



BARRY BUTTT

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE DYSTOPIANS

Bad times are boom times for some.

BY BEN McGRATH

A year and a half ago, with real-estate prices falling, Dmitry Orlov, a forty-six-year-old software engineer from Leningrad, sold his apartment in the Brighton section of Boston, along with most of its contents, and bought a sailboat—an old sharpie made from Douglas-fir marine plywood, on which he and his wife, Natasha, a literary translator, now live, debt-free. They rent a slip at the Constitution Marina, near the Boston Naval Shipyard, and he walks to work at a nearby advertising agency. For errands, Orlov rides a bicycle, which he sometimes parks on deck. It's been a long time since he owned either a car or a television ("When I'm in front of one for five minutes, I think it's lying to me and I want to take wire cutters and clip the power cord"). He has outfitted the boat, which is named Hogfish, with solar panels and six months' worth of propane, and figures he can store an equivalent supply of rice and beans down below. "It's basically a survival capsule," he said recently.

Orlov moved to the United States when he was twelve, and returned to the Soviet Union for the first time in 1989, shortly after his uncle, a political prisoner under the Andropov regime, was released. During his second trip back, in 1990, the country was suffering from a fuel shortage, and he financed a road trip to the medieval towns of Pskov and Novgorod with a trunk full of vodka, trading half-litre bottles for ten litres of gasoline from black-marketeers along the way. (This was just after Gorbachev's anti-alcoholism campaign, and Orlov capitalized on a death in the family by redeeming a funeral's worth of vodka coupons.) The only comparable resource seemed to be bluejeans, of which he'd brought only one pair. No one wanted rubles. He internalized the lesson for future reference: "When faced

with a collapsing economy, one should stop thinking of wealth in terms of money."

Over the course of several visits, Orlov observed the social effects of the Soviet breakdown and concluded that there were some peculiar advantages to his home country's dysfunctionality. Bloated bureaucracies move slowly, and are therefore slow to die. Long breadlines force people to consider backup plans, like kitchen gardens. Orlov's 2008 book, "Reinventing Collapse: The Soviet Example and American Prospects," identifies the ingredients of what he calls "superpower collapse soup"—a severe shortfall in the production of crude oil, a worsening foreign-trade deficit, an oversized military budget, and crippling foreign debt—and argues that his adopted country, with its "American-style Potemkin villages" and "highly compensated senior lunch-eaters," is not only vulnerable but likely to fare worse. ("Make no mistake about it: this soup will be served, and it will not be tasty!") "Now we're in hospice care," he told me. "The bailouts you see can be viewed as ever bigger doses of morphine for a patient that's not long for this world."

In 2006, Orlov published an online manifesto, "The New Age of Sail," in which he extolled the virtues of what might be called bourgeois survivalism. "She must look like a proper yacht, and not a shanty boat or a barge, because she must give coastal property owners no reason to complain to the harbormaster about the ugly thing spoiling their precious view," he wrote. "She should give the impression that she is sailed by people of obvious quality and distinction, of the sort that snooty coastal property owners might want to invite over for gin-and-tonics and to catch up on the goings on in San Tropez." Life on a boat

has the additional benefit, he wrote, of providing "isometric exercise similar to a Pilates workout," because of the constant jostling of the sea. "People who live aboard are rarely overweight."

Hogfish, whose hull is trimmed red and gray, looks the bourgeois part; aside from the solar panels and bicycles, it is indistinguishable from the weekend yachts cruising in and out of Boston Harbor throughout the warmer months. Regarding the domestic considerations of the transition to aquatic sustainability, Orlov said, "I think my wife is very realistic, but I can't say that she's all that in favor of it. We're doing it in stages." For now, he keeps a ten-horsepower Yamaha outboard motor handy, in case of emergency or faint breeze, and just before Thanksgiving he installed an on-demand hot-water system to take the bite out of a coastal New England winter. He plans, meanwhile, to establish a trading network along Lake Champlain for transporting Vermont apples and maple syrup to farmers' markets in New York City, and hopes to be able to undercut diesel trucks on price when the oil market resumes its upward swing. "We don't have a long wait before sail-based transport is the only option," he said, anticipating more dire environmental conditions. (From the manifesto: "In the future, I expect coastal property owners to get downright excited when they see any sailboat, whether it looks fashionable or not, paddle out their leaky canoes, and try to barter jewelry, silver cutlery or pretty seashells for the things they desperately need.") Should the trading not suffice, and the need to raise chickens arise, they'll set sail and relocate to a more rural base of operations, where Hogfish, which has a flat bottom, can double as a trailer home.

Until recently, Orlov identified the

A doomer: "That's the exciting thing about collapse—the breaking down of barriers and definitions that just don't work anymore."

readers of his book, and of a blog that he maintains, Club Orlov, as belonging to three basic cultural categories: “back-to-the-land types,” united in their opposition to industrial agriculture; “peak oilers,” who worry about the shock effects on energy markets of reaching the maximum global crude-extraction rate; and all-around Cassandras, or “people who sometimes derisively are called doomers.” (The doomers are currently enjoying a little less derision, which is a mixed blessing, because it is axiomatic among true believers that mainstream respect means that it is too late for anything to be done.) But in the past few months, judging from the e-mails he receives, Orlov has acquired a fourth audience, composed of financial professionals, who have been, as he said, “bolstering my gut feeling that the United States is bankrupt.” A number of them have placed orders for multiple copies of his book, and he took some pleasure in imagining them passing it on

to their friends and families this past holiday season as a grim kind of stocking stuffer.

One of Orlov's greatest fans is the author James Howard Kunstler, whose 1993 book about suburban sprawl, “The Geography of Nowhere,” is a staple of collegiate urban-studies curricula, and whose weekly blog column, Clusterfuck Nation, can be read as a sustained critique of the cheerful globalism championed by Thomas Friedman. His latest contribution to the doomersphere is an engaging novel, “World Made by Hand,” set in the post-collapse future, and while it's not apocalyptic by the standards of, say, Cormac McCarthy's “The Road,” it is comprehensive in its imagination of the disasters that await us: dirty bombs and race wars and dengue fever and flu epidemics and forced shavings by religious fanatics and hurricanes in New England in June. (Kunstler resists the doomer label—“I've never been a com-

plete collapsitarian,” he says—but the fact that one of his bombs detonates in Washington on “twelve twenty-one” is likely to please superstitious adherents of the Maya calendar, which concludes its first cycle on what is now the Internet's most popular day of reckoning: December 21, 2012.) “World Made by Hand” is set in a small town north of Albany, where the residents have no oil, no coffee, no spices, no mail delivery, and only sporadic electricity, but marijuana cultivation is booming and they're growing “buds the size of plums.” Capitalism and human ingenuity persist; it's only the economic incentives that change. “The action is going to be in smaller towns in the years ahead, because the cities are going to be so problematic,” he told me.

Kunstler likes to say that the United States has “a railroad system that the Bulgarians would be ashamed of,” and when I proposed visiting him last fall in Saratoga Springs, where he lives, he advised against taking the train. Hudson River foliage in October struck me as one of those things that, like vodka and pot, retain their appeal even in a dismal fiscal cycle, so I bought an Amtrak ticket. Sure enough, about midway up the line, the train came to an unplanned stop, and did not resume forward progress for more than a half hour, during which the conductor befriended the family sitting in front of me—a father and his two young daughters, from Vermont. Theirs was an unlikely, if fitting, alliance between economic populism and nouveau hippiedom. “There go the stockbrokers,” the conductor said, as a southbound passenger train whizzed by on the left. “As long as they're on the train they can't be spending your money.” Meanwhile, the father, whose hair was long and braided, pointed out the window at a speedboat on the river and said, “Look at him, wasting gasoline.” They might both have sympathized with Orlov. The family, it turned out, was planning to stop in Saratoga Springs for lunch, and they grew louder as the wait persisted. Finally, after we'd started moving again, the conductor made an announcement: “Albany is next. That'll occur in twenty minutes. Of course, based on past performance, who knows?” I got off in Albany and rented a car.

Kunstler showed up at my hotel



wearing jeans and a bright-red vest over a flannel shirt, with a small hoop in his left ear. He is bald, with a neatly trimmed gray mustache, and walks with a bounding theatricality, perhaps owing as much to his thespian days at SUNY-Brockport, in the late sixties, as to the overwhelming correctness of his warning, back in 2005, about a “worldwide pyramid racket” involving subprime mortgages and what he later called “incomprehensibly abstract mutant financial ‘products,’” such as derivatives and credit default swaps. He was also carrying a long umbrella (the forecast was partly cloudy), which he used to prevent me from crossing the street in front of a car that didn’t appear to be slowing down. “Fuck you, asshole!” he yelled at the driver, an unwitting enemy combatant in the new class warfare (transportation division) that Kunstler believes will soon have Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton hiding from more than just the paparazzi. Shortly after we turned left onto Broadway, the town’s main commercial stretch, Kunstler ran into a couple of acquaintances, a local real-estate developer and the owner of an art gallery that had just shuttered, eating lunch at an outdoor café. “Your vision is coming true, only through the back door,” the developer said, presumably referring to the fact that gas prices—Kunstler is a prominent peak oiler—did not seem to be the catalyst of the current upheaval.

“I’d say an emergency meeting of the G7 is pretty much the front entrance,” Kunstler said. “Although who would have thought Iceland would be the first to go?”

Kunstler saw degeneracy everywhere. Stopping in a pharmacy to drop off a prescription for sleeping pills, he was nearly bowled over in a narrow aisle by a heavyset woman, and remarked, “Our fellow-Americans just don’t look that healthy.” The tattooed arms of a young man standing next to a young woman at a crosswalk qualified him as a “bad boyfriend.” (The proliferation of tattoos, Kunstler has written, is “a symptom of the growing barbarism in American life,” and the fact that tattoo parlors now rent space on main thoroughfares, like Saratoga Springs’ Broadway, rather than in back alleys, is “a harbinger of social dysfunction.”) Kunstler showed me a motel at the corner of Broadway



“Mrs. Pepperkorn and her cat made many contributions to the museum.”

and Division Street, near the outdoor café, that he considered “the most low-quality Western-civilization architecture conceivable.” Its name was the Downtowner, although its appearance suggested a Roadside. “Look at the details,” he said. “Look at those stupid mangy little shutters and those horrible windows, and the horrible steel railings and those ridiculous pilasters. Everything about it is just so cheap. And the thing that amazes me is that this is the stuff that we built in the most confident and flush period of our history, in the sixties, when, you know, we were basically ruling the world!” Farther along, we came across a faux-Georgian bank, which he said was “basically fabricated out of the cheapest shit you could possibly get, stuck onto a brick box. Except it’s not *even* a brick box. It’s an aluminum-frame box with a brick veneer, meant to visually get across a cartoon idea that this is a plantation house, and therefore a dignified building—you know, with a dignified activity, *banking*, going on.” Hard as it may be to believe,

Saratoga Springs rates comparatively well in Kunstler’s assessment of America’s built environments.

The architectural criticism was inextricably linked to our national predicament, because in Kunstler’s view the American economy since the Second World War has essentially been one of continuous sprawl-building, made possible by cheap (but diminishing) energy sources, and, given what we’ve built, it amounts to “the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world.” As long-term infrastructure, McMansion subdivisions and the big-box retailers that service them are only worth the scraps that can be salvaged by scavenging, he contends, and when oil stops allowing people to indulge the current fantasy, Bergen and Fairfield Counties will become Hobbesian slums, highway strip malls will be recolonized by sumac trees, and the hulking sheds formerly known as Kmart will be good for little more than Pentecostal roller rinks. (Economic collapse bodes well for fundamentalism, as people seek holistic explana-

tions for the wipeout of their savings.)

"We make so many assumptions about the things that we know necessarily continuing to function the way they are now," he said. "I find that hilarious." Take skyscrapers: their efficiencies may become nightmares in a blackout, as the elevators stop working. And when natural-gas reserves are depleted to levels at which pressure falters, the pipes will freeze and burst, the halls will flood, and offices and apartments will become instantly uninhabitable. Large cities will then need to decompress almost overnight, and reconcentrate along their waterways, which offer both potential power sources and shipping routes. The industrial zoning of riverfronts and canals was not an unfortunate accident. Or, put another way, the Gowanus Canal is a model of sustainable urbanism. Goodbye, greenways.

That morning, on his blog, Kunstler had mentioned Nassim Nicholas Taleb's best-selling book "The Black Swan," about the inevitability of unforeseeable events, and now he elaborated. "We don't really know how collapse proceeds," he said. "We have reason to believe that it can happen pretty rapidly and comprehensibly, in ways that we'd find shocking and unbelievable until it happens. We're in the middle of one right now. I mean, you and I are walking happily down a little alley in a small town, but really around us all kinds of stuff is in dire trouble—you know, banks in dozens of countries, people in Iceland are hoarding food. Three weeks ago, none of the people in Reykjavík thought, Oh, on October 13th our currency will be worthless."

Triumphant pessimism can be fun, and Kunstler certainly will not be sad to see Patio Man, David Brooks's archetype of the exurbs, abandon his Weber Genesis for a life of Dumpster diving. As we walked around town, Kunstler continued to spot people he knew, which gave him ample opportunity to shout "Dude!" and "Get out!" and "Word up!" in mock surprise. (Irony, hipness, and adolescence itself are distant memories in a world made by hand.) Far from the image of the stereotypical Chicken Little as a maladjusted hermit, he was more like an amiable town crier whom the citizenry regarded fondly, if a bit skeptically. "You expect-

FIRST IDYLL

A frayed rope of ivy wound round and round the lip
of a cup, a wooden cup carved from boxwood
that grew for a thousand years.
My cousin has a little goat, black
and white, with a delicate
hoof that looks like
onyx from a distance,
and like coal when
you come close
enough to touch it.

—Susan Stewart

ing rain?" one of his friends asked, noticing the umbrella.

Our route took us past the stables next to the racetrack, where the annual yearling auction is held. They had been abandoned for the off-season, but it was easy to imagine them serving a less fanciful, year-round purpose with the return of animal labor, another Kunstlerian forecast. Nearby, the large Second Empire and Queen Anne-style houses of the East Side Historic District, formerly run down by a transient college population ("Kids are living there and smoking bongos, and cats are peeing in the corners," as Kunstler put it), looked mostly renovated, thanks in part to speculating Wall Streeters who'd been drawn upstate by the races during the bull market. "Whatever Morgan Stanley smoothie bought this one, he's got an extra thirty-six thousand dollars sloshing around in his pocket, saying, 'Oh, it'd be so nice to have a little masonry fantasia on the lawn,'" Kunstler said, noting an unfinished stone wall in someone's front yard—now a fossil of gentrification. "We can't predict how households are going to be organized. One possibility is you'll be renting out rooms to boarders. Another possibility is that there are so many unemployed people they actually start working as servants again." Echoing Mark Twain, Kunstler sometimes says that history doesn't exactly repeat itself, but it rhymes.

Kunstler once had a "very grand house" in this neighborhood, before the breakup of his third marriage, in 2004, in the midst of the real-estate bubble.

He didn't have the will to buy another. He rents his current home, which is by his own estimation an "embarrassing" raised ranch with vinyl siding. It sits on ten wooded acres on the edge of town and offers plentiful firewood, but its remoteness leaves him vulnerable to bandits as the social contract breaks down and police forces, working with reduced budgets, become more thinly stretched. (In a recent blog post titled "Easthampton Burning?" he described a new class of "millions of Joe-the-Plumber types" who will soon have lost their jobs and been reduced to hunching over "in their tent cities, in the rain, sipping amateur-brand raisin wine bartered for a few snared rock doves. How long before the hardier ones among them venture out to Easthampton with long knives and matches?") He keeps a sixteen-gauge shotgun in the closet, and he recently applied for a pistol permit.

As it happened, not only did it not rain while Kunstler and I were walking around Saratoga Springs but the Dow Jones gained nine hundred and thirty-six points. "What does the headline say? 'ECONOMY FIXED?'" Kunstler asked, eying my complimentary *USA Today*, when we met for breakfast the next morning. (It read "BIGGEST BOUNCE EVER.") He declared the rally a "dead cat's bounce," and repeated a joke that he'd made the day before, involving orders from the Treasury Secretary, Henry Paulson, to his underlings, to "buy the Dow," in order to stave off consumer panic. "Let's say that lending is reestablished," he said. "What for? For

people to buy more suburban houses? I don't think so. For people to buy more flat-screen TVs on their credit cards? I don't get what they think they're going to be re-starting. We're way over-retailed. We don't need a single extra souvenir-spoon shop in America." He added, "I think what we're seeing, really, is unfortunately another false euphoria."

You could argue that false despair has the more established track record. Thomas Malthus first lent philosophical legitimacy to the apocalyptic inklings of religious prophets with his "Essay on the Principle of Population," in 1798, and secular doom booms have tended to coincide with periods of political upheaval or economic breakdown ever since. The year 1968 brought not only rioting in Paris and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy but the founding of the Club of Rome think tank, with its "Predicament of Mankind" ("If something is to be done it needs to be done now—for otherwise we might be confronted by that ultimate experience: N-E-V-E-R"), as well as the publication of Paul Ehrlich's "Population Bomb." Ehrlich predicted that by 1980 there would be few snooty coastal property owners for the likes of Dmitry Orlov to worry about offending, so bad would be the stench of rotting fish from pesticide runoff.

When I first spoke with Kunstler, by phone, he asked me to imagine the situation in Europe a hundred years ago. "If you said, 'The coming century is going to be a horror show,' you would have been met with disbelief," he told me. "This is the beautiful epoch! We've got elevators and airplanes and motorcars." But both sides would have ended up with defensible cases. Elevators and airplanes and motorcars were followed by still more innovations, like the polio vaccine and the personal computer—which itself became the source of amplified millennial alarm, via the Y2K bug. In April of 1999, Kunstler wrote, "It seems to me that the Y2K problem is so broad, systemic, and unprecedented that imagining its repercussions calls for something besides conventional thinking." He also said, "Y2K is going to rock our world." The actual interruptions barely registered, and from Kunstler's vantage point this can be attributed to a rare reverse-Cassandra effect,

in which crisis was narrowly averted because people actually listened to the alarmists and took precautions.

At breakfast, he said that we "misuse the word 'innovation' because it has overtones of magic and the supernatural," and brought up a talk he'd given at the TED Conference—Technology, Entertainment, and Design—in Monterey, in 2004, on the tragedy of suburbia. ("We have about thirty-eight thousand places that are not worth caring about in the United States," he'd told the audience, while showing a slide of a bleak intersection separating a Wal-Mart from a Target. "When we have enough of them, we're going to have a nation that's not worth defending.") A video of the speech has been viewed more than thirty-five thousand times on YouTube, and it ranks among the top fifteen "most persuasive" talks in the TED annals, as judged by visitors to the conference's own Web site, but Kunstler's memory is of being upstaged by an "idiot" inventor's plans to develop a flying car—of being met, in effect, with disbelief. "These were presumably the best young minds of American business, of entrepreneurial, high-tech corporate activity," he said. "And so the consensus among them was that the most interesting and exciting and important thing was flying cars. That shows you where our heads are at. These are the kinds of delusions that bring a society down."

A couple of local businessmen were seated at a table nearby. One of them got up to leave, and said, "Good to see you, Jim."

"Have fun with the markets today," Kunstler replied.

"I don't even watch," the man said, and shook his head.

Later, as Kunstler was leaving, he peered over the shoulder of the cook, who was taking a break and reading *The Saratogian* on a stool at the counter. "Ups and downs," the cook said, referring to the fluctuations of the market in the habitual way of someone unaccustomed to the possibility of a new paradigm. Kunstler held his tongue. A



man wearing a suit and a Bluetooth device in his ear sat a couple of stools over, drinking coffee. "Do you ever read his stuff?" he asked the cook, with a grin, as the sage of Saratoga went out the door. Kunstler was flying to Lisbon later that afternoon to speak to a couple of environmental groups, and then to Atlanta (a "giant hairball," he once wrote), to lecture at a university. He now gets about a hundred personal e-mails a day from strangers—college students, in many cases, seeking his advice. "They're all studying to be hedge-fund managers," he told me. "And they're going to end up supervisors of rutabaga pickers."

Before we parted ways, Kunstler stopped on a patch of high ground overlooking a giant parking lot and a couple of bulldozed sites, and reminded me that the core of Saratoga Springs is about the same size, geographically, as the imperial capital of the Roman Empire—another casualty, in its way, of sprawl. "There'll be a timeout for sure," he said, looking at the expanse of dirt and macadam. "The question is how long. You could have been in Rome in the fourth century A.D. and people would have said, 'You know, I think our imperial adventure is over.' And they'd say, 'Yeah, we probably won't be building anything for fifteen years.' Little did they know the population would go from a million to about thirteen thousand over the next millennium."

The Malthusian movement has expanded with time into a kind of peaknik diaspora. Peak oil and peak carbon (i.e., global warming) are the heavies, with the most obviously compelling claims on our attention, and the greatest number of advocates; their relative standings swing in rough accordance with the price of gas and the latest hurricane news. Smaller contenders like peak fish and peak dirt have their devotees as well, and are in some ways more pleasing to contemplate, because they are based on the idea that the path to destruction begins not in the Earth's atmosphere or crust but at the surface, with salmon and topsoil mites. The bailouts in the wake of the subprime defaults, however, have arguably thrust a new concern to the front: peak dollars, or the point at which the system breaks down through the

simple printing of paper money. (A corollary, peak debt, was coined in 2006 by a former Cisco employee named Jaswant Jain, who calls himself the Prophet of Doom and Gloom, and who first observed the deleterious effects of unrestrained borrowing as an eight-year-old in a village near the city of Jodhpur, where debt-ridden Brahmins appeared worse off than solvent untouchables.) Viewed from this perspective, Ben Bernanke and Hank Paulson represent substantially greater threats—to the developed world, at least—than Hummers and chemical fertilizer, and we had better start preparing ourselves for a Zimbabwe experience, or, as Jim Sinclair, a currency and commodities trader in Sharon, Connecticut, likes to say, a “planetary Weimar Republic.”

Sinclair is king of the goldbugs—an intermediate class of doomer that can’t quite embrace a currency in drugs or booze—and proof that, as Dmitry Orlov suspected, some of the most vociferous dystopians these days wear banker’s collars and vote Republican. He is fond of quoting Milton Friedman (“Inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon”), and made his fortune by selling out at the top of the last recession-driven gold boom, in 1980. This time, in the midst of what he calls a “great economic drama,” he’s not selling; he is the chairman of a publicly traded mining interest in Tanzania, and in April he offered to bet a million dollars against any takers that the price of gold bullion, which was then trading at about nine hundred dollars an ounce, would reach \$1,650 by the second week of 2011. He communicates with what he calls his CIGAs—Comrades in Golden Arms—through a Web site, jsmineaset.com, on which he posts daily blitzes of commentary with headers like “What Happens in Iceland Doesn’t Always Stay in Iceland,” and answers readers’ questions. Those questions now number as many as seven hundred a day. Sinclair asks that CIGAs use sixteen-point type when e-mailing him, for easier scanning. A widower, he writes and works from his home, a thirty-eight-acre compound he calls Sunnyfield Farms that is protected by motion sensors, and features its own apple orchard, an indoor shooting range, two electric generators, four wells, and storage capacity for tens of thousands of gallons of fuel and water.

On October 18th, responding to a MarketWatch story about the bailouts and their limited emphasis on reforming corporate governance, Sinclair wrote the following:

My Dear Friends,

I am absolutely sick to my stomach. I am grateful that I am 67 years old because I fear for my children and grand children.

How can they maintain the principles taught to them in a degraded, sinful and sociopathic world?

The world is crying out for relief from a financial world akin to Caligula’s rule of Rome.

A month later, one of his memos was posted to the Doomers.us bulletin board, along with the warning “This is about as pure doom as it gets.” It began:

My Dear Extended Family,

Things are now ‘Out of Control.’ . . . Now we enter the Collapse of Confidence period. . . .

This broken glass cannot be put back together.

It is heart rending to see a picture of GM autoworkers holding a prayer meeting for their retirement funds. The retirement money was never funded.

Collapse makes good sport for amateur historians, and as many would-be pundits raced backward through the bearish landmarks of American financial history—1998, 1987, 1974, 1929, 1907, 1873, 1837—in search of an impressively jarring analogy for current events, Nassim Taleb, the “Black Swan” theorist, was busy rereading Cicero and Herodotus (“the ancients saw things very clearly”), and thinking more along the lines of 483 B.C., when Xerxes ordered the waters of the Hellespont whipped, out of frustration over the destruction of his bridges. Xerxes’ superstitious arrogance, Taleb felt, was no different from our own scientific arrogance, which had been building steadily since the Enlightenment, to the point where investment bankers believed they could eliminate the consequences of risky behavior through the use of complex mathematics. “We’re just puppets to the gods,” he said. “The gods don’t want us to be too ambitious, too aggressive. The gods just want us to be subservient to nature. Leave the planet the way we got it.”

Taleb is not anyone’s idea of a permaculturalist. A former hedge-fund manager, he lives in Larchmont, and flies fre-

quently to Europe and the Middle East. But he has mostly lost interest in finance—even discounting outright frauds like Bernard Madoff, he says, “the stock market is a mild Ponzi scheme”—and now considers himself primarily a philosopher of randomness, consumed by the limitless possibilities of black swans, or what Donald Rumsfeld called unknown unknowns. He liked to shock friends who asked him about the election last fall by explaining that it didn’t matter whom you voted for, and what better proof of this could there be than that George W. Bush had just nationalized the banking industry? “George Bush!” he’d say. “The system will take us where it wants us to go, which is to blow up. Next time, it’s going to blow up much bigger.”

Whereas Kunstler worries about being marginalized because of an association with “whack jobs” and their fringe ideas (he complains of being “pestered incessantly with conspiracy nutcases”), Taleb wonders how serious people can fail to understand how crazy the world really is. “I got two million e-mails from people saying, ‘You’re right,’” Taleb said. “About a million people read my book before the crisis, but nobody got protection!” He calls the new book he is working on, for which he received a reported four-million-dollar advance, “my mission to discredit most of organized knowledge.” Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who responded to the crash of 1837 by writing of the “good” in “such emphatic and universal calamity as the times bring,” Taleb sees reason for encouragement in, for instance, the rapid shrinking of certain institutional endowments: “Universities will have less funding, so economists will lay low and won’t burden us with as much nonsense.” (If his own position as Distinguished Professor of Risk Engineering at N.Y.U.’s Polytechnic Institute is jeopardized, so be it.)

Taleb’s perspective is not for the anxious or weak-willed. In an effort to protect yourself from too much dependence, you begin with the certainty that a side effect of globalization is “fragility”: a problem in Icelandic banks depresses the lobster-fishing market in Maine. (“Everybody should be told that Thomas Friedman is dangerous to society.”) Capitalism itself, through the

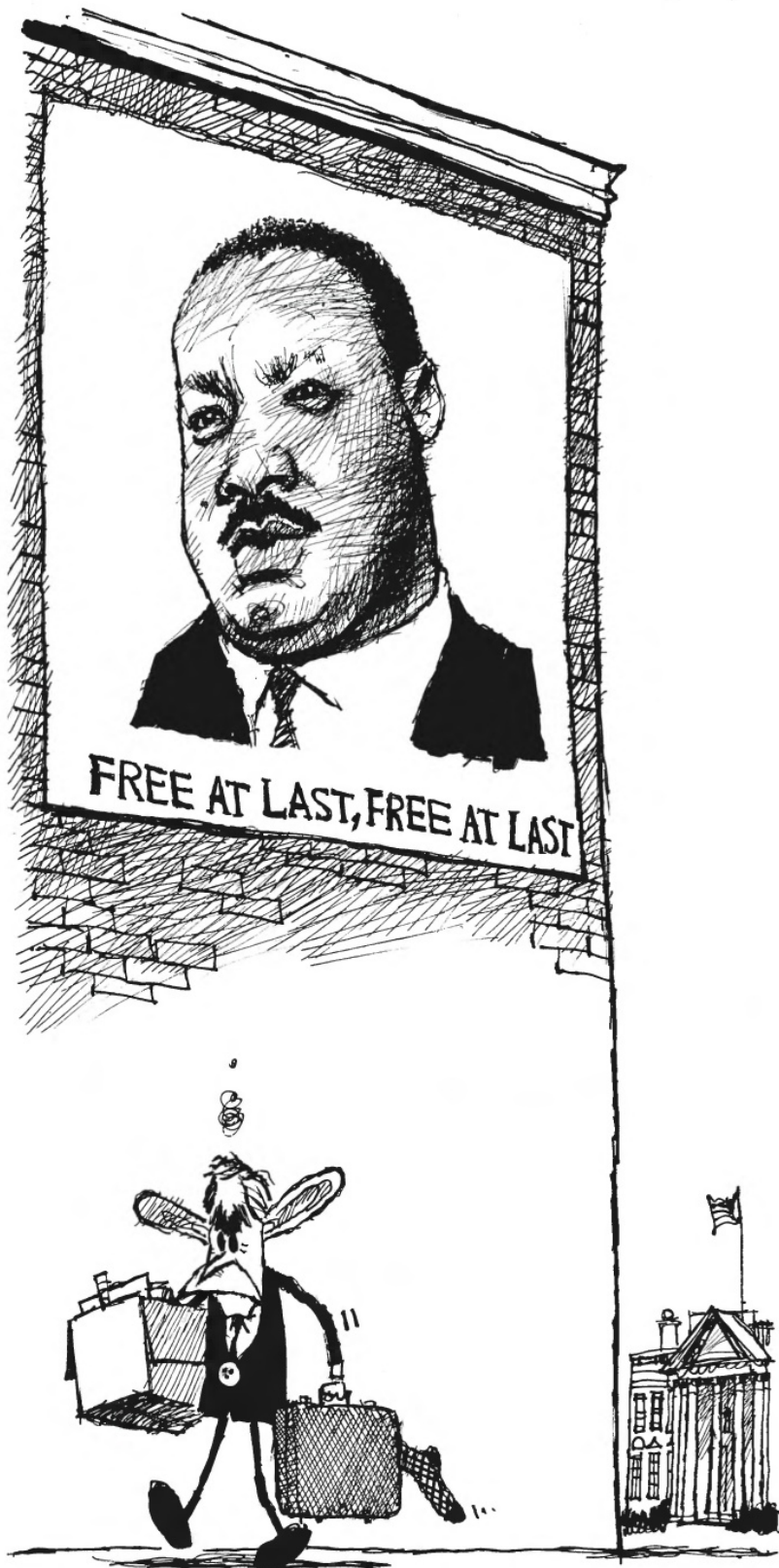
relentless pressure of quarterly reports, introduces too much efficiency and socially destabilizing leverage, so you recommend a reversion to something like an Islamic banking system, in which debt-based lending is forbidden, or at least heavily discouraged. (Taleb grew up in Lebanon, where an ongoing civil war had the beneficial effect of dissuading people from trusting banks.) You begin to question the Internet, which represents "one degree of complexity too much to handle," and advocate withdrawing from "the idiotic race" for a life of maximum inefficiency and leisure. You start to sound almost like a fellow-traveller of Ted Kaczynski. ("Kaczynski on suburbs and cars was remarkably prescient. His ecoterrorism was extremely poorly received by many people, and he was deranged. The association with his character is not a happy one. Sometimes you have movements that have to start somewhere.") In short, "You end up with antiquity," he said, a new Classical age. "I'm becoming obsessed with my idea."

It is an obsession that can overtake one's experience of daily events, and can hint of a bridge-and-tunnel apocalypse. I spoke with Taleb a few times by phone, and at a certain point in one conversation I couldn't hear him over the sound of a loud and sustained horn—his car horn, I soon learned. "You have to blow the horn so the guy comes," he said. He was on his way from Larchmont to Greenwich Village to have lunch with a friend, and was stuck at the entrance to the Henry Hudson Bridge, in an EZ-Pass lane that wasn't moving.

More honking. "Now it looks like all the EZ-Passes are stuck, in three lanes," he said. "So it's a computer glitch—classic. I'm going to be late to lunch—my first time being late since January of 2007." Here, it seemed, was a micro case study of global collapse at work: an unexpected breakdown in a typically efficient system rendering the contingencies of even the most cautious citizens moot, and concluding in a disorienting din.

A lone toll taker attended to the problem, accepting cash from one of the lead cars, and afterward the line began to move more steadily, which caused Taleb to reconsider his initial diagnosis of the problem. "Is it a random event

SKETCHBOOK BY MIKE LUCKