure the public has confidence in you, because that's going to be the first thing to go."

After the victory in Albany, New York's police reformers took a couple of days to party, pandemic style, and then turned their attention to City Hall. The city's fiscal 2021 budget would be submitted on July 1st, and the consensus goal among reformers was a billion-dollar cut in the N.Y.P.D.'s six-billion-dollar budget. De Blasio said he was in favor, but nobody trusted him. People camped in the little wedge of park outside City Hall, trying to turn up the pressure.

Joo-Hyun Kang, the director of Communities United for Police Reform, a long-running campaign to end discriminatory policing in New York, was a key leader in the effort to repeal 50-a. Kang has fought the police unions and the N.Y.P.D. for years, trying to get even the names of officers responsible for killings. "People really should have the right to know who's patrolling their streets," she said. "Really, though, egregious police killings are just the tip of the iceberg. It's the daily humiliation, the daily abuse of authority."

Now she had turned her full attention to the city budget. "This is a direct challenge to the outsized power that the police unions have had," she said. "This movement to decrease N.Y.P.D. funding? That's what they're really scared of." She and the other activists took a hard line with de Blasio. "We don't want to see any funny math," she told me. "This is the time to think about what sort of city we want to be."

When the Mayor and the City Council reached a budget deal, the activists were keenly dissatisfied. The deal pur-



*"It's great to have something we can all do together."*

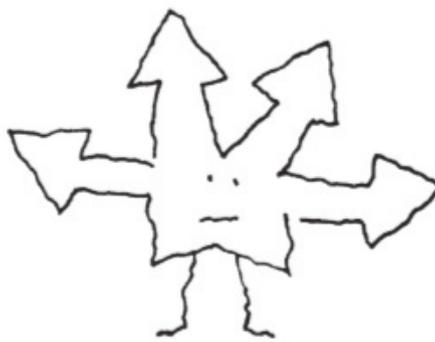
ported to redirect a billion dollars from police into social investments, but it was full of funny math. It set a thoroughly unrealistic cap on overtime, promising to reduce last year's estimated expenditures of eight hundred and twenty million dollars by two-thirds. It eliminated the N.Y.P.D.'s payments to cops in schools, but only by making the Department of Education cover them. It lacked an across-the-board hiring freeze—even as other municipal agencies were having their budgets slashed, to address COVID-era shortfalls. To the activists' disappointment, many Black elected officials supported the deal. Kang suggested that the council members who voted for it would face progressive opposition. "These councilpersons are going to have races in 2021," she said.

The police unions, already aggrieved by the state-level reforms, were further provoked by a set of New York City statutes passed the following week, which provided new restrictions on choke holds and surveillance and supported the public's right to film police activity. A frightening spike in violent crime—as of late June, murders in the city were up twenty-three per cent over last year—inspired a fierce round of finger-pointing. It was de Blasio's fault. (Lynch to Hannity: "The city has given our streets back.") It was cops not doing their jobs. (Arrests were down dramatically, and morale was said to be low.) It was the bail-reform law, and pandemic mitigation, emptying the jails. It was the judicial backlog. It was the disbanding of a plainclothes "anti-crime unit"—Pantaleo's old crew.

In July, Dermot Shea, the police commissioner, decided to go full Patrick Lynch. In a speech to senior commanders, he said, "People that don't have a clue about how to keep New Yorkers safe suddenly think they know about policing." He called the city's leaders "cowards who won't stand up for what's right." He declared, "We're not giving this goddam city back to criminals."

De Blasio's response was timid. He said that, while Shea's choice of words was not "constructive," his frustration was understandable. Meanwhile, N.Y.P.D. officers were voting with their feet. Since the protests began, more than five hundred officers have filed for retirement—almost twice the figure from the same

period last year. The chief of the lieutenants' union told the *Post* that the police were feeling "demoralized and abandoned." Another possible factor: many officers had earned huge amounts of overtime, between working the protests and covering pandemic sick days, and their pensions, based on their final year's salary, were as lucrative as they'd ever be.



The office that handles retirements was so swamped that it was seeing people only by appointment.

On a warm recent afternoon, I found myself in colloquy with a half-dozen police officers stationed outside the front entrance of the American Museum of Natural History. They were there for the duration, they said, unhappily. Their assignment was looming above us, in the form of the Teddy Roosevelt statue that has stood in that spot for eighty years.

It's one of the great problematic monuments. Roosevelt sits astride a horse, both of them extra-muscular. He has a pistol on each hip, and a resolute gaze, too noble by half, fixed on the horizon. On either side, and slightly behind him, is a gun-bearer on foot. One is a Native American, in a feathered headdress, his lower half covered by a blanket—you hear him called a "generic Plains Indian." The other is a generic East African, naked, carrying a shield on his back and a blanket over one shoulder. In the revolutionary spirit of the moment, the museum had decided to remove the statue, and the cops were there to prevent its being removed prematurely by a mob. Things were quiet up and down Central Park West. Still, the mood was sour.

"You ever read '1984'?" one officer asked. He was fleshy and fair, late thirties, with a Long Island accent.

He nodded at the statue, the closed-down museum, the whole situation.

"Nah," his colleague said. "This is 'Animal Farm.'"

"Nah," the first cop said. "It's the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Wipe out the past, act like none of it ever happened." He sounded disturbed, disgusted, sad.

"Even the blue whale?"

"Yeah, everything," he said.

Change is coming, and everybody knows it. But Trump and the more reactionary police-union leadership have something in common: they all seem to have missed the last boat out of the bad old days. Patrick Lynch, certainly, is a relic of mid-century policing, when cops were always right and usually white and could take a free hand in Black and brown neighborhoods. The social license of that model of policing has expired. A new generation of officers, mostly not white, waits to take power at the unions.

In New York, the percentage of African-American officers is in decline, as the first big generational cohort retires. But the numbers of Latino and Asian-American officers are still growing. Though it is impossible to generalize, officers of color seem less enthusiastic than their white colleagues about the union leadership. Each one I've asked has described a feeling of not being represented. A fraternal organization of Black officers, called the Guardians Association, has long dissented from the union's hostility to civilian oversight.

I was struck by a coincidence in telephone interviews with two Black N.Y.P.D. officers, one of them retired. In both conversations, we ended up discussing the latest local police scandal, in which an officer was caught on video applying a choke hold to someone on the boardwalk in the Rockaways. The officer, David Afanador, had previously been tried for felony assault—he pistol-whipped an unarmed, unresisting sixteen-year-old, breaking his teeth—but he was acquitted at trial. In the new case, he was quickly suspended and indicted for "attempted aggravated strangulation," with no discussion of a grand jury. Both interviewees called my attention to the same detail in the Afanador video: a second officer urging him to ease up. That was what excited them. It was a complicity breach—a small but perhaps indicative case of the ninety per cent reining in the ten. "That's what we want to see," the retired officer said. "That guy's an actual hero." ♦

FICTION

Heirloom



Bryan  
Washington

It's still dark when I wake up, the morning after Mike leaves, but Mitsuko's mincing shrimp. She's hunched over the cutting board, beside eggs, flour, and honey.

Do you eat, she asks.

I tell her I do.

We don't say shit while she's working. Mitsuko blitzes everything in a food processor. Drops the mixture in a skillet, dabbing everything with soy sauce, folding the batter gradually. I take my meds, watching her do all this, and she ignores me the entire time, working at her own pace.

When I sit on the sofa, Mitsuko stops rolling. I stand to set the table, and she starts rolling again.

Once she's finished, she fills a bowl with some pickled cucumbers and puts an omelette on a plate, leaving another one out for me. We eat hunched over the counter, hip to hip.

So, Mitsuko says, how long have you been sleeping with my son? Or is it casual?

Not really, I say.

I don't know how it works, Mitsuko says.

I think it's the same for everyone.

It isn't, Mitsuko says.

She says, I'm sure you can tell that Michael and I are very close.

We've been together for four years, I say. More or less.

More, Mitsuko asks, or less?

A little more, I say.

But just a little, she says.

Mike's better with numbers, I say.

It occurs to me that my posture is entirely fucked up. Mitsuko's is impeccable, even at a lean. So I straighten up, and then I stoop, and Mitsuko raises an eyebrow.

She snorts, and says, My son could not be worse with numbers.

After that, we eat in silence. Scattered Spanish filters in through the window. The kids next door kick a soccer ball against the wall, until their father, a big Venezuelan dude, steps outside yelling, asking which one of them has lost their fucking mind.

While Mitsuko's focussed on her food, I really look at her. It's clear that, at one point, she was a startlingly beautiful woman.

Then she meets my eyes. I blink like something's in them.

She says, I realize that this must be strange for you, too.

No, I say, it's fine.

So you're a liar, Mitsuko says.

I'm being honest. Really.

I'm fluent in fine, Mitsuko says. Fine means fucked. Did my son tell you how long he'd be gone?

A month, I say. Maybe two. I don't know. We didn't talk too much about it.

Of course not.

But did he tell you?

Tell me what?

How long he'd be gone, I say. Or that he was leaving?

Mitsuko cracks her knuckles on the counter. No, she says. My son neglected to give me that information. But this could be a good thing. I needed to get out of Japan for a while. No sense in rushing back to Tokyo to look at a dying man.

So, I ask, you're staying here? Until Mike gets back?

My voice cracks, just a bit. But Mitsuko hears it. She grins.

Would that be a problem? she asks.

No, I say. That's not what I meant.

Then what did you mean?

I'm sorry, I say. I really was just asking.

Mitsuko crosses her arms. She leans on the counter, and her hair slips down her shoulders. I make a point to slow my breathing, to let my shoulders droop just a bit.

Then, I think staying here is exactly what I'll do, Mitsuko says. I could use the time off. Your place is filthy, but it'll work until Michael makes it back.

And that's absolutely O.K., I say. Totally perfect.

Remember, Mitsuko says, you're the one who let him leave.

You're right, I say. I'm the one who let him leave.

How generous, Mitsuko says, but then she doesn't say anything else.

Once she's finished her plate, she drops it in the sink. She turns on the faucet. Reaches for mine. The omelette was delicious, the sort of thing Mike would cook, because he has always done everything in the kitchen, and I think that this may have been the problem to begin with.

Nice chat, Mitsuko says, and I apologize, but I'm not sure why.

Here is the root of the problem, our problem: in bed, before we fucked, the

night before Mike flew to Osaka, to visit his father—a man who'd left the States when his son was a teen; a man whose voice Mike hadn't heard in more than a decade; a man who was fighting cancer, with no hope of recovery, only for his son to volunteer to nurse him into his deathbed—he asked if I thought we were working.

What the fuck kind of question is that? I asked. Working. Are you saying we're done? Right after we bring home your fucking mother from the fucking airport? To visit you?

I'm asking a question, Mike said. That's all.

Just say it. Don't be a little bitch.

Ben, I am literally only asking what you think.

I think you should just come out and say what you're trying to say, I said. If you think we're done, just say it. I'll pack my shit tomorrow.

It's not that simple, Mike said, and then he put his face in his palms.

But it is, I said.

You are the one who's been fucking around, I said.

This again, Mike said.

Yes. Again. Again and again and again. And now you're leaving for who the fuck knows where. For who the fuck knows how long.

You're not being fair, Mike said. That isn't fair. It's my dad.

Who you couldn't give a fuck about!

That won't fucking matter when he's dead.

We'd been whispering. We hadn't looked at each other. I felt Mike's body relax beside me.

Look, Mike said. Just because something isn't working doesn't mean it's broken. You just have to want to fix it. The want has to be there.

Tell me, I said. Do you want to fix it?

I guess that's what I'm trying to find out.

That evening, Mitsuko's cooking potatoes and okayu and a sliver of fish. She sets a bowl aside for me, with some scallions dashed over the porridge. Then she sips tea by the counter, and I drink water like a drowning man, and I never see her take a pill or check her blood pressure or anything else.

So, I say, how was your day?



*“Hey, God? Can we make Eve now?”*

How was my day, Mitsuko says.

My son leaves the country the morning after I arrive, she says.

He leaves me with I don't know who for I don't know how long, she says.

I haven't seen him in years, she says, and he's off looking for my ex-husband, who is rotting from cancer as we speak.

My day was fucking phenomenal, Mitsuko says.

When she's finished, she slips on a jacket and shoes. I don't ask where she's going. I won't make the same mistake twice.

It's how our first week together passes: I drive to my gig at the day care, and I come home to set the table, and Mitsuko eats at the counter while I chew beside her, and afterward I wipe everything down while she hits the dishes.

Otherwise, we mostly keep to ourselves. It's probably better that way. But I've learned a few things. Little things.

Like how, back home, she works at a jewelry store in Shimokitazawa.

And how she flies to L.A. three times a year, to meet a man, or to meet a friend, or to meet a man who is also a friend.

And she's hardly flashy, but all of her clothes are nice. Every sock and skirt and earring is clearly part of a larger, varied whole.

Mike, meanwhile, wears the same three things seven days a week. He has no patience for schedules, routines, or patterns of any kind.

Before me, he saw whomever he wanted, whenever he wanted, fucking them however he wanted, and then he'd leave when he got bored.

Living with Mitsuko is, in other words, entirely unlike living with her son, whose gayness she is comfortable with, or at least not entirely uncomfortable with, or at least less disagreeable about than my own parents, probably.

When Mitsuko asks about laundry detergent, I tell her it's in the cupboard under the sink.

When she asks where we do laundry, I point to the laundromat across the street.

When she asks where we buy groceries, I give her a few names, but she looks skeptical at all of them.

Will they have natto? she asks.

I say that the H Mart just might.

You know what natto is? Mitsuko asks, frowning.

Soybeans, I say, right? Mike uses it.

And for the first time in our acquaintance, Mitsuko looks confused.

Here in Houston, she says.

Yeah, I say.

And you eat natto, she says.

I do, I say.

I don't believe you.

Because you don't think I could like it?

How the hell would I know what you like? Mitsuko says.

In the evening, I hear the television in the living room, where Mitsuko's been sleeping. She's scrolling through movies, until she settles on “War of the Worlds,” and I listen as Tom Cruise chases after his son. The kid's gone to join the resistance or some shit. The viewer knows he's a goner, but Tom doesn't see that. He goes after the kid anyway.

I'm dozing off when my phone dings.

Mike has sent a picture of his face in front of what looks like a train station. He's not quite smiling. The background is clogged with bodies.

And he's texted: HOW ARE THINGS?

I type: How the fuck do you expect.

A few minutes later, Mike sends another selfie. There's the backdrop of a neighborhood. It looks quiet, bookended by telephone poles.

found him yet? I type.

YEAH

and?

HE'S DOING FINE

HE'S NOT REALLY DOING FINE

IDREK

So I text: where can you get natto here y?

Your mom says she wants to make some.

And Mike's response is immediate, possibly the fastest he's ever replied to me: TF?

Once, maybe three years in, I asked Mike if he wanted kids. We were at a pub in the Heights, watching two drunk white boys fall all over each other. One of them would stand up from his barstool, and the other guy would catch him. Then the other guy would stand, and they'd repeat the performance.

Mike had already finished his beer, but he managed to spit some up anyway.

It was around this time that we had the monogamy conversation. Mike was the one who brought it up.

I didn't refuse his idea of opening things up outright, but I never affirmed it, either.

I'm just saying we should think about opening things up, Mike said.

There's nothing to think about, I said. I wouldn't care what you did, Mike said, as long as you came back home. You aren't in a relationship with yourself, I said.

Just consider it, Mike said. Really. All I'm saying is that it's a big world out there.

World? I said. What the fuck? What world? We live in one place.

You know what I'm saying.

And the thing is, I did know. I knew. And I'd thought about it. But I was less worried, at the time, about what Mike would do than how I'd handle it. If I opened the door, even just a crack, would I still have a reason to step back inside?

We didn't actually decide anything, between the two of us. But a nondecision is a choice in itself.

The morning after Mike texts me, Mitsuko knocks on my bedroom door for the very first time. She's fully dressed. I lean on the doorframe in a tank top and boxers.

Take your time, she says.

Jesus Christ, she says.

We leave five minutes later. Our Black neighbors wave from their porch. There's a question on the grandfather's face, and I wonder if he'll ask it.

But Mitsuko doesn't look away. If anything, she walks slower. Staring him down.

Mike's car is filthy with clothes: hoodies and socks and a loose pair of shoes. The whole thing smells like him, and I know his mother smells it, too. When I toss a pair of shorts behind us, she grunts, and there's a jockstrap in the back seat, and I pray to no god in particular that she doesn't spot it.

We've pulled out of the neighborhood when she asks, You're sure they'll have what I need?

They should, I say. You and Mike make the same things.

Maybe similar, Mitsuko says. Not same.

We drive past the locals beginning their day. Whole swaths of Houston look like chunks of other countries. There are potholes beside gourmet bakeries beside taquerías beside noodle bars, copied and pasted onto a tinted landscape.

At a stoplight, these two smiling dudes walk a toddler across the street,

each holding one of her hands. One of the men is white. The other one's brown. They look like something straight out of *OutSmart*. I glance at Mitsuko, and her face doesn't tell me much.

So, she says, you're Black.

You noticed, I say.

Just barely, Mitsuko says. And how did you find my son?

Accidentally, I say.

Let me guess—it was Grindr.

It wasn't.

You found my son on the Internet.

No.

We met at a get-together, I say. An acquaintance introduced us.

Sure, Mitsuko says.

After the couple crosses the road, their daughter looks up at them, beaming. She is the happiest that a child has ever been, ever. If Mike had seen them, he'd have feigned some sort of choking, or honked his horn, or he'd have grown sober, not saying much at all.

Two years in, my sister met him accidentally. It happened on Halloween, at a bar off Westheimer, in the thick of Montrose. I'd wandered away from Mike to take a piss, and when I made it back to the table Lydia was stirring her Coke beside him. She wore some witchy getup, a costume with too many straps. Mike had on a toga. I'd gone as myself.

I was just talking to Mark, Lydia said.

You didn't say you had a little sister, Mike said.

They went on like that, back and forth. Lydia ordered more drinks. When I asked if she didn't have a date to get back to, she smiled and told me she'd just have to reschedule it. This, she said, was special. She'd never meet her baby brother's boyfriend for the first time again.

Lydia was Mike's age. A few years older than me. She wrote copy for the Buffalo Soldiers museum downtown, and if you told her you didn't know Houston had one of those she'd smile at you and ask how many Black friends you had, or if you had any at all.

But that evening she played it cool. Laughed at our jokes. Paid for more beer.

Just before last call, Lydia gave Mike her number.

Wow, Mike said. This is a first.

Life is long, Lydia said.

Cheers, Mike said.

Later that night, Lydia texted me. he's funny, she said.

too funny for you 😊, she added.

Another thing: on Sunday mornings, Mike drove us from market to market, all over the Northside. He juggled onions and guanabana and garlic and pineapples. He haggled with vendors in his shitty Spanish, and in the evening he'd cook three versions of the same fucking meal. I'd take a bite of one, and then a bite of the second. Then Mike would motion me toward the third. I usually went with the second.

Mike said that this was practice for him. He'd been working at the café for years, and he was getting a little sick of its menu. He called it limiting. This, he swore, was how he'd get better, and I told him that not everyone did this, and he said there was a reason for that.

I didn't grow up with their palates, he said. They can assume a lot of shit that I can't.

So you force it on me, I said. Down my throat.

You'll miss it when it's gone, Mike said.

Our local H Mart is, inconceivably, closed, and the next grocery store I take Mitsuko to is objectively filthy—but there's natto. There's also a metal detector by the entrance. A fried-chicken vender in scrubs sits beside the doorway. Older women and their grown children finger carrots, and a little girl wandering the aisles wears a bunch of parsley like a crown.

I drift around looking for a shopping cart. I find one with three wheels. We end up filling the whole thing, and also Mitsuko's basket, and also the crooks of her elbows.

At the register, I feel for my wallet, and I wait for Mitsuko to stop me. But she doesn't. So I slowly pull out my card, and that's when Mitsuko plucks a bill from her bag, shaking her head.

The girl behind the register laughs, tugging at a braid.

Just like a nigga, she says.

Isn't it, Mitsuko says.

And then, hours later, Mitsuko's chewing vitamins when I make it back to the

apartment from work, and I'm ducking toward the bedroom when she calls my name.

Can you cook a chicken? she says.

You mean boil it, I say.

I meant what I said.

Like, frying wings?

Absolutely not, Mitsuko says. Come here.

She's more comfortable in Mike's kitchen than I've ever been. He arranged everything to his liking, but Mitsuko's reorganized all of it. Everything in the drawers, all of the ladles and spatulas and sticks. The bowls were a certain way, and now they are not. Plus, all Mike's spices. And the utensils. I never knew where he kept his chopsticks—they just materialized whenever we needed them. The place looks unrecognizable. She's flipped it on its head. It's entirely disorienting, but for once I can actually settle in.

Mitsuko grabs the chicken by one leg, balancing the other with a cleaver. In one fluid motion, she slices the bird in half.

Jesus fuck, I say.

Quiet, Mitsuko says.

She proceeds to break down the carcass, bone by bone, stuffing the remains in a pot on the stove for stock. When she's finished trimming the fat, she shakes each piece with a flick of her wrist. Her seasonings are lined up. She douses the meat in what looks like a pool of salt. But she doesn't say shit about it, and eventually she pirouettes to the side, flinging the pieces into a pan. They sizzle like a sheet of rain.

If I were at home, I would've marinated this, Mitsuko says. But I'm not at home.

When the meat's cooked, Mitsuko sets two bowls on the table. That's new. I sit across from her.

We eat, mostly in silence.

Did you get that? Mitsuko asks.

Well, I say, bits and pieces.

She looks me over a little coolly.

That's all right, she says, you're going to learn.

You have to, she adds.

Mike texts me that night. His father's doing worse.

worse? I reply.

CAN'T SLEEP, WON'T EAT, BREATHING HEAVY, Mike writes.

i'm sorry

YOU DIDN'T PUT IT INSIDE OF HIM

When I ask Mike what the next steps are, he tells me that they don't know yet. He tells me his father is stubborn. But the one certainty Mike has is that he's glad he flew over, or he thinks that he's glad, or he can't really imagine not having flown over.

It's too much to parse on a screen. I tell Mike that I dismembered a chicken with his mother.

Mike writes, ???

i know, I text. i'm shocked

YOU ENJOY IT?

i survived

HA. THINK YOU'LL TRY AGAIN?

we'll see

I wait for Mike to ask about his mother. Or how we're doing in Texas. But he doesn't. The dots on my screen appear, and disappear, and reappear, but nothing comes through.

So I ask him how he's doing, how he's really doing, and he sends me a selfie.

He's shaven, wincing in the photo. I can see his whole face for the first time in a year.

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When I'm up the next morning, Mitsuko's already gone. Her jacket is gone. Her shades are gone. I check for her shoes and they're gone.

I look for a note, and Mitsuko's left one on the table.

It's written entirely in kanji.

I could pull my fucking ears off.

But then I notice that she's taken the laundry baskets. Hers, and mine, and all the detergent.

By the time she makes it back, we're well into the afternoon, and I'm lying on the sofa. She takes one look at me, opens her mouth, and closes it again.

Then she says, My son called.

She says, He sounded horrible.

•

On our four-year anniversary, Mike and I went to Galveston for a long weekend. We hadn't gone on trips together, not a single one, so this was a brand-new thing. But, for the first time in months, he'd taken time off from the café. My gig was closed for a holiday weekend. We had a weird energy brewing around the apartment with

both of us there, just lying around. And then there were the neighbors, who'd knocked on our door the night before, warning us that they'd be hosting some sort of marathon quinceañera. They spent the entire first night outside in the yard, shouting and dancing and beating a piñata. Around two in the morning, they locked hands to sing a song about Jesus. When their sixth chorus rolled around, I told Mike that it didn't matter where we went, as long as we went somewhere else. But he was already snoring.

So the sand was grimy and pale. Our end of the beach was sparse. A high-school couple argued about Sadie Hawkins under a makeshift fort behind us. Some girls rolled around in the water in front of us while their mother tucked her head in a Ferrante novel. Every now and then, she'd look up at her girls, and then at us. When Mike finally waved, she wiggled her fingers.

We laid out a towel, took off our shirts, and glazed in the sun for the whole afternoon. For lunch, we drifted up the pier for fish tacos. The woman who sold them was missing an ear. They were delicious, and we ordered four more, and then we watched some boys do somersaults in the sand by the dock. A pair of older couples mimicked them, husbands and wives looking round and unbothered.

Eventually, we bought more tacos from the one-eared woman. She said, Buena suerte a ambos, and I asked Mike what that meant.

He told me that we were lucky charms. Everything we touched turned to gold.

And we walked the food back to our tiny spot in the sand. I fell asleep with Mike's calves on my shoulders.

When I woke up, the beach had cleared out. Windows glowed from houses lining the pier.

I felt around for Mike. He wasn't on the towel. But his trunks were right beside me, and I felt this sort of chill.

That was when he called. He stood in the water, far enough out to float away. He yelled my name, waving his arms, with this big-ass grin on his face, and, when I started to make my way over, he yelled for me to strip.

I looked to see who else was on the beach. Mike told me to stop.

He said that nobody cared.

And, if they did, it didn't matter.

And, sometimes, it helps to think that I was someone who could do that. I could strip buck naked on the beach and sprint through the sand, because I felt that strongly about someone.

•

Three weeks into her stay, Mitsuko tells me that we're going to start with the classics. She's been brighter since she heard from her son, as if Mike had given her a charge—and, that night, she cooks what she tells me is his favorite: potato korokke, crowded beside onions and gravy, surrounded by sliced tomatoes and lettuce. She mashes the potatoes and pork with her fingers, drizzling the mixture with salt and pepper, molding tiny patties and flipping them in flour and egg yolks and panko. From the counter, I watch them crisp, and Mitsuko watches me watch them.

It is the most personal thing she's shared with me so far, and I tell her that.

She looks at me for a while, then says, Don't be stupid.

•

The next morning, before I head to the day care, Mitsuko says she needs a ride downtown. She'd mailed herself ingredients from Japan to the FedEx by the Marriott.

So we pull out of the neighborhood, and past I-45, dodging the never-ending construction on Elgin. As I hook a right at a stoplight under the bridge, a dishevelled guy in a Rockets jersey sips from a paper bag. He's seen better days, but the jersey's brand new. It's got the tags and everything.

He nods our way. I nod back. Then the light changes, and we both turn back to our lives.

Tell me something about my son that I don't know, Mitsuko says.

Well, I say.

But, the thing is, I've got nothing. Mike is irritable.

Short-winded.

He can do this thing with his tongue.

For the first few months, he'd trace shapes across my back in bed.

Whenever I got them right, he'd chew on my shoulder.

Mike knows a little bit of Spanish, I finally say.

That's nice, Mitsuko says.

He has to. For his job.

Also, I say, he's really into food.

Thank you for that, Mitsuko says. Really. You're a wealth of knowledge. An oracle.

But tell me, she says, when did you know you were gay?

I nearly swerve onto the sidewalk. Some loiterers in shades hop away from the curb. Through the rearview mirror I see them flip me off.

Never mind, Mitsuko says.

Sorry, I say, it wasn't you.

Obviously, Mitsuko says.

We resetttle into traffic.

If it helps, she says, I had no idea Mike was that way.

He never told me, Mitsuko says. Or his father. I had friends whose children are gay. Sons who sleep with sons.

Girls who sleep with boys and girls.

But not mine, she says. I didn't see it.

And then one day, she says, I just knew. Before he left home, it clicked. Everything finally made sense.

There was nothing to say after that, Mitsuko says. We both understood.

Cruising into the parking garage, we find a spot just across from the elevator. Once I've settled the car in park, we sit in the darkness.

What kind of guy did you think your son would end up with? I ask.

Is that your real question, Mitsuko says, or are you asking something else?

Are you asking if I thought the man would be Japanese? she says. Or if I care that you're Black?

A white dude emerges from the elevator in front of us, looking extremely distressed. He fumbles with his keys for a second. At the sound of his car alarm, his whole body relaxes.

If you put it that way, I say.

Well, Mitsuko says, I didn't think



# THE FAUCI ON MY SHOULDER



about that. That wasn't my business. Isn't. I'm his mother.

Or are you really asking what I think about you? she says.

Another white guy in a suit unlocks the car beside us. He peeks into my window, frowning above his tie.

I'd tell you, Mitsuko says, but you might drive us into the wall.

I trail Mitsuko as we walk up an escalator, and over a crossway. The staff in the FedEx are mostly women, mostly Black.

They look at Mitsuko. They look at me.

A light-speed calculus blips across their faces.

When we reach the front of the line, I smile as wide as I can. Mitsuko still hasn't taken off her shades. She hands one woman a card and receives an armful of envelopes. When she's asked if she needs a bag, Mitsuko declines.

That's what he's for, she says, nodding at me.

My kind of woman, a lady behind the counter says, chuckling.

On the drive back, I ask Mitsuko what her home in Tokyo's like. She raises an eyebrow.

Quiet, she says.

The next evening, on my way home from work, I've literally just parked by the apartment when my cell rings.

Ben, Mike says.

Godfuckingdammit, I say.

It's been a minute, Mike says.

I agree that it has. Just over a month.

One of our Black neighbors is sitting on the porch. She's rocking in her chair, watching the street lights flicker. The block's quiet, for once, and the mosquitoes are out, and the woman swats her elbows from time to time.

Well, I say to Mike.

How are things? I ask. Are you at your father's?

I am, Mike says. Or, we were. We're out now. Took a little trip.

He's not doing well, Mike says.

I'm sorry, I say.

And instead of Mike's usual You Didn't Do It, or his You Don't Have to Say That, he just says, Thank you.

That's when I understand.

But how's my mother? Mike asks.

Just lovely, I say. Still adjusting to our shared proximity.

That's what she told me.

Go figure.

But it's a compliment, Mike says. Could be worse. Ma says you've been cooking.

We play house together, yes.

I can't even imagine it.

Just because the neighborhood's snoring, that doesn't mean it's asleep. There's a house party going on a few doors down. Some white girls trample onto the lawn, laughing, with red Solo cups. They glance back at the door, and one of them covers her mouth, and her friend latches on to her shoulders.

Hey, I say, when are you coming home?

Scattered voices slip through the phone, and also the sound of motion. For Mike, it's midday.

That's the question, isn't it, Mike says.

It is.

Mike asks if I want him to come back, and I don't say a word. We're both silent. Both holding the line.

I owe him a lot, Mike says.

Not everything, he says. But I think I should see him through this, you know?

I know, I say.

So when he's gone, Mike says, I'll come back.

When he's gone, I say, you'll come back.

The white girls stumble into the grass, laughing all over each other. The street lights keep flickering. A chill settles in. And our neighbor, as if snapping out of a reverie, smiles and waves my way, putting her whole shoulder into it.

And you, Mike says. How are you doing?

The other day I saw a pigeon fly away with some cash, I say.

Go figure. It's probably for booze.

You think so?

Duh, Mike says. Don't overthink it. I shut the door behind me as quietly

as I can, but Mitsuko's already asleep on the sofa.

There's a bowl of rice on the counter, covered with a paper towel. It's still a little warm.

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Another week passes.

And another week after that.

And then, nearly two months in, it's astounding how little Mitsuko and I have talked about her son. When I tell her this, she shakes her head.

What is there to discuss? she says. What could you possibly tell me? I asked you once already and you gave me nothing.

He came out of my body, Mitsuko says. He's a homosexual. He left his mother with a stranger. I've already got everything I need to know.

She's sitting at the table, scrolling through her tablet. I'm in the kitchen, leaning over the stove.

I don't know, I say.

Exactly, Mitsuko says. You don't. So don't worry about it.

Maybe you could tell me a story, I say, and Mitsuko actually laughs.

A story is an heirloom, she says. It's a personal thing.

O.K., I say.

You don't ask for heirlooms. They're just given to you.

O.K., O.K.

Check the rice, Mitsuko says.

I figure she's just cutting me off, but then I look at the stove and it's bubbling.

•

One afternoon, I watch Mitsuko crack an egg in her palm. I think it's a fluke, but then she does it again.

Wait, I say. Wait!

What? Mitsuko says.

How did you do that?

Do what?

Mitsuko gives me this look like she's entirely exasperated. But then she does it again, executing the cleanest of breaks.

•

A little later, I text Mike, thinking he'll just be starting his day, after Mitsuko and I finish an elaborate collaboration: udon cooked in a hot pot, beside aburage and kamaboko and spinach and two chicken legs.

When Mitsuko cracks an egg into the pot and tastes a spoonful, she actually doesn't grimace.

It's edible, she says.

Really?

Really.

Once we've brought everything below a simmer, I take some photos. All of them are blurry. But when I send them to Mike he responds immediately.

Nice! he says.

Mike has never, not once, used an exclamation point in our correspondence. Ever. He's not one of those people.

I ask if he's all right.

The next message he sends takes a little longer to arrive.

No, he says.

No?

It's happening, he says.

And I stare at the phone. I don't need to be told that there's nothing I can say to make it better. Mike went to find his dying father, and now his father is dying.

That sucks, I say.

Thank you, Mike says.

For what?

And, after a pause, Mike writes: For not apologizing.

And then, immediately: I'll call soon.

Everything will be OK, he says.

I promise, he says, and that's what I take to sleep with me.

•

Mike's never promised me anything. Only delivered or didn't. He always said that promises were only words, and words meant only what you made them mean.

•

It's just past midnight when I hear rustling.

I slip on basketball shorts, some sandals, and dip into the living room. Mitsuko's sliding into a jacket and her pair of graying sneakers. She gives me a look when I cough in the hallway.

You can come, she says, but keep your mouth shut.

We walk to the next street over, and then a few blocks more. The air is mild for Houston. A little too crisp for February. Plodding behind Mitsuko on the sidewalk, I wonder what we look like to anyone watching from a window.

Eventually, we stop in front of a church. Something Something Methodist. I look at Mitsuko, and then at the signage, and she waves me over to the door.

There's a light on by the pulpit, but otherwise the place is empty. The aisles are cleared. The seats are clean. The church's windows are stained with various highlights from the Old Testament.

When we reach the pulpit, Mitsuko takes to her knees.

I feel ridiculous standing behind her, so I settle next to her.

We stay like that for a while. Mitsuko mutters gently, quietly, in Japanese. Her hands are clasped. Her head is bowed. At one point, I hear Mike's name, and then once again, but that's all I get.

It's been at least a decade since I stepped into a church. I'd been baptized, as a teen, because my mother had insisted. The pastor dunked me in the water and everything. Afterward, I came out soaking, feeling brand new, like money, and I ate a wafer and drank some wine and never went back again.

I wonder how long Mitsuko's been doing this.

I wonder if it's even legal. If we're trespassing somehow.

But when Mitsuko's finished she nods toward the choir pews, at no one at all. Then she stands up beside me, steadying herself on my shoulder.

Hurry up, she says. We're leaving.

Back in the apartment, I pour us both a glass of water. Mitsuko doesn't thank me, but she takes it.

In case you're wondering, she says, that's what it's come to. It's absurd.

I don't think it's absurd, I say.

It's absurd, Mitsuko says.

We do what we can, I say.

With that, Mitsuko looks me in the eyes. It feels like only the second time she's done that since I've known her. And then briefly, nearly imperceptibly, she gives me a nod.

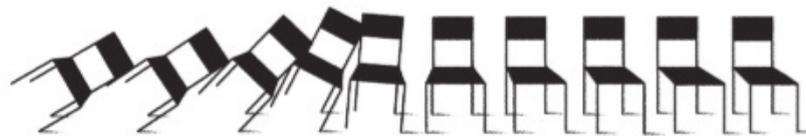
But the moment doesn't last. I watch her drink the water. That's all she has to say. So I take my glass back to the bedroom, draining the rest on the way. ♦

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NEWYORKER.COM

The author on "lowercase love stories."

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## YOUR BODY IS A WONDERLAND

*A new science of skin is rethinking the meaning of “clean.”*

BY BROOKE JARVIS

When my sister and I were young, we liked to come home from school and turn on “Guiding Light,” a soap opera on CBS. We only ever caught the last fifteen minutes of the hour-long show, but, because it wasn’t particularly subtle, this was plenty of time to follow even its most involved plotlines—such as when Reva Shayne, a nine-times-married character who had arcs as a talk-show host, a psychic, the princess of a fictional island, and a time traveller to the Civil War and Nazi Germany, had to fight Dolly, a devious clone that her most recent husband had made of her in order to spare her children from grief during the most recent of her presumed deaths.

“Guiding Light” began, in 1937, as a radio show to promote a soap called Duz. (“Duz does everything.”) When it went off the air, in 2009, it was the longest-running show in broadcast history. It was owned, until the end, not by CBS but by Procter & Gamble, which began as a soap company and has been credited with inventing modern advertising in America. In addition to promoting its brands with paintings on trolley cars and billboards, the company developed more than twenty radio and television dramas. The first, “Oxydol’s Own Ma Perkins,” premiered in 1933; the last, “As The World Turns,” left the airwaves in 2010, by which time the term “soap opera” had become freestanding. You could even watch them, as I did, without ever knowing they had anything to do with a soap company.

It was easy, until the COVID-19 outbreak, not to think very often or very deeply about soap. Early in the pan-

demic, this began to change. We learned which pop songs had choruses that we could sing to keep us scrubbing for a full twenty seconds; we learned that, at least during the pre-lockdown period, the lines outside men’s rooms grew suddenly longer—likely because (according to one study) only thirty-one per cent of men had previously been in the habit of washing their hands after using the bathroom. As distilleries and breweries pivoted to producing hand sanitizer, the *Times* ran a piece explaining why old-fashioned soap was actually better at destroying the coronavirus: the hydrophobic tails of soap molecules bond with the lipid membrane that protects the virus, literally ripping it apart, while their hydrophilic heads bond with the water that washes the dead virus away. Like many people, I developed a new appreciation for soap, imagining with grim satisfaction a scene of microscopic destruction each time I scrubbed my hands.

So this has been a strange time to be reading a book by a medical doctor which takes a critical view of the soap industry and begins with the sentence “Five years ago, I stopped showering.”

Let me clarify at once that James Hamblin, a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of “Clean: The New Science of Skin” (Riverhead), is still an advocate of regular handwashing, indisputably a world-changing innovation in public health, and of especially crucial importance at this moment in history. (Hamblin also writes that he “would never wear a white coat two days in a row without cleaning it.”) But he’s doubtful about all the scrubbing and

soaping—not to mention moisturizing and deodorizing and serum-and-acid application—to which we subject the rest of our body’s largest organ, and about the companies that spend a lot of money to convince us that we must do so to be clean.

Soap is an ancient invention, so old that we can only assume it was the lucky result of animal fat spilling into fire ash and some people being alert enough to notice the cleaning power of the resulting lather. Still, early versions, made with lye, could burn skin, and were used more often for laundry than for people. Bathing more commonly involved water, sand, pumice, scrapers, and oils or perfumes—though in certain places the whole notion was seen as dangerous. Some historical records suggest that washing was comparatively rare in the Western world: Marco Polo wrote of his surprise at how frequently people in India and China bathed, and Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who travelled from the court of Baghdad to the Volga River in the early tenth century, wrote that the people he met on his journey did not wash after eating, shitting, peeing, or having sex, and were “the filthiest of Allah’s creatures.” The French historian Jules Michelet described the European Middle Ages as “a thousand years without a bath.”

In America, soap made for skin became commonly sold only in the nineteenth century, largely as a way to make money from the leftovers of the meat-packing industry, which produced large quantities of unused animal fat. Entrepreneurs added potash and made soap, for which they then needed to create public demand. These early “soapers”

ABOVE: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ



*Skin, long seen as a barrier that should be sterile and pristine, is increasingly seen as a “complex, diverse ecosystem.”*

included William Procter and James Gamble, who began working together after marrying a pair of sisters; another familial pair, whose company name eventually changed from Lever Brothers to Unilever; and a man named William Wrigley, Jr., who gave away chewing gum as a promotion for his soap, but found that the gum was in higher demand.

Last year, the beauty-and-personal-care market in the U.S. was valued at nearly a hundred billion dollars, which makes it hard to imagine a time when people had to be persuaded to use soap. But the soap industry, Hamblin argues, serves as an effective introduction to the history of American marketing. Early soap companies pioneered many techniques that we still see today: a single company owning lots of competing brands with nearly identical products, in order to foster feelings of consumer choice and loyalty; the use of “sponsored content,” such as the soap operas or Procter & Gamble’s “How to Bring Up a Baby,” which was part health pamphlet and part advertisement. The ad campaigns created a sense of lurking danger in the competition by claiming that their own products were safer and purer, or they promoted, as product virtues, obscure, jargony terms (“triple milled”) that consumers assumed to be important simply because they were touted on a package. The companies leaned, not at all subtly, on racism and classism to sell their products. They even used people who would now be called influencers, such as the film stars who appeared in “9 out of 10 screen stars use Lux Toilet Soap” ads. “Lever never even paid them,” Hamblin writes, “and the practice being so new, the stars apparently didn’t think to ask.”

The other innovation was to create, and then meet, needs that people didn’t know they had. Hamblin notes that “B.O.” began as a marketing term, and that many soaps advertised as “antimicrobial” and “antibacterial” were less safe than standard soap, leaving behind dangerous compounds. (Many products that we now think of as soaps are actually detergents, made from synthetic compounds.)

Meanwhile, soap companies, in order to expand their product lines, “had to sell the idea that soap was insufficient on its own—or that its effects had to be undone by yet more products,” Hamblin writes. You needed separate soaps

for your hair, your body, your face, and even for different members of a family. (Albert Einstein, asked why he didn’t use shaving cream, then newly invented, is reported to have replied, “Two soaps? That is too complicated!”) To offset the drying effects of soap, you then needed other products—conditioners, moisturizers, toners. Hamblin identifies the 1957 introduction of Dove, whose cleaning power is reduced because it’s mixed with moisturizer, as the moment when the industry started moving toward selling a product that would do nothing at all.

Hamblin’s decision to stop showering—he occasionally rinses—began as an experiment, as he started to question what he’d assumed to be the essentials of his life. He sold his car, cancelled his Internet, and, until his girlfriend objected, considered living in a van. But it also reflected a new understanding of how our skin functions: as a living, permeable “dynamic interface” that connects us to the world around us—“a complex, diverse ecosystem” rather than a barrier that should be sterile and pristine. Soap, he reasoned, washes away not only natural oils but also many of the microorganisms that make our skin their home, disrupting the natural balance they might otherwise achieve.

Hamblin embarks on a rather disjointed and sometimes unsatisfying series of adventures meant to question what it means to be clean. He visits the Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps factory, gets a fancy facial, and attends the opening of a Glossier store and various product expos. One salesperson pours soap for men into shot glasses from what looks like a whiskey bottle; another tries to sell him a “fountain of youth stem cell moisturizer,” in which the stem cells come from pumpkins. In an effort to show how laxly we regulate the ingredients in cosmetics—fifteen hundred chemicals are banned or restricted in personal-care products in the E.U., compared with only eleven in the United States—he starts his own skin-care company. It’s called Brunson + Sterling (the motto: “Menscare for Fucking Perfect Skin”) and offers a mix of random ingredients in two-ounce bottles for two hundred dollars each. The product doesn’t sell, but it is legal.

Most interestingly, Hamblin meets people who take a very different view of what skin care means. One woman afflicted with acne tried everything from scrubbing to antibiotics, Accutane, and hormonal birth control. (Caused in part by *Cutibacterium acnes*, acne is one of the most common reasons for antibiotic prescriptions.) Things only got worse, until she gave up, stopped doing anything, and found her skin clearing. Sandy Skotnicki, a Canadian dermatologist, spends her winters begging itchy men to stop using shower gel and wonders if the twinned increases in over-washing and in eczema are more than just correlation. (Because Skotnicki’s patients want to be prescribed *something*, Hamblin writes, she “has found a way to turn something into nothing,” by advocating regimented cleanses—by which she just means breaks from cleansing products.) Some scientists find that symptoms of eczema—which often involve an overabundance of *Staphylococcus aureus*—can be treated with the application of a different bacteria.

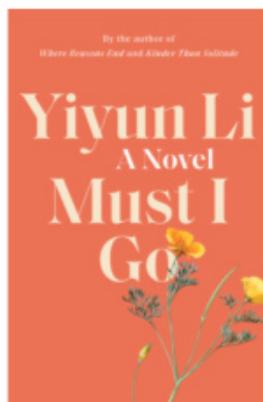
Hamblin interviews experts in immunology and microbiology who worry that, for some of us, humanity’s longstanding problem with hygiene has now reversed itself: instead of too little, we may have too much of it. These experts want us to think of hygiene more expansively—as a matter of health and balance, rather than one of sterility and purity. With all our soaps and sanitizers and antibiotics, in addition to so much time spent inside, away from dirt and animals and fresh air, we’ve created new problems for our immune systems, which miss out on the chance to encounter benign triggers and instead learn to overreact to perceived threats. Excess hygiene can also be a problem for the skin’s microbiome, which has an ecology that we’re just beginning to understand. Mark Holbreich, an allergist in Indiana, found that the Amish have notably low levels of allergies, eczema, and other skin problems, even when compared to genetically and culturally related groups, including Hutterites in South Dakota, whose children are generally raised farther from their farms. Julie Segre, who published the first maps of the bacterial and fungal diversity of human skin, notes that the recent fascination with probiotics in food doesn’t seem to have affected our think-

ing about skin health: “Everyone wants to eat Activia yogurt and colonize themselves with bacteria, and then they want to use Purell.” And Jack Gilbert, a microbiologist, greets Hamblin with a non-standard hello: “So, I shower. I do shower, though I know the implications of it. Not every day, and I don’t tend to use a lot of soap when I do.”

Medical textbooks are commonly illustrated with what are known as *écorché* figures—human anatomies of the type sketched by Leonardo da Vinci, their skin removed to better show the muscle and bone beneath. Monty Lyman, a dermatologist, believes that this reveals a failure of the medical establishment: regularly overlooking the medical importance of the skin, which serves as both wall and window between us humans and the outside world. He knows specialists in more glamorous fields who scoff at dermatology. (A surgeon friend tells him, grotesquely, that “the skin is the wrapping paper that covers the presents.”) In “The Remarkable Life of the Skin” (Atlantic Monthly Press), Lyman’s goal is to push back: to teach readers to appreciate an organ that is often “invisible in plain sight.”

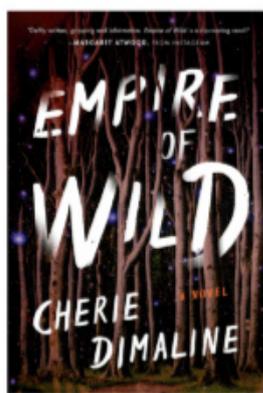
Skin is a strange little miracle. Were it removed, you would quickly lose the water in your body and die of dehydration. It protects you from deadly radiation and pathogens and helps you stay within the narrow temperature spectrum your body can tolerate, yet it is, at its thinnest, half the width of a penny. And the cells with which it faces the world are already effectively dead, and will, in general, last no longer than a month—a million or so are shed each day, filling your house with dust. As these skin cells are lost, they are replaced with new ones, taking their own self-sacrificial turn at the barricades to protect the trillions of other cells of which you are made. “Never was so much owed by so many to so few,” Lyman writes.

As is often true in medicine, the importance of skin is made most clear when its workings go awry. Lyman tells us about pellagra, a painful rash that was widespread in South Carolina in the early twentieth century, leading to “unstoppable diarrhea” and eventually psychosis, until it was finally cured by the introduction of a balanced diet; it is the

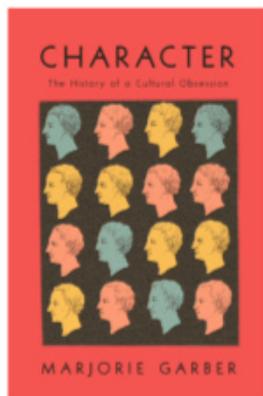


## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Must I Go**, by Yiyun Li (Random House). Lilia, a woman in a retirement home who believes that she lacks a “porous heart,” recalls a love affair with a man whose posthumous journals have recently been published. She never told him that he was the father of her first child, Lucy, who killed herself. When the home offers a memoir-writing class, Lilia, reflexively cynical about her fellow-residents, is scornful, but she independently starts work on a personal history for Lucy’s daughter, Katherine, her favorite grandchild. The account suggests the places where Lilia’s hardness readily cedes to something tender. “People will say all sorts of things about those who’ve committed suicide,” she writes. “But, Katherine, your mom was a brave woman.”



**Empire of Wild**, by Cherie Dimaline (William Morrow). In the small Ontario town where this novel is set, indigenous inhabitants are constantly pressured to sell their ancestral lands for natural-resource development, as the *rougarou*, a mythical beast of folk legend—part man, part dog, part wolf—stalks the streets. Joan, the book’s sharp narrator, whose family has lived there for generations, suspects the *rougarou*’s dangerous influence when, eleven months after her husband disappears, she finds him preaching in a revival tent and unable to recognize her. As she struggles to reclaim him, she follows the revivalists through mining and indigenous communities in Canada, unknowingly tracing the path of a proposed oil pipeline, which is connected in strange, dark ways to her husband’s story.



**Character**, by Marjorie Garber (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This wide-ranging history of our “cultural obsession” with character as a moral quality notes how often public figures are denounced for not possessing it. But what, exactly, does it mean to say that a politician, for example, has “failed the character test”? Drawing on ancient philosophy, Victorian educational tracts, Shakespeare’s plays, and Freud, Garber shows how slippery the concept can be. Is character fixed and intrinsic, she asks, or is it capable of being “formed,” as the Victorians believed? Answers remain elusive in this thought-provoking work, but, as Garber writes, one thing about character becomes clear: “We may not agree on what it is, but we know when it is lacking.”



**The Vapors**, by David Hill (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Hot Springs, Arkansas, was once a casino hub that rivalled Las Vegas, despite a state law criminalizing gambling. As this history shows, from 1870 until 1967 businessmen openly disregarded the law, with the connivance of the police and lawmakers. The narrative focusses on three figures: a New York gangster who consolidated the city’s gambling industry; his protégé, a local boy who becomes gambling boss; and the author’s grandmother, an impoverished pill addict. Bribes, kickbacks, campaign contributions, ballot stuffing, and intimidation steered the profit to those in power, but the casinos also enjoyed genuine popular support, something that leads Hill to a consideration of what makes an enterprise legitimate.

reason that packaged bread now includes niacin. We're introduced to children with xeroderma pigmentosum, a genetic condition that sabotages the natural repair system that searches for U.V. damage to DNA; they are sometimes known as "midnight children," because of their need to avoid the sun, and develop skin cancer at horrifying rates. In epidermolysis bullosa, another genetic condition, no proteins connect the epidermis to the dermis, which means skin can be ripped off by "a shearing force as light as twisting a door handle." A young patient with the condition, Hassan, had barely any skin remaining when he received a pioneering treatment: doctors harvested some of his skin cells, exposed them to a virus that carried a healthy version of the mutated gene, then used them to grow nine square feet of new skin in a lab, which they successfully grafted onto Hassan's body.

While Hamblin focusses on cleanliness, Lyman attempts a comprehensive look at skin, speeding through sections on touch, pain, the history of tattoos, the science of melanin, how different religions view nudity, and how our skin's exposure to the sun affects our broader health. (Did you know that dogs and cats, perhaps because their fur blocks their skin's ability to absorb sunlight and produce Vitamin D, secrete an oil that converts to Vitamin D when exposed to sunlight? It then has to be ingested orally, which is one reason that pets are always licking themselves.) The sun can affect the aging of skin even more profoundly than time itself does, Lyman notes. He writes about working in a clinic and wrongly assuming that a sixty-something woman was the daughter, rather than the mother, of a fortysomething, sun-worshipping patient.

Though he takes readers on a tour of fad skin treatments, from the "vampire facials" once favored by Kim Kardashian to Cleopatra's daily bath in donkey milk, his only fully endorsed beauty treatments are sun protection, a healthy diet, and the avoidance of smoking, excessive drinking, and long-term stress. "It is no surprise that the 2008 financial crisis saw a record peak in psoriasis and eczema consultations," Lyman writes. Disorders such as celiac disease, Crohn's disease, rosacea, and eczema—all of which involve the skin, the immune sys-

tem, and the gut—reveal just how intertwined these systems are. Eczema, for example, is a predictor of whether an infant will develop food allergies, and acne has been found to increase when a person's diet becomes Westernized.

Skin care, whose market value grew by some twenty billion dollars between 2014 and 2019, has become the most profitable sector of the cosmetics industry. Products can be wildly expensive, especially when combined with others into elaborate regimens. But the science of skin health, as described by Hamblin and Lyman, suggests that we err when we think of skin as static or as separate, to be ministered to by surface applications of various cleansers and moisturizers, goops and goos. (Hamblin scoffs at the idea of trying to promote skin's internal collagen production by rubbing on, or ingesting, collagen: "It's like if you needed new tires and you put rubber in your gas tank.") Skin is, literally, an ecosystem, in constant connection with the health of the rest of our body, as well as with the world beyond.

In a chapter called "Skin Safari," Lyman gives a tour of the denizens of our skin. They range from the microscopic mites that wander around our faces at night, copulating, to the highly stable communities of microorganisms that live on the different regions of our bodies, each with its own unique environmental conditions. "At first glance, our skin looks like a bare, inhospitable landscape," Lyman writes. In fact, for critters that are small enough, it's full of ridges and canyons and deserts and swamps: "Habitats filled with wildlife worthy of a nature documentary." These habitats are affected, in turn, by our own environmental conditions. In one study, scientists could tell, just by examining people's skin microbiome, what city they lived in and with whom they cohabitated.

If reading this makes you want to use more soap, not less, I can certainly relate. (It probably won't help to learn that all those tiny face mites, because they have no anuses, eventually die from the backup of all the skin and oil they have consumed on your face.) But bear in mind that the skin microbiome has always been with us, and includes at least as many microorganisms as you have cells in your entire body—maybe

three times as many. It is you, in a very real way, and it serves purposes we're only beginning to understand. For example, microbes called archaea, discovered on skin in 2017, may be caretakers of our skin, helping it turn over nitrogen and keep pathogens at bay; smelly microbes on our feet may discourage fungal infections; and even those face mites could be thought of as natural exfoliants. One person's skin is home to "a thousand species of bacterium, not to mention fungi, viruses, and mites," Lyman writes—a diversity of characters and story lines that would put any soap opera to shame, and that have real outcomes for our health and our well-being. He tells of a smelly person who, after being swabbed with microbes taken from the armpits of his sweet-smelling twin, stopped stinking, and another who used dietary changes to combat a socially crippling genetic condition known, evocatively, as "fish-odor syndrome." Lyman expects that science will soon be able to alter our unique microbial selves in ways that are far more sophisticated than using, or giving up, soap: "Manipulating and adjusting these populations has the potential to revolutionize medicine."

Hamblin, too, learns that soap is a small player compared with other things that affect the microbiome: use of antibiotics, say, or the early life experiences that affect its initial development. Rethinking soap, he decides, may be most important as a symbol of the way that we think about cleanliness: Is it a war or a balancing act? He concludes his book with an ode to public parks as a key part of urban hygiene, wishing that we spent more of the money that we've shelled out for soaps and skin care on improving our own habitats—both those that we live in and those that we are. "As we change our worlds, we change our bodies," he writes. "The old duality between environmental health and human health is obsolete."

Still, he decides that his personal experiment is a success. After a period of transition, which his microbial populations presumably spent getting themselves reorganized, the girlfriend who rejected the van idea embraces the non-showering. She declares that Hamblin smells neither good nor bad, exactly, but "like a person." ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

## SLOPPY JOE

*Senator Joseph McCarthy and the force of political falsehoods.*

BY LOUIS MENAND

*The witch hunt McCarthy is identified with was at its worst before he got started.*

At the start of 1950, Joseph McCarthy's political future did not look promising. McCarthy had been elected senator from Wisconsin in 1946, after switching his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican and running as a decorated Marine veteran with the nickname Tail Gunner Joe. Even then, he had a reputation as a scofflaw. He had exaggerated his war record. He first ran for Senate (and lost) while he was still in uniform, which was against Army regulations, and he ran his second Senate campaign while he was a sitting judge, a violation of his oath. Questions had been raised about whether he had dodged his taxes and where his campaign funds had come from.

When McCarthy got to Washington, he became known as a tool of business interests, accepting a loan from Pepsi-Cola in exchange for working to

end sugar rationing (he paid it back), and money from a construction company in exchange for opposing funding for public housing (which he eventually voted for). He plainly had no ethical or ideological compass, and most of his colleagues regarded him as a troublemaker, a loudmouth, and a fellow entirely lacking in senatorial politesse.

So when, in 1950, Lincoln's birthday came around, a time of year when the Republican Party traditionally sent its elected officials out to speak at fund-raisers around the country, McCarthy was assigned to venues where it was clearly hoped that he would attract little notice. His first stop was the Ohio County Republican Women's Club, in Wheeling, West Virginia, then a diehard Democratic state.

McCarthy didn't know what he was going to talk about (he never planned

very far ahead), so he brought notes for a couple of speeches: one about housing for veterans, and one, consisting mostly of clippings cobbled together by a speechwriter, about Communists in the government. McCarthy had seemingly had very little to do with that second speech, but he decided to go with it.

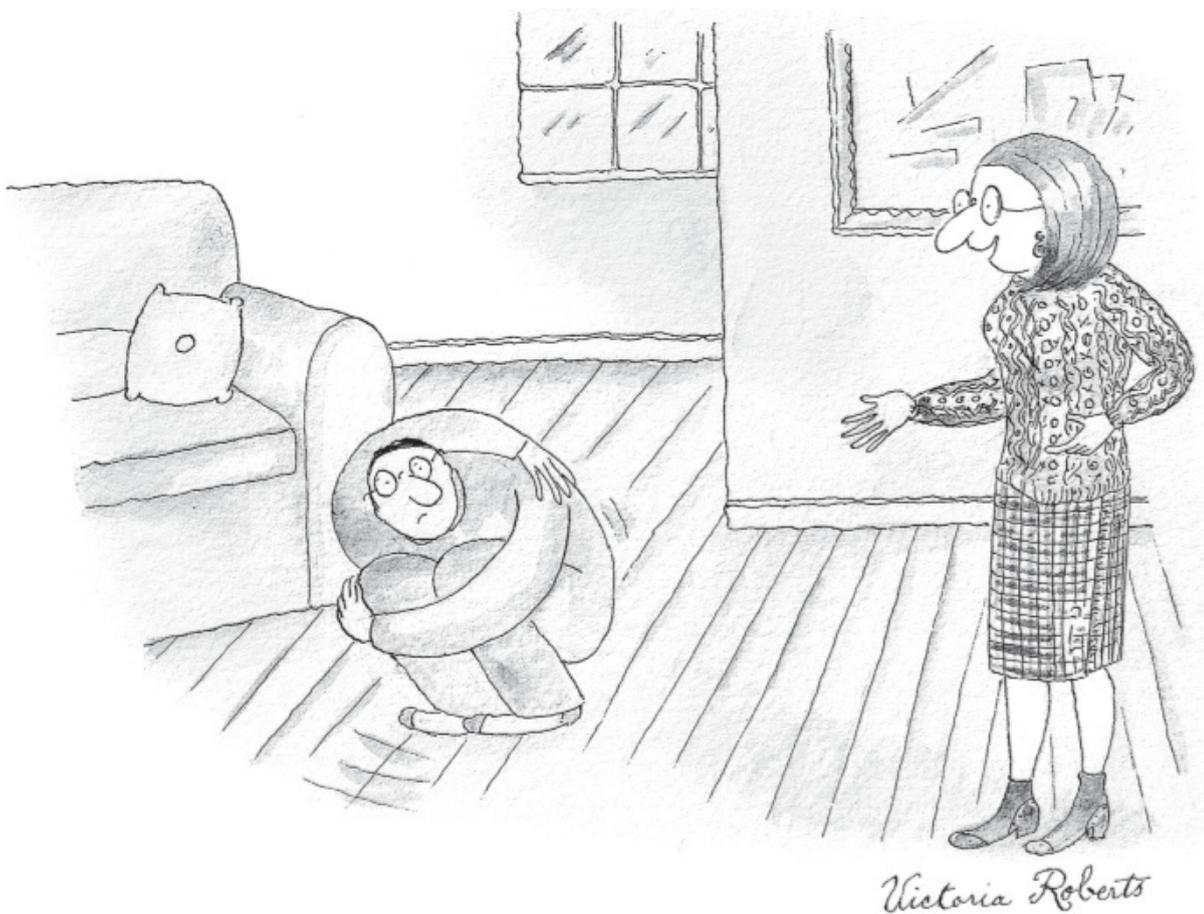
It is not known exactly what McCarthy said in Wheeling, and he later claimed that he couldn't find his copy of the speech. But a local paper reported him as having waved a piece of paper on which, he said, were the names of two hundred and five Communists working in the State Department. The story was picked up by the Associated Press, and soon it was everywhere.

McCarthy had, in fact, no such list. He did not have even a single name. He may have calculated that a dinner speech at a women's club in West Virginia was a safe place to try out the "I have in my hand" gimmick, and, somewhat to his surprise, it worked. In subsequent appearances on his Lincoln's-birthday circuit, he gave the same speech, though the numbers changed. In Reno, the list had fifty-seven names. It didn't matter. He had grabbed the headlines, and that was all he cared about. He would dominate them for the next four and a half years. Wheeling was McCarthy's Trump Tower escalator. He tossed a match and started a bonfire.

Larry Tye's purpose in his new biography, "Demagogue: The Life and Long Shadow of Senator Joe McCarthy" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), is to make the case that Donald Trump is a twenty-first-century Joe McCarthy. Tye draws on some fresh sources, including McCarthy's papers, which are deposited at Marquette, his alma mater, and unpublished memoirs by McCarthy's wife, Jean, and his longtime aide James Juliana, who served as his chief investigator.

Tye also quotes from transcripts of the executive sessions (that is, hearings closed to the public) of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Government Operations Committee, which McCarthy essentially hijacked in 1953 and put to the business of exposing Communists in the government.

Tye describes these transcripts—almost nine thousand pages—as "recently



Victoria Roberts

“‘The armadillo’ is not a yoga pose, Ethan.”

unveiled . . . and never before closely examined.” This is a little misleading. The transcripts were released in 2003, and they have been quoted from extensively, notably by Ted Morgan, in “Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America.”

But they are important. The other senators on McCarthy’s subcommittee stopped attending the hearings, since McCarthy dominated everything, and so it became his personal star chamber. He could subpoena anyone (Tye says he called five hundred and forty-six witnesses in the year and a half he ran the show), and was answerable to no one. These transcripts give us McCarthy unbound. As for Tye’s McCarthy-Trump comparison? He more than makes the case. The likeness is uncanny.

McCarthy was a bomb-thrower—and, in a sense, that is all he was. He would make an outrageous charge, almost always with little or no evidentiary basis, and then he would surf the aftershocks. When these subsided, he threw another bomb. He knew that every time he did it reporters had two options. They could present what he said neutrally, or they could contest its veracity. He cared little which they did, nor did he care that, in his entire ca-

reer as a Communist-hunter, he never sent a single “subversive” to jail. What mattered was that he was controlling the conversation.

McCarthy had the support of a media conglomerate, the Hearst papers, which amplified everything he said, and he had cheerleaders in the commentariat, such as the columnists Westbrook Pegler and Walter Winchell, both of whom reached millions of readers in a time when relatively few households (in 1952, about a third) had a television set. He tried to block a hostile newspaper, the *Milwaukee Journal*, from his press conferences, and he egged on the crowds at his rallies to harass the reporters.

Right from the start, McCarthy had prominent critics. But almost the entire political establishment was afraid of him. You could fight him, in which case he just made your life harder, or you could ignore him, in which case he rolled right over you. He verbally abused people who disagreed with him. He also had easy access to money, much of it from Texas oilmen, which he used to help unseat politicians who crossed him.

To his supporters, he could say and do no wrong. Tye quotes the pollster George Gallup, in 1954: “Even if it were known that McCarthy had killed five

innocent children, they would probably still go along with him.” His fans liked that he was a bully, and they liked that he scandalized the genteel and the privileged.

McCarthy forced government agencies, by the constant threat of investigations, to second-guess appointments, and to fire people he had smeared just because he had smeared them. He didn’t need to prove anything, and he almost never did, because it didn’t matter. Your name in McCarthy’s mouth was the kiss of death. He was a destroyer of careers.

To call McCarthy a conspiracy theorist is giving him too much credit. He was more like a conspiracy-monger. He had one pitch, which he trotted out on all occasions. It was that American governmental and educational institutions had been infiltrated by a secret network of Communists and Communist sympathizers, and that these people were letting Stalin and Mao have their way in Europe and Asia, and were working to turn the United States into a Communist dictatorship.

What distinguished McCarthy’s claims was their outlandishness. He didn’t attack people for being soft on Communism, or for pushing policies, like public housing, that were un-American or socialistic. That is what ordinary politicians like Richard Nixon did. McCarthy accused people of being agents of a Communist conspiracy. In 1951, he claimed that George Marshall, the Secretary of Defense, the former Secretary of State, and the author of the Marshall Plan, had been, throughout his career, “always and invariably serving the world policy of the Kremlin.” Marshall, he said, sat at the center of “a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men.”

Even Republicans were aghast. Marshall was almost universally regarded as a selfless public servant and a model of personal probity. The leader of the Party’s conservative wing, Robert Taft, expressed regret that McCarthy had overstated his case. But that was about as far as most Republicans had the nerve to go. Nothing came of McCarthy’s at-

tack. For McCarthy, though, the important thing was that he had said something that was manifestly preposterous and had got away with it. He must have realized that he could get away with anything.

McCarthy lied all the time. He lied even when he didn't need to lie, as Tye thinks is the case with the war record. When he didn't have any facts to embellish, he made them up. He found that, if he just kept on repeating himself, people would figure that he must be onto something.

He was incapable of sticking to a script. He rambled and he blustered, and if things weren't going his way he left the room. He was notoriously lazy, ignorant, and unprepared, and he had a reputation for following the advice of the last person he talked to. But he trusted his instincts. And he loved chaos. He knew that he had a much higher tolerance for it than most human beings do, and he used it to confuse, to distract, and to disrupt.

At the end, when he was about to be condemned by the Senate for his behavior toward his colleagues, he was invited to sign letters of apology that would probably have got him off the hook. He refused, and is supposed to have thrown the pen across the room. He was like the Don in Mozart's opera: he preferred eternal damnation to admitting that he had ever been wrong.

Like many bamboozlers who succeed by preying on the earnest and the credulous, McCarthy was easily bamboozled. He often tied witnesses who had little to hide in knots, but the actual spies who testified (and there were one or two) completely fooled him. He hired rashly, and he valued loyalty over ability. He was also loyal to those he believed were loyal to him—and that, ironically, turned out to be his undoing.

I don't want this to be taken the wrong way, but, to a certain extent, McCarthy is a scapegoat. His excesses and his political vulgarity have made him a convenient symbol of Cold War anti-Communism—its ideological intolerance, its disregard for civil liberties, its exaggerated warnings about Communist infiltration and expansion. But McCarthy was responsible for none of those things. The work he is credited with

doing—purging the government of spies and “security risks,” typically people suspected of Communist sympathies—had already been done before he got up to speak in Wheeling.

This is the main reason (along with his general disorderliness) that no one McCarthy investigated was ever convicted of anything. There were almost no Communists left to fire or spies left to convict. McCarthy can be blamed for continuing the official practice of witch-hunting long past the point it made any sense, but he cannot be blamed for creating it. The blame for that rests with a man who hated McCarthy, Harry Truman.

After the war ended, in 1945, it was not immediately clear what our future relations with the Soviet Union would be. But, by early 1947, many in the American government had concluded that the Soviet Union was a hostile power, and that Communist parties in Western Europe were threats to democracy there.

On March 12th, in a speech before a joint session of Congress, Truman relieved the situation of any remaining ambiguity. He announced that it was the policy of the United States “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” “Armed minorities” meant Communist insurgents, and “outside pressures” meant the Kremlin. The policy was quickly named the Truman Doctrine. That speech was the start of the Cold War.

Nine days later, Truman signed an executive order establishing the Federal



Employee Loyalty Program, which tasked the F.B.I. and other agencies with undertaking investigations of government employees suspected of disloyalty—specifically, anyone with “membership in, affiliation with or sympathetic association with any foreign or domestic organization, association, movement, group, or combination of persons, des-

ignated by the Attorney General as totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive.” According to the Columbia scholar Ira Katznelson, between 1947 and 1953, 4,765,705 federal employees had to fill out forms initiating loyalty investigations. Of these employees, 26,236 were referred for further scrutiny, and five hundred and sixty were fired or not hired. Homosexuals were targeted as security risks (being vulnerable to blackmail) or as generally undesirable. There were no anti-discrimination laws to protect them. They were simply fired.

At the same time, Congress began its own loyalty investigations. Hearings on Communists in Hollywood, conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), began in October, 1947, and resulted in the convictions for contempt of Congress of the so-called Hollywood Ten, all of whom served prison terms. The following July, Elizabeth Bentley, a former member of the American Communist Party (C.P.U.S.A.), gave HUAC the names of American spies, among them Harry Dexter White, formerly a senior official in the Treasury Department.

A month later, another ex-Communist, Whittaker Chambers, gave testimony that led to the most spectacular unmasking of the anti-Communist crusade, that of the former high-level State Department official Alger Hiss. Hiss was convicted of perjury in January, 1950, and sent to prison. The same month, an atomic spy ring was busted when the physicist Klaus Fuchs confessed to being a member. His confession would lead, in 1951, to the conviction of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, for espionage, and, in 1953, to their execution.

There were spies to be caught. The historians John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, who have examined documents from K.G.B. files and from the Venona project—in which the U.S. government intercepted coded messages from Soviet intelligence agencies—say that more than five hundred Americans gave intelligence to the Soviets.

Rooting out spies and informants was therefore a perfectly sensible policy, and that part did not take long. The problem was that the process didn't stop there. It was allowed to sweep up people who had only a notional connection to national security, like high-school

teachers and Hollywood screenwriters. It licensed anti-Communist groups of all types—official (government agencies), quasi-official (educational and ecclesiastical authorities), and pseudo-official (editorialists and ad-hoc organizations)—to pursue their own investigations. And it constantly redefined what made a person a security risk or disloyal.

Espionage was a crime. But it was not a crime to be a member of the C.P.U.S.A. Communists had been on the ballot in every Presidential election from 1924 to 1940. Nor was it a crime to be a fellow-traveller or to belong to a front organization. “Front” and “fellow-traveller” were terms of art, anyway; they meant whatever the authorities in charge of an investigation said they did. By 1950, most of the people caught up in the investigations had already ended their relations with the C.P.U.S.A. and with radical politics generally. Many were committed anti-Communists. But their past was used to brand them as disloyal.

McCarthy had nothing to do with any of this. By the time he took charge of his subcommittee, in 1953, the C.P.U.S.A. was moribund, and the Soviets had run out of sympathetic Americans willing to give them intelligence, and had resorted to conventional means of spycraft.

McCarthy was therefore reduced to making national-security mountains out of molehills like Edward Rothchild, a bookbinder in the Government Printing Office who might have pilfered some classified documents but who had no access to atomic secrets. Rothchild seems to have been the only plausible security risk that McCarthy ever uncovered; he lost his job, but he was never prosecuted.

The case of Irving Peress was another McCarthy extravaganza. Peress was a dentist, drafted by the Army in 1952 because the Army needed dentists. He had declined to answer a question about his political affiliations on his loyalty questionnaire, and he may have had some prior connection to the C.P.U.S.A. But he had no access to secret information—he fixed teeth—and by the time McCarthy got to him, at the end of 1953, he was due to be discharged.

McCarthy made up for the smallness of the fry he was nabbing by claim-

ing that these people had been hired and promoted by higher-ups who knew all about their Communist connections. Peress, McCarthy announced, was part of “the deliberate Communist infiltration of our Armed Forces.”

This case of overkill is one of the things that brought McCarthy to his Waterloo, the Army-McCarthy hearings, held in the spring of 1954 and followed, Tye estimates, by eighty million Americans, half the population. The hearings had nothing to do with Communism. Their purpose was to determine whether the chief counsel on McCarthy’s subcommittee, Roy Cohn, had put improper pressure on the Army to give special treatment to another member of McCarthy’s staff, a wealthy non-entity named David Schine, after Schine was drafted. As he always did when attacked, McCarthy punched right back, countercharging that the Army had been holding Private Schine hostage—putting him on K.P. duty, threatening to send him overseas—in order to get McCarthy’s subcommittee to drop its investigations into the Communist infiltration of the armed services.

It was obvious that Cohn had made threats in an effort to get Schine excused from the ordinary duties of life as an Army private. On the behind-the-scenes advice of President Dwight Eisenhower, who loathed McCarthy, the Army had compiled a detailed chronology of Cohn’s many phone calls to and meetings with Army officials, and a list of his demands. There was no way McCarthy was going to win that argument.

And yet McCarthy didn’t do what almost anyone else would have done. He didn’t throw Schine and Cohn under the bus. McCarthy knew that Schine was worthless, but he also knew that Cohn was deeply attached to him, and McCarthy valued Cohn as a man who was as free of scruples as he was. McCarthy put his career at risk for Schine and Cohn, and he lost. It may have been honor among scoundrels, but it was honor, of a sort.

**T**he most interesting thing about the hearings, looking back, is the story behind the celebrated dénouement, an exchange between McCarthy and the Army’s hired counsel Joseph

Welch, seen by millions on television, and by many people afterward in Emile de Antonio’s documentary “Point of Order!” It began when McCarthy, incensed by what he regarded as Welch’s overly aggressive examination of Cohn, revealed that a young lawyer named Fred Fisher, at Hale & Dorr, where Welch practiced, had once belonged to the National Lawyers Guild, an organization accused of being a Communist front.

Welch was a crafty courtroom performer of the “I’m just a simple country lawyer” variety, and he put on his best basset-hound face. “Until this moment, Senator,” he said, “I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness.” McCarthy spoke up again, repeating things he had just said about Fisher. Welch tried to stop him. “Senator, may we not drop this?” he asked. “Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator; you’ve done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?”

Again, McCarthy refused to change the subject. Welch let him talk. “Mr. McCarthy,” he said finally, when McCarthy was done, “I will not discuss this further with you. . . . If there is a God in heaven, it will do neither you nor your cause any good.” The room erupted in applause. Even reporters applauded. It was June 9, 1954, the thirtieth day of the Army-McCarthy hearings. The dragon had been slain.

What had actually happened is that the bamboozler was bamboozled. It was not McCarthy who had outed Fred Fisher. It was Joseph Welch. The whole Fisher story had appeared two months before in a front-page article in the *Times*. “Mr. Welch today confirmed news reports,” the *Times* said, “that he had relieved from duty his original second assistant, Frederick G. Fisher, Jr., of his own Boston law office because of admitted membership in the National Lawyers Guild, which has been listed by Herbert Brownell, Jr., the Attorney General, as a Communist-front organization.” The article was accompanied by a photograph of Fisher. Welch’s lament that McCarthy had ruined Fisher’s reputation was bogus. Fred Fisher was a trap, and McCarthy walked right into it. It has

been said that when Welch left the hearing room, with tears in his eyes, he winked at a reporter he knew. I doubt he did this, but he was certainly entitled to.

The hearings had lasted a hundred and eighty-seven hours—long enough for McCarthy to make himself sufficiently toxic in the public mind for the Senate to do something about him. A committee was appointed to prepare charges for a vote of censure. In the end, in a classic profile in senatorial courage, the decision was made to “condemn” McCarthy for a single offense, which was not that he had destroyed the careers of dozens of public servants, or that he had used congressional immunity to libel people, but that he had behaved disrespectfully to other senators. The vote was 67–22. Senator John F. Kennedy, whose younger brother Bobby had served on McCarthy’s staff, did not vote. Back trouble, he explained, had prevented him from coming to the floor.

The vote had no practical consequences. Although McCarthy was relieved of his chairmanship when the Democrats gained control of the Senate, he could have gone on. But the other senators had a way of punishing him that was more effective than condemnation, and, conveniently, less visible to voters. They shunned him. When McCarthy rose to speak, they wandered off the floor. When he approached groups in the cloakroom, they disbanded.

McCarthy had never cared what kind of attention he got, as long as he got it, and he could not handle being ignored. He had always assumed—people found this one of the most twisted things about him—that he could continue to pal around with men whose reputations he had trashed. Already a heavy drinker, he descended further into alcoholism, and he died on May 2, 1957, in Bethesda Naval Hospital. Hepatitis was given as the cause of death; Tye thinks, based on the medical records, that this is wrong, and that McCarthy died of alcohol withdrawal—the D.T.s. Either way, he drank himself to death. He was forty-eight.

Many national politicians would probably have been happy to drop loyalty investigations after 1953, but no



*“I’m trying to get into foraging and wanted to pick your brain.”*

one wanted to speak out against them. It was not an issue one could afford to be on the wrong side of. So subversive-hunting lasted until 1957, when a series of Supreme Court opinions curtailed the power of government agencies to inquire into the political beliefs of citizens. The reign of inquiry had lasted ten years. Joseph McCarthy was only one episode in that miserable saga.

Tye wisely does not propose to draw many lessons for today from the story of McCarthy’s career. Our demagogue is far more dangerous than a senator who was not very popular even in his own state. Ours is the President, and he has henchmen running the State Department and the Justice Department who are dedicated to clearing a legal path for him to eliminate whoever stands in his way. The Trump Administration has done serious damage to the entire executive branch. It will take a long time to repair it.

But what is puzzling about McCarthy is also puzzling about Trump. Once McCarthy was in a position of power, he was incapable of modifying his behavior. He could not shut it off, even when everyone around him was begging him to. He had a single explanation for everything, and the only way he knew how to do his job was by threat-

ening and prevaricating. Trump, too, is a one-trick pony. He says the same things on every issue and in response to every crisis.

Voters get tired of one-trick ponies. Not every civil servant with progressive views can be a spy, despite McCarthy’s insistence, just as not every story Trump finds unflattering can be fake, and not every investigation he dislikes can be a hoax. Endlessly recycled charges lose their sting. That is what happened to McCarthy. It was not that the public decided that Communists were not a real danger. They just got sick of the constant snarling and browbeating. They wanted it to go away.

When Joseph Welch arrived in Washington for the famous hearings, some of the people involved in the Army’s defense were shocked that he did not seem to have studied the case. They worried that he was unprepared. But Welch knew that he could not beat McCarthy on the facts, because McCarthy would just make up new facts. He saw that the only way to destroy McCarthy was to give him the opportunity to destroy himself. He let McCarthy rant and bully and interrupt for thirty days, and then, as the clock was winding down, he closed in for the kill. It was pure rope-a-dope, and a lesson, possibly, for Joe Biden. ♦

ONSTAGE

## WAVE WARNINGS

*Tragic and comic takes on American life.*

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ



Our species cannot make sense of warnings. In January, when reports of the coronavirus in Wuhan began to appear on the front page of the *Times*, we in New York grimaced and flipped past. Even as northern Italy succumbed, Milan's Fashion Week rattled along. Something was happening to someone else, again. In retrospect, the confused feeling of early March in New York was like the sickening pause that heralds the arrival of a tsunami, the water receding before the wave crashes down. Now that we have been spat out onto drier land, we try to persuade the rest of the country to look at us, to listen, to learn from our mistakes,

and we get silence, or worse, in return.

If the progression of the unchecked virus doesn't scare the anti-maskers and the politicians who cynically enable them, it's unlikely that watching "The Line," a new play by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen about New York City health-care workers battling COVID-19, will do much to advance the cause. Still, it makes for an urgent, heartrending hour; maybe dramatized truth can slip through a window when the doors of reason have been slammed. Directed by Blank, and produced and presented by the Public, "The Line" is streaming on YouTube through September 1st, and, in a welcome effort at accessibility, is also available with Span-

ish subtitles, in closed captioning and sign language, and with audio description for the visually impaired. So far, more than twenty-eight thousand people have watched the play, likely a far larger audience than the physical theatre could have accommodated over the course of a run. If there is an understandable appetite for escapism these days, there is clearly also a hunger for works that try to parse our baffling shared reality.

Blank and Jensen practice a documentary style of play-making, which involves interviewing the real people they depict, who are generally caught in the teeth of tragedy. Their previous work includes "The Exonerated," about inmates freed from death row, and "Coal Country," which opened at the Public in early March and focusses on members of a West Virginia mining community that's reeling from a deadly explosion. The characters in "The Line" include Oscar (John Ortiz), a gregarious E.M.T. from Queens; Ed (Jamey Sheridan), a gruff, streetwise paramedic; and Sharon (Lorraine Toussaint), a nurse who is fiercely protective of the geriatric patients she cares for. David (Santino Fontana), a Long Islander, became a nurse after training as an actor; Dwight (Nicholas Pinnock), an immigrant from Trinidad, came to the profession after finding that he had no head for business. Vikram (Arjun Gupta), an emergency-room doctor who treats some of the city's poorest patients, is coolly analytical—he catches the virus early and reports to work the moment he has recovered—while Jennifer (Alison Pill), an outspoken first-year intern in Brooklyn, seethes with fury at her hospital's failure to adequately prepare for COVID, and its attempts to cover up its negligence.

Each actor narrates his or her character's story, looking into the camera of a computer or a phone, as if chatting from home with an interviewer; the clips are intercut so that a collective narrative arc traces the arrival and the spread of the virus. What emerges is a communal experience of horror, told with stark specificity: the non-stop emergency calls, the intubations, the lack of P.P.E., the stunned families, and, everywhere, the fear, the death, the grief. Sharon, who nearly died from the virus herself, says, "Then I come back to work and find out that half my population is gone." The performers are,

*New York City's health-care workers tell their stories in "The Line."*

to a person, subtle, vivid, and direct; their voices amplify one another, and, as they do, a bigger picture of the city clicks into focus. These people know their town better than anyone; they have seen that who you are, and where and how you live, can make all the difference when it comes to survival. “We caught one aspect of it on a video,” Vikram says, referring to America’s lethal racism and the killing of George Floyd. “But with medicine there is no video.”

Early in the crisis, workers like these were branded, by the Mayor, and in the popular imagination, as health-care “heroes.” One of the messages to be taken from these testimonials is the obfuscating inadequacy of such titles. “Now we’re heroes? What the fuck do you think we were doing before all of this?” David says—and he’s the sweet one of the bunch. “‘Hero’ is a word we use in the face of fear, and it separates us from each other,” Ed says. “Same thing after 9/11.” Ed’s preferred term is a “chain” or a “line,” which includes the postal workers and the grocery clerks, the cleaners, the security guards, the food deliverers, and everyone else who, at great personal risk, has kept the city afloat. We lucky ones owe them our health. Guaranteeing theirs is the only way to repay the debt.

Catching stuff on video is at the heart of the comedian Hannibal Buress’s terrific new special, “Miami Nights.” Buress recorded the show in front of a live audience last summer, and released it for free on YouTube in early July. Buress, who may still be best known as the guy whose joke about the rape accusations against Bill Cosby turned the popular tide, is “medium famous,” a status that he discusses without rancor. Comedy nerds know him from “The Eric Andre Show,” on Adult Swim; millennials know him as Ilana Glazer’s boyfriend on “Broad City.” Twice a year, he says, he’s asked to host a game show. (“THE PROPHECY WILL BE FULFILLED, BUT THE TIME IS NOT NOW,” he booms in a mike-enhanced God voice, as cheesy apocalyptic flames engulf the screen that forms the back wall of the stage. “I WILL CONTINUE ON MY PATH TOWARD THE COUNTRY PLAYING MID- TO LARGE-SIZE VENUES AND OCCASIONALLY POPPING UP IN BIG-BUDGET WHITE COMEDY.”) He looks great, with a charming

bit of belly, in a snug gray T-shirt that makes him seem younger, at thirty-seven, than he used to when he wore button-downs and blazers onstage.

A lot of comedy specials sag onscreen without the energy from an audience to boost the room, but Buress’s is perfect for home viewing. Tightly directed by Kristian Mercado, the show is highly visual, with the vast screen providing effects and illustration for Buress’s bits. It’s one of the better onstage representations I’ve seen of Internet brain, the way we think in links and GIFs and memes. “I hate the fact that you can just Google how much somebody’s house costs,” he says. “And I hate the fact that I don’t have the self-control to not do that while I’m in somebody’s house.” Buress has always had a goofy streak, and some of his silliest riffs are pure candy. There’s a bit on the rapper 2 Chainz begging God for various custom automobiles, and Buress has fun messing around with the mike, spinning out a scenario in which a throat-cancer survivor with an Auto-Tuned voice box delivers a hauntingly mellifluous anti-smoking P.S.A. to schoolkids.

But mortality is also on his mind. He talks about quitting drinking, about his asthma, and about death. “I want my own way of dying,” he says. It’s a joke about ego, but the unspoken subtext—about the precise way in which a Black man in America does not want to die—hangs in the air, to be picked up in the story that the act has been building toward, which takes up the last twenty minutes of the hour-long show. In 2018, Buress made the news after he was arrested for disorderly conduct during a boozy night in Miami. What distinguished the episode was his ingenious decision (if, given his state of mind, it can be called that) to speak directly into the cop’s body camera. He plays us the footage. There he is, as amiable as ever, stooping to get his angle: “Hey, what’s up, it’s me, Hannibal Buress. This cop’s stupid as fuck.” Without hitting the notes too hard, Buress takes us through the rest of his Miami night, ending with a twist that lands, especially now, as sublime catharsis. The encounter could have ended tragically. Instead, Buress turned it into comedy. A knife’s edge separates one from the other, and it’s getting thinner all the time. ♦



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## POP MUSIC

## AFTERLIVES

*Pop Smoke, Juice WRLD, and the posthumous album.*

BY CARRIE BATTAN



In late 2018, a Brooklyn teen-ager named Bashar Jackson experienced his first brush with viral fame. In a video, Jackson is standing in a royal-blue puffer vest, the same color as his BMW, arguing with the police. As the cops attempt to detain him for a reason that is not discernible, a voice out of the frame says, with increasing urgency, “Yo, look what they doin’! Yo, Pop! Yo, Pop!” The clip then shows Jackson—who was eventually crowned the king of New York hip-hop under the name Pop Smoke before being shot and killed, this past February—wriggling out of the grasp of five officers. He dodges and weaves

through them like a running back, sailing down the sidewalk as they struggle to catch up.

Shortly after this clip began circulating online, Pop Smoke, who grew up in Canarsie, began to dabble in music. One day, when he was nosing around YouTube in search of beats, what caught his ear was not the monotone, mid-range trap beats that dominated hip-hop at the time but a spare, grim, electrifying beat by an East London producer named 808 Melo. It began with a stretch of melancholy violin notes, followed by a series of deafening low-end bass hits and clicking hi-hats. It had a regal morbidity and an un-

abashed coldness that seemed appropriate for mythmaking.

The beat felt fresh to Pop Smoke, but its style was commonplace among London street rappers. Bored by grime, the long-standing dominant rap style in the United Kingdom, these rappers had looked to the United States for ideas, drawing inspiration from music that came out of Chicago by artists like Chief Keef and Lil Durk, who, despite a pose of heavy stoicism, had a talent for writing hooks. Like its Chicago antecedents, the U.K.’s emergent scene became known as drill. Often, cross-cultural interpretations of genres can sound like hokey imitations, but London’s drill made for a bracing expression of defiance, as rappers there were under constant surveillance from authorities. In Britain, authorities can place injunctions on controversial lyrics, so musicians are forced to use slang in creative ways.

Jackson was not the first New Yorker to discover these innovative sounds. (A Brooklyn rapper named Sheff G had already used the same 808 Melo beat, in a song called “Panic.”) By the time Jackson released his version, “MPR,” in late 2018, some of his Brooklyn peers were working on their own interpretations of drill music. Together, they marked a bold reclamation of New York gangster rap, which had long been overshadowed in the mainstream by Southern styles. The subgenre was also a rejection of the cartoonish version of New York rap made popular by Tekashi 6ix9ine, a Brooklyn native with rainbow-colored hair, who seemed more concerned with online high jinks than with lived experience. And although Brooklyn drill had strong ties to early-two-thousands stars like 50 Cent and Fabolous, it also represented the future, and the way that influences could ricochet around the globe, gaining new vigor as they did.

Pop Smoke quickly became the figurehead—and the greatest commercial hope—of the scene, owing to his charisma, his magazine-cover looks, and his vocal tone, which was so low, rich, and gruff that his aunt once told him that he sounded like “he could control people.” On “MPR,” when he rapped that he needed “money, power, respect,” it seemed like an inevitability

*Rather than translate Brooklyn drill, Pop Smoke muscled it into popularity.*

rather than like a wish or a plea. His unflinching cool was broken only by ad-libs: machine-gun trills, guttural “Baow!”s, and ecstatic interjections of “Woo!,” which hinted at a greater vocal elasticity than he usually revealed. Pop Smoke quickly transformed from local street star to radio phenom—rather than translate Brooklyn drill for the masses, he muscled it into the popular imagination.

So many young hip-hop artists have died at the peak of their success—either from drug overdoses or from gun violence—that the posthumous album has become a standard format. In early July, Interscope Records released “Legends Never Die,” a new album from Juice WRLD, a rapper and singer who died in December, of an accidental drug overdose. Juice WRLD can be seen as a by-product of drill. Born in Chicago, he came up under the local drill artist Lil Bibby. Although Juice WRLD adopted some of the genre’s hook-writing tendencies, his music often felt more like a reaction to the scene’s dead-eyed energy. A fan of emo and rock, Juice WRLD turned vulnerability into a virtue. Before he died, he recorded a bit in which he pretends to be streaming on Instagram Live from Heaven. (The clip serves as the album’s coda.)

Juice WRLD was also one of the few artists with the songwriting aptitude to turn idle cross-genre fascinations into groundbreaking pop music. “Legends Never Die” is a fully realized document of this potential. Its centerpiece is “Come and Go,” a pop-rock song produced by the E.D.M. artist Marshmello. It’s a bait and switch, beginning

with a dreary, aimless synth line before abruptly shifting into an up-tempo chorus and a burst of electric guitar and hand-clapping. Juice WRLD tells of his desire to preserve an unusually promising romance: “I don’t want to ruin this one,” he sings, buoyant. It’s one of the most effective rap-rock hybrids of the contemporary era.

When Pop Smoke was killed, during a home invasion in Los Angeles, he had made two mixtapes and was making his first proper album. After his murder, his label heads and collaborators, along with 50 Cent—a mentor who executive-produced the record—worked to create a formal debut that would introduce him to a global audience.

The result is “Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon.” The record, filled with chart-topping collaborators, is a buffet of ideas rather than a focussed statement, and it favors a generic appeal over regional specificity. One especially silly song, called “West Coast Shit,” produced by DJ Mustard, who has helped shape the sound of the West Coast for the past decade, features Tyga, who’s equal parts rapper and social-media punch line, known for clumsy but effective music. He and Pop Smoke exchange boasts about being in California, one of the album’s many awkward collisions between artists with only star power in common. It’s a stark contrast with the album’s most potent moment, a ferocious and joyous verse by the Brooklyn rapper Rowdy Rebel, recorded over a prison phone.

Though much of the album feels like a concession to mainstream tastes, there are also places where Pop Smoke

explores new and energizing impulses. For someone whose rapping voice was a low growl, he could sing unusually well, a talent that is showcased on a number of songs that are nostalgic for an earlier era of New York rap, like “Something Special”—a heartfelt interpretation of Tamia and Fabolous’s swaggering R. & B. duet, from 2003. At times crassly commercial, the record can seem like a betrayal of Pop Smoke’s signature sound. But, more likely, it is the sincere project of a young man exploring all his possibilities. And, like many before him, Pop Smoke has become ubiquitous after his death. All nineteen of the album’s tracks landed on the Hot 100 chart the week of its release.

“Shoot for the Stars, Aim for the Moon” was scheduled for release in mid-June but was then delayed, out of respect for the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted after George Floyd’s murder. Nevertheless, Pop Smoke was a force in absentia, when “Dior,” a single that he released last year, became an unlikely protest anthem. Pop Smoke declares, “Christian Dior, Dior / I’m up in all the stores / When it rains, it pours.” In another time, this might have been a tossed-off line about dropping newly earned wealth in high-end retail establishments. But the lyrics were transformed into a rallying cry for protesters—and for looters, some of whom were actually in such luxury stores. One video captured hundreds of New Yorkers chanting these words outside Trump Plaza. It was at once a tribute to people who had died unjustly and an opportunity to bask in the certainty of Pop Smoke’s voice. ♦

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Jeremy Nguyen, must be received by Sunday, August 9th. The finalists in the July 20th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 24th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“But they don't allow dogs?”*  
Brianna Blashill, San Clemente, Calif.

*“I know it's not an elephant, but we still need to talk about it.”*  
Tim Elliott, Juno Beach, Fla.

*“Well, who ever reads the entire lease?”*  
Jeff Kessel, Brooklyn, N.Y.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“And then I find out all the king's horses and all the king's men are out-of-network.”*  
Gary Skidmore, White Plains, N.Y.

# IS THIS THE AMERICAN PROPHECY?



**"As in Tolstoy or Mann, individual lives become romantic instances of destiny and history, each performing an office in the onward drift of the greater world"**

Malcolm Bradbury,  
THE LONDON TIMES

**"If Tolstoy were writing *War and Peace* today he would have to imagine and invent it in the same form as *The Book of Kings*"**

John Bayley

**"...he has no peers among American novelists working today. The hundreds of pages of scenes out of the Nazis' war against civilisation are extraordinary in their power"**

Al Cheuse,  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

**"MAGISTERIAL"**

John Zogby

**A LUME BOOKS NOVEL**