

READINGS

[Essay]

MELANCHOLY SCIENCE

By Martin Jay, from “*Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment*,” an essay from the collection *Splinters in Your Eye*, which will be published this month by Verso.

On July 22, 2011, a neofascist Norwegian terrorist named Anders Breivik set off a car bomb in Oslo that killed eight people, and then traveled to a socialist youth camp on the island of Utøya, where he ruthlessly gunned down sixty-nine more. That morning he had published a fifteen-hundred-page manifesto, titled “2083: A European Declaration of Independence,” which he had prepared well before his horrific acts. The document, in addition to parroting predictable, racist rants against Muslims and immigrants, offering muddled defenses of “Christian civilization,” and repeating a few arguments from the Unabomber’s screed against modern technology, recycled charges made by the “alt-right” against the Frankfurt School, the contingent of intellectuals and academics that coalesced around the University of Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in the early twentieth century. The group, which included Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, practiced what it termed critical theory, a mode of Marxist critique that, in Horkheimer’s words, aimed to emancipate people and create “a world which satisfies the needs and powers of men.” Today, critical theory

is viewed by some on the right as the font of contemporary “politically correct” culture. Much to my chagrin, Breivik urged his audience to turn to my book *The Dialectical Imagination* for information about the Frankfurt School, warning that it was written by a left-wing sympathizer.

The conspiracy theory is numbingly simplistic: all the ills of modern American culture—feminism, affirmative action, sexual liberation, gay rights, secular education, environmentalism—can be attributed to the insidious influence of the Institute for Social Research members who came to America in the 1930s. Here is a list of things the School supposedly recommended that appears on many alt-right websites:

1. The creation of racism offenses
2. Continual change to create confusion
3. The teaching of sex and homosexuality to children
4. The undermining of schools’ and teachers’ authority
5. Huge immigration to destroy identity
6. The promotion of excessive drinking
7. Emptying of churches
8. An unreliable legal system with bias against victims of crime
9. Dependency on the state or state benefits
10. Control and dumbing down of media
11. Encouraging the breakdown of the family

The ultimate goal of “cultural Marxism,” in their telling, is more than a kind of thought control that denies alternative positions under the guise of restricting hate speech. It is the subversion of Western civilization itself.

The Frankfurt School conspiracy has become increasingly potent in the age of Donald

Trump. In addition to cropping up in a flood of new videos made by an international cast of conspiracy theorists who all repeat the same clichéd talking points, it has appeared in truly unusual contexts, including in discussions about the choice of a black hero for the latest Star Wars episode and in debates about the 2016 mass shooting in an Orlando nightclub.

The Frankfurt School theory has also surfaced in the writings of several influential figures in contemporary American politics. Among the most powerful was the journalist Andrew Breitbart, who launched the radical right-wing news service bearing his name. Shortly before he died in 2012, Breitbart published a best-selling book titled *Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World*, which included a chapter on the Frankfurt School. And, bizarrely, one of the most outspoken purveyors of white-supremacist racism in America today, Richard Spencer, wrote his master's thesis at the University of Chicago on Adorno. (In it, he claimed that Adorno was afraid to admit how much he admired Wagner's music because the composer was an anti-Semite loved by the Nazis.) In May 2017, shortly before the deadly

white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, an aide in the strategic planning office of the National Security Council named Rich Higgins wrote a memo called "POTUS and Political Warfare," which blamed widespread opposition to the president on the Frankfurt School.

There's no doubt that Trump has been in close enough contact with the Frankfurt School conspiracy theory to have been infected. In the spring of 2016, while running for president, he met with the paleoconservative author William Lind. In a picture taken at the meeting, they hold copies of Lind's 2009 book, *The Next Conservatism*. It contains a lengthy account of the Frankfurt School's alleged responsibility for "cultural Marxism" and its effects.

It is, frankly, difficult to know what to make of all of this—and even harder to imagine a way to counter it. But if there is one positive outcome, it is that, in vilifying the Frankfurt School, those on the alt-right have discerned a real threat posed by the cultural transformations they cannot abide. But the threat is not to some phantasm called "Western civilization," whose most valuable achievements they themselves routinely betray. It is rather to their own counter-Enlightenment worldview and the dangerous politics it has spawned in our climate of heightened fear and despair.

When attempting to address this counter-Enlightenment movement, it is useful to consider the Frankfurt School's own ambiguous analysis of "the authoritarian personality," which thinkers on the left have revived in response to the populist onslaught against liberal globalization in the past decade. This analysis was perhaps most prominently deployed in a piece on *The New Yorker* website by Alex Ross, published just after the 2016 presidential election, with the headline **THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL KNEW TRUMP WAS COMING**, which contended that "with the election of Donald Trump, the latent threat of American authoritarianism is on the verge of being realized."

Although consistent with Adorno's deeply pessimistic prognosis, such a view has a cost. As in the case of the stigmatization of some of Trump's supporters as "deplorables" by Hillary Clinton in 2016, the characterization of right-wing populists as authoritarian personalities can foreclose treating them as anything but objects of contempt, with little hope of rescue short of the radical restructuring of society as a whole.

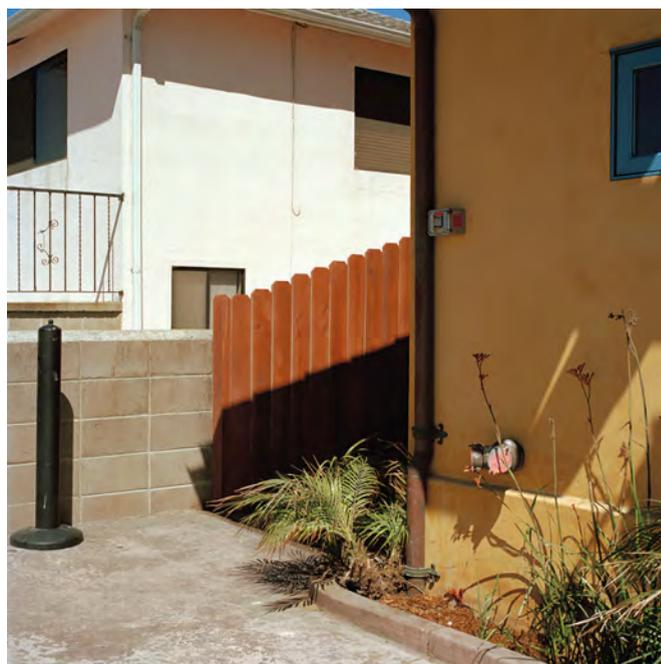
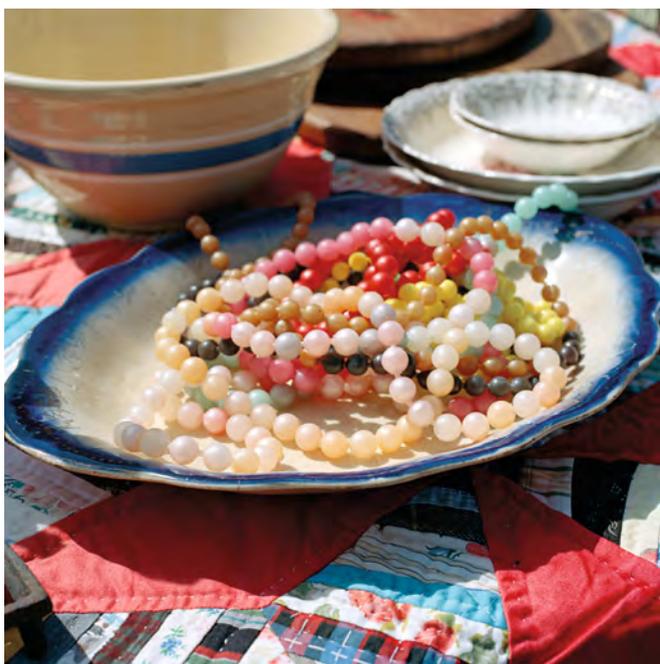
It is not merely being labeled as authoritarian personalities that prevents the demonizers of the Frankfurt School from seeing the light. Still, there may well be a good many whose devotion to the alt-right is less certain and whose

[Abstract]

CAT LADIES

From a study published in Biological Conservation by scientists at Nanjing University. The article, titled "Where there are girls, there are cats," was published in February, then retracted without explanation.

The growing population of outdoor, free-ranging cats poses an increasingly serious threat to biodiversity. In this study, we provide robust estimates of free-ranging cat density at thirty universities in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, China. We found that the population density of free-ranging cats is linearly related to the proportion of female students at a university. An online questionnaire confirmed that human females were more concerned about the living conditions of free-ranging cats than were human males in China. A socialization test on twenty-seven free-ranging cats suggests that cats may react more sociably to human females, an important factor to consider in cat population management.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MACK

Photographs by Jason Fulford from his monograph *Picture Summer on Kodak Film*, which was published in March by MACK.

motives are vague. In those cases, it would be counterproductive to pathologize their politics too quickly or to place them in theoretical categories that rob them of the ability to alter their views or behavior. Empathizing with their problems and hearing their grievances may be a more constructive way to address our increasing polarization. There is, after all, nothing that hardens prejudices more effectively than calling those who hold them passive dupes.

It is, of course, naïve to hope that the Anders Breiviks of the world would be amenable to voluntary transformation, no matter how mindful we are of the need to respect their dignity and take their ideas seriously. We lack the tools, alas, to reform those souls in the grip of what can justifiably be called radical evil. But when considering those whose personalities might be too glibly dismissed as “authoritarian,” it is necessary to acknowledge that the counter-Enlightenment must be



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"Helen and Camy, Cumberland, Kentucky, 1987," a photograph by Bertien van Manen, whose work is on view through August at the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam.

grasped dialectically. It has to be understood as more than a one-dimensional negation of all that calls itself progressive. It too requires the application of a critical theory that knows how to ask the right questions.

[Interview]

SOUL PROPRIETOR

From an interview with Tony Spell conducted in April by Victor Blackwell, an anchor for CNN. Spell, the pastor of Life Tabernacle Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, had been cited for holding services in violation of the state's ban on large gatherings, a measure put in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.

VICTOR BLACKWELL: Your attorney, who was one of more than a thousand who attended the Palm Sunday service, has now contracted

the virus. He is in the hospital. His wife has also tested positive.

TONY SPELL: You have no way to prove they contracted this virus in our services.

BLACKWELL: That is true. My question is, if you know that people have contracted the virus, have you considered having services online?

SPELL: We have not. In fact, Victor, I had sixteen different states represented at our Easter Sunday service. People are coming out in greater numbers because they are seeing that this is such a false balance in our nation. Everything is open but the church.

BLACKWELL: Well, that's not true. But I want to ask: pastors around the country are having these teleworship services. They are able to relay the Gospel. Why can't you?

SPELL: The word of God commands us to assemble. It is discrimination for me to get on a screen and try to reach the people who do not have the ability to watch. If anybody should be up in arms, it ought to be those in the civil-rights movement who are asking me to discriminate against my poor congregants. We are going to run twenty-seven buses this morning. We pick them up and bring them to church.

BLACKWELL: You talk about how needy some members of your congregation are. And this is what you are launching today: you are now asking people who can't even get to church without you going to pick them up to hand you their twelve-hundred-dollar stimulus checks.

SPELL: Evangelists have not had payroll in five weeks.

BLACKWELL: Nonprofits and faith-based ministries can apply for the Paycheck Protection Program.

SPELL: We don't want to.

BLACKWELL: But that is your choice.

SPELL: That's fine.

BLACKWELL: But to say you know people don't have much and then ask them to hand over twelve hundred dollars, the only money some will have—you have another option.

SPELL: We don't want the government to give us a dime. Never will our federal or state government put one penny into our church.

BLACKWELL: You are tax-exempt, though, right?

SPELL: Yeah.

[Annals]

FEVER DREAMS

From accounts of dreams reported during the novel coronavirus pandemic, collected in March and April by Erin Gravley and Grace Gravley on their "i dream of covid" website.

I was wandering around a medieval city looking for a nice place to get ice cream and found a store with many flavors, but I only wanted watermelon. Some flavors resembled the coronavirus structure—a ball with little spikes around it—while others looked like the inside of a mouth. I took my watermelon ice cream, paid with pencils and little holy images, and left.

My family arrived in the city, the center of which was a massive

neon supermarket with rigid shopping rules. We were each attached to a cart, which hovered a foot above the floor. The products were floating at eye level, like treats in a video game. We were only allowed to purchase the food that we passed, like Pac-Man.

Every time I picked up an item to place it in my cart, it coughed or sneezed.

My cat instructed me to buy a certain brand of chicken, but I told her it was too expensive. At checkout, the cashier said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you'll have to submit the paperwork for your chicken later. The system can't find the part number." I apologized and asked where I would find the part number on a chicken carcass. She said not to worry, to just provide a description and photos, and the store would figure it out.

I helped a woman carry some bags to her car. When we finished, she turned to me with a menacing smile and reached out to thank me with a hug. I thought it was a joke and started to back away, but she followed me. I tried to run, but she was too close. I pushed her away and yelled, "You are killing me!"

I began dating a wonderful woman. She was going to break up with me unless I got a decent haircut. I despaired. It was impossible!

I engaged in inappropriate physical contact

[Poem]

NIGHT TREES

By Martha Ronk, from a manuscript in progress.

each tree sticks itself upward dark into light or light's the medium for each to define itself aslant against air saturated with water pixelated molecules diffusing the already diffused source of light so few here, so few houses, few on the street, the homeless cyclist crossed noises crossing the highway, uneasiness tossed in empty bottles off to the side, infirm gullies underfoot past the corner sudden quiet, sudden removal from all else and then there's each tree, its leafless sticks, some quiver in haze some gather themselves, rising up into Japanese brooms (an inventory of the tightly bound, the stiff and ancient) and there they are, numerous Vs in and above, and one's own upright seemingly held, in lower-down lost-in-the-dark conjunction.

with several co-workers at a long-term care facility. I exchanged casual kisses with married staff members during breaks, moved another into my house, and instructed a female colleague as to how to properly pleasure herself with a Snickers ice-cream bar.

A friend and I were sitting on the veranda of an old building overlooking a big field with trees and red flowers. The flowers whispered to me that we had died from the virus and would return in spring as red flowers.

I arrived at a center for mandatory instant testing, waited in a short line, and when my results came back positive, I was instructed to get inside a six-by-two-by-two-foot wooden box, in which I would be held in isolation until the pandemic was over. The boxes were stacked in a gigantic trench.

I informed my surgeon that I was canceling my elective surgery to remove and then reattach my hands.

I was in a hospital gown. My fallopian tubes were in a jar that was infected with the virus. The doctor was explaining how they were going to put the tubes back in my body. I cried and couldn't catch my breath.

I was watching a video on social media depicting two dying women, covered in blood, who had just been shot. In the background, I heard cheering and clapping, and people were calling them heroes, but nobody was helping them.

I was watching a news report about spring breakers who were not taking social distancing seriously. The report showed a horse-drawn hearse carrying stacked caskets and mourners traveling slowly down the streets of New Orleans. Several students jumped on top of the caskets, intending to surf on them, and crashed through the windows of a restaurant where people dressed in funeral attire were dining. The caskets broke open, with dead bodies and splinters flying everywhere, exposing everyone to the virus.

In church, I saw ladies I knew, and they were wearing awful white wigs with curls flat against the bouffant. "We're all at home now," they said. "We can wear our hair however we want." Then it was night, and people in mourning were standing around outside, lit up by a vague glow. It was as if they were illuminated by a bonfire, but there was no flame. A friend with a shawl over her head looked gloomily in the direction the glow should have been coming from.

I returned to the city in Romania where I had been living before the outbreak. I ran into a bunch of people from my high school English class working at a coffee shop that I liked. I asked why the shop was open. They said that the city had cut itself off from the rest of the world because it had zero cases. We could do anything as long as we stayed within the city limits. After walking the streets, my friends and I ate Crown Fried Chicken on a bench outside a Communist memorial and cried for our old lives.

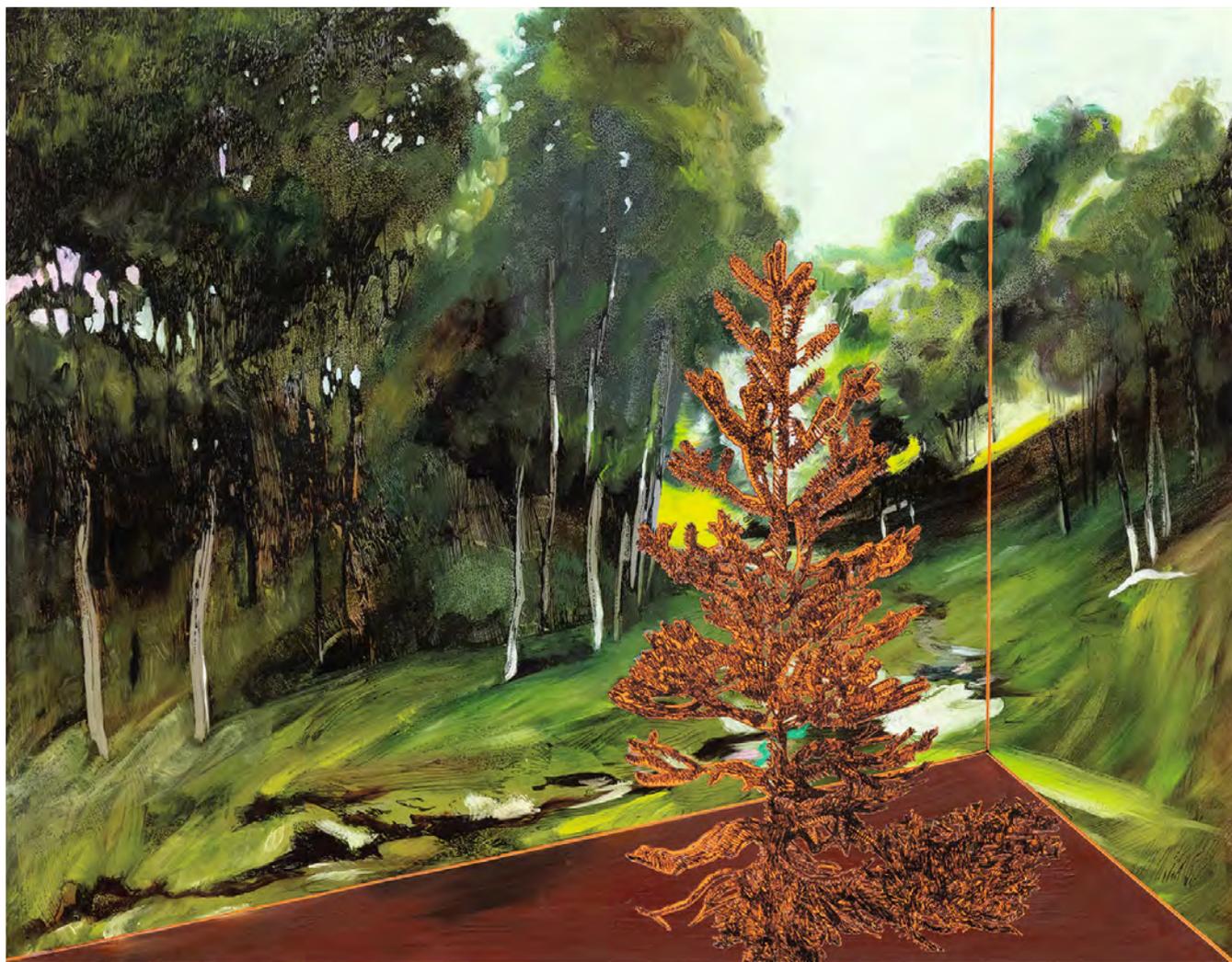
I was at my grandmother's house cleaning piles of personal protective equipment and NBA uniforms. The gowns, head coverings, booties, shorts, and jerseys were not made of standard materials, but of heavy, silky nylon in beautiful colors. As I wiped a Phoenix Suns practice jersey with disinfectant, Jimmy Butler of the Miami Heat walked in the back door and surveyed my work. He flashed me a grateful smile.

[Directives]

RALLY OF THE DOLLS

From guidelines for women presented in a series of infographics issued by the Malaysian government in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Translated from the Malay by Syazween Zainal Ariffin.

- Create a temporary workstation
- Use your dining-room table to get into a professional mindset
- Do not dress in house clothes
- Wear makeup and dress neatly
- Work on building a happy household with your husband
- Do not nag your husband
- Do not argue with your husband
- If your husband hurts your feelings, count to twenty before responding so that your brain has a chance to calm down
- If you see your husband doing a household task incorrectly, approach him playfully by saying something like, "This is the proper way to hang clothes out to dry, my dear!"
- Mimic the voice of Doraemon, the animated robotic cat, then giggle



Veduta (Sargent), a mixed-media painting by Whitney Bedford, whose work was on view in February at Vielmetter Los Angeles.

[Local Customs]

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

By Judith Schalansky, from *An Inventory of Losses*, a collection of fictive essays that will be published next month by *New Directions*. Translated from the German by Jackie Smith.

On an August day a few years ago I visited a town in the north. It lies on one of the innermost bays of a marine inlet that has extended far into the interior of the land since the Ice Age, and whose brackish water is home in spring to herring, in summer to eels, in autumn to cod, and in winter to carp, pike, and bream; hence fishermen ply their

trade there to this day. For centuries these men and their families have lived in a quaint neighborhood, consisting of little more than two cobbled streets, a drying place for the nets, and a monastery now occupied only by two aristocratic old ladies. In short, it is one of those seemingly timeless places that might very well tempt one to believe that some bygone age, as vague as it is appealing, is still alive today. Yet what lodged in my memory was not the leggy hollyhocks in front of the squat, whitewashed houses, nor their brightly painted wooden doors, nor the narrow alleys between the buildings. Rather, it was that I found in the village center, instead of a market square, a graveyard shaded by the foliage of young lime trees and enclosed by cast-iron railings. In the place where goods would normally be exchanged for money, the dead and buried were instead “resting in peace.” My astonishment, which I initially took for unease,

was further compounded when someone pointed out the house of a woman who, while she cooked in her kitchen, was able to look out upon the grave of her prematurely deceased son. It became clear to me that the centuries-old tradition of the town's funeral-rites guild had resulted in the dead and the living of the same family abiding in close proximity. Of course, I had visited other burial sites before. Yet none touched me as deeply as the fishing community's cemetery, whose peculiar shape—a compromise between a circle and a square—struck me as the very emblem of the remarkable utopia I saw embodied there: a life where death was always in view. For a long time I was convinced that in this place, whose Danish name means “small island” or “surrounded by water,” one is closer to life, precisely because its inhabitants had literally brought the dead into their midst instead of—as is otherwise the norm in our latitudes—banishing them beyond the city gates.

Of course, this is just one of myriad ways of dealing with death. It is fundamentally no more crude or caring than that of the Callatae tribe whose custom, as Herodotus attests, was to eat their deceased parents, and who were horrified when they learned of the Greeks' tradition of cremating theirs. Indeed opinions differ as to who is closer to life: someone constantly reminded of his own mortality or someone who manages to suppress all

thought of it. And likewise on the question of which is more terrifying: the notion that everything comes to an end, or the thought that it may not.

[Oral History]

OLD WAYS

From Foxfire: Story, a collection of oral histories as told by people in the southern Appalachian Mountains, edited by T. J. Smith and published in April by Anchor Books. The stories originally appeared in Foxfire Magazine.

JERRY CARTER, 1993

One time Doc amputated a man's arm, and he buried it in the backyard of his office. A few weeks later the man came to him and said that he was having terrible pain in and on his arm, the one that had been amputated. He allowed that Doc had buried it crooked. He begged Doc to please dig it up and straighten it out. Doc did just what the man said and dug it up. The man never had any trouble again.

DELLA CODY, 1992

This man come, and the dog was with Grandpa. He said, “Does the dog bite?”

Grandpa said, “The dog ain't gonna bite nobody unless they bother me.” Well, this man didn't believe him.

He said, “You mean, that dog will fight for you? Well, let's just put on a show. I'm gonna fight you and see what that dog will do.”

So, the man acted like he was gonna fight Grandpa. The dog jumped on him. Then he was gonna kill the dog. Grandpa said, “Don't kill my dog!”

So, they got into a fight, and they fought and fought. Since this man was gonna kill Grandpa's dog, Grandpa was gonna get him. Well, the man started running, and he cut into the house, and then Grandpa cut into the house. As Grandpa was coming around, the man hit him in the back of the head with a rock and it killed him.

HOYT TENCH, UNKNOWN DATE

I was going out of Toccoa on a steam engine. I left about four o'clock going down by Elberton. I saw a white something out—it was foggy—and it was a lady in a nurse uniform. She was running

[Cartography]

THE HILLS HAVE EYES

From images hidden by cartographers in maps of Switzerland that have been published by the Swiss Federal Office of Topography.

A man overlooking the town of Interlaken from a summit

A naked woman reclining by a river in the countryside of Egg

A hiker, with boots the size of a house, ascending an Italian slope

A white spider crawling up a technical passage of the Eiger

A freshwater fish swimming in the marshy zone of Lac de Remoray

A marmot crouching on a rock face in the Alps

around on the tracks. I blew the horn, not realizing what she was trying to do. She got off, and we missed her. Then there was a brand-new Plymouth sitting right there, and we hit the thing. We just ruined it. So, we had to have an investigation the next day. At the depot I told her, “I had the headlight on, blew the horn,

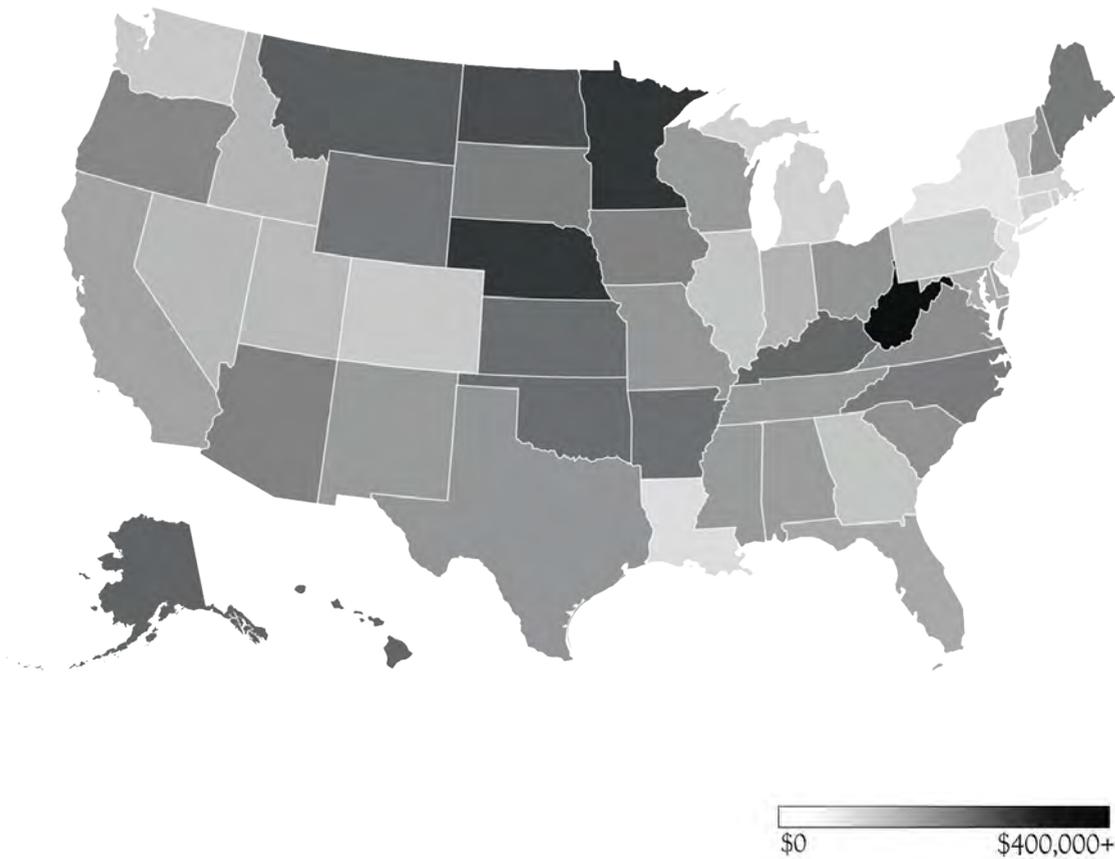
blew the whistle, and didn’t see it.” She said, “He’s right. I heard him coming, and I was trying to flag him down, but he could not stop.”

The railroad went and bought her a new Plymouth, at the Plymouth place in Toccoa. She said that she did not believe that there were people in the world who would do that.

[Map]

STATES OF CARE

From a report published in April by the Kaiser Family Foundation, detailing the amount of money each state received per COVID-19 case in the first round of grant funding under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. An initial \$30 billion was allocated to hospitals across the country according to their historical share of Medicare funding. The darker a state appears on the map, the more money per case its hospitals received. New York, which had the largest number of cases, was granted only about \$12,000 per patient. West Virginia, Hawaii, Montana, North Dakota, and Alaska—which had some of the lowest infection rates—each received more than \$300,000 per patient. The map was compiled by Hannah Norman of Kaiser Health News using analysis from the House Ways and Means Committee and a New York Times database of known coronavirus cases.



It was completely her fault. She said that her mother told her to be sure and stop on the railroad tracks, but her mother meant for her to stop before she got on the railroad tracks. Anyway, she did, and the car went dead, and she couldn't get it cranked again. We hit the car running twenty-five miles per hour with a big old engine. There are just so many things that can happen.

GRANNY TOOTHMAN, 1985

We had chickens. Up until I was twelve years old, I had to kill those chickens with an axe and *whang* on the chopping block! Then I plucked them and all that. After I was twelve years old, I shot them. By then I had me a twenty-two rifle. It was one of the first bolt-action rifles that was ever put out. A single shot. I ordered it from Sears and Roebuck. It cost four ninety-eight. I remember that very well because I got five dollars for hoeing corn that summer and I paid for that rifle myself. The first evening I had the rifle, I got my shells and went over the hill and killed a squirrel. Dad thought that was great.

But that first Christmas I had the rifle, Mother sent me out to kill a chicken. She had some special blue hens that were extra good layers, and then she had these Dominickers that were a whole lot bigger and bet-

ter to eat, and they didn't lay like the blue ones did. She said for me to get her a big hen and "don't kill a blue one!" So, I went out and shot that Dominicker right in the head, and there was a blue one in line with the shot, and it went right through its neck, and I'd killed a blue one and a Dominicker both at the same time.

I was really nervous about going in and telling her about shooting her blue hen. Dad was in and I knew I had protection, so I said, "Oh, Mother, I shot one of your blue hens."

She said, "I thought I told you not to shoot a blue hen."

I said, "Well, I couldn't help it. It was right in line with the Dominicker. I got the Dominicker, but I've got a blue hen, too." And she said, "Well, I reckon if you killed two birds with one stone, it's all right."

[Fiction]

THE GAMBLERS

By Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, from *Unwitting Street*, a collection of short stories that will be published next month by New York Review Books. Translated from the Russian by Joanne Turnbull.

They were two in a square unheated room in a wooden shack by the city gates. A bookkeeper and a poet. On the abacus there was nothing to count. Except changes of regime. Only yesterday the bookkeeper had slid a ninth white bead from right to left along its spindle. Paper had all gone to handbills, orders and appeals stuck to the brick and wood of walls, while resolutely rejecting anything as trifling as poetry. So then, both men were out of work. Their money had long since emigrated from their pockets and turned into bread and firewood, long since eaten and long since burned. Two men, two benches, one table, two stools and one dog-eared deck of cards. From morning till night, the poet and the bookkeeper played stuss. Now and then, most often in the evening, one of them would go out to forage a crust of bread or a plank from a fence for kindling. The trouble was that between them, they had only one pair of boots, which was constantly, depending on how the cards fell, changing hands. Or rather: feet.

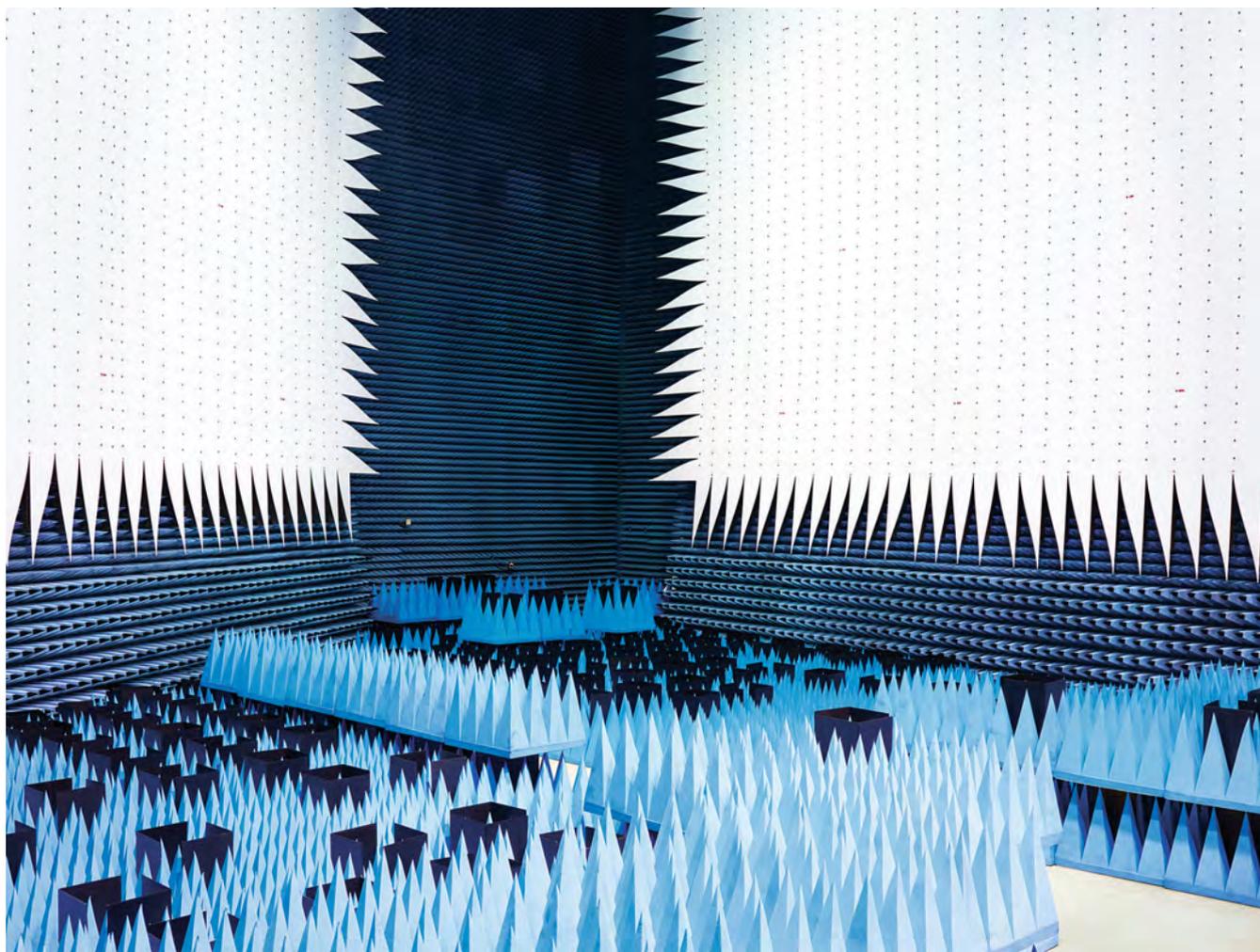
The poet was having bad luck. For a week now he had been going around in clothes no

[Box Office]

THE LAST PICTURE SHOW

The national box-office report for the weekend of April 17–19, reflecting all self-submitted earnings by theaters in the United States, where government orders aimed at halting the spread of the novel coronavirus had shut down major cinemas.

MOVIE TITLE	GROSS EARNINGS
<i>Resistance</i>	\$2,490
<i>Swallow</i>	\$2,490
<i>The Other Lamb</i>	\$265
<i>Monero Means Money: Cryptocurrency 101, Live from Leipzig</i>	\$70
	TOTAL: \$5,315



"Satellite Antenna Test Zone," a photograph by Henrik Spohler, from his monograph *Hypothesis*, which was published in March by Hartmann Books.

longer his. An unpaid advance and the dedication of his book, *Dreams of a Freezing Man*, had likewise passed into the possession of his partner. Yet the gamblers continued to gamble.

In effect, the cosmos belongs to everyone; everything—from stars to dust motes—is the common property of humanity. Proceeding from that thought, the poet—this was only yesterday—put the North Star on his card and began to tally. Alas, ten seconds had not gone by before the star was made over to the bookkeeper. In that same way, the poet lost Berenice's Hair and, soon after, the Little Dipper, then the Big.

Because of the Milky Way the gamblers did not sleep the whole night. By the light of an oil lamp, they battled on furiously until that starry way wound up in the bookkeeper's pocket.

But after that, fortune suddenly turned 180 degrees. For a start, an extraordinary thing

happened: the poet managed to collect his lost advance. True, it was only three or four million. But even if the bread was stale, it was bread; even if the wood was green, it was wood. In the cube of four walls it became warmer in their stomachs as well; their fingers unfroze and, naturally, reached for the deck of cards. The poet's run of luck continued: first he won back his millions, then—planet by planet—the entire solar system, and finally whole constellations rained down from the starry heavens straight into his palms: the bookkeeper had only a few paltry starlets left; he managed to hang on to Saturn's rings, but two or three deals later—the rings too rolled away, right behind the planet, to his lucky rival.

Never mind the stars. The poet won back the boots! The entire universe belonged to him. Excited by his good luck, he took a few turns up and down the room. By now the

small stove had grown cold. The universe the poet had won was slightly frozen. Ornate white patterns were forming on the windows. "Who'll go for wood?" asked the lucky man.

[State Secrets]

BURN AFTER EATING

From responses to Freedom of Information Act requests regarding internal discussions about the food served at various government agencies and organizations. The documents, from between 2015 and 2020, were published on Muckrock.com.

U.S. SOUTHERN COMMAND

There has been resolution on the soy milk. However, all other issues are still in place. We received two-liter bottles of soda, but the camps can't use that much soda. That is why we need the smaller size. As a result, the soda has passed its expiration dates and it is being thrown out. Thanks for your assistance on this.

DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

At 1410 hours ██████████ observed a doughnut cart left outside the entry of Dunkin' Donuts with excessive crumbs. ██████████ told me to forward this to you to ensure the matter does not happen again. I went down to Dunkin' and pushed the cart inside the room. This didn't take care of the crumb problem. Unfortunately, all Dunkin' personnel were released at 1200.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

I don't know if you all are aware. However, I tried pulling up the menu ██████████. The menu is not found ██████████. All the other menus appear except ██████████. Please advise.

AMTRAK

██████████
██████████
██████████
██████████ no snack car ██████████
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"The one who won the boots," replied the bookkeeper.

He sat on his bench, knees pressed to chin, and rubbed his rag-wrapped feet.

The winner did not object. He pulled his canvas cap down over his ears, wrapped himself tighter in his quilted jacket, and went off.

Outside, at almost that same moment, gunshots crackled. The bookkeeper understood: the Whites were entering the city; it was their turn. The bookkeeper went up to his abacus hanging on a nail and slid a black bead from right to left along its spindle.

The volleys intensified; in the distance two or three cannon shots thundered. From somewhere nearby came the typewriter-like *rat-tat-tat* of a machine gun. The pre-dusk light turned to dusk, the dusk to night.

His partner had not returned.

The temperature in the room was falling. All through that long winter night the bookkeeper sat on his bench, and uneasy thoughts slipped through his brain.

Come dawn he wound strips of felt and two newspapers around his feet, and shivered out into the street. Snow, saltpetrously glittering snow. Clenched shutters of long, yellow, coffin-shaped shacks. At a crossroads a gray—like a spreading inkblot—body. Near the body, three women and a little boy, the earflaps of his cloth hat hanging down, wagging their ribbon tails.

The bookkeeper approached. Yes, it was the poet, his lucky partner. He lay facedown in the snow, arms flung out. Under his chest was a bundle of wood. One of the women, wiping away freezing tears with her black shawl, wailed:

"Oh, my darling, unfortunate man. Who'd have known, who'd have guessed? I sent my Mitka out last evening for kerosene. But those—what do you call them, I don't know—they were about. About and shooting. What could I do? My little Mitka . . . Then God sent a kind man. He swooped Mitka up in his arms and ran for the gate. Only he was got, poor fellow, by a bullet. Just look at him! What bad luck. Just look! Bitter sorrow . . ."

"But is Mitka all right?"

"He's all right. Nothing wrong with him. But this poor . . . May he rest in peace . . ."

The women stood sighing for a minute more, then the gate closed behind them.

The bookkeeper looked around. The street was empty. Kneeling in the snow, he drew the boots off the corpse, pulled them on his frozen feet, and, without looking around, went back to the shack. As for the Universe, which remained the property of the poet, he didn't give it a thought.



The Smokers, a painting by Salman Toor, whose work is on view through September at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.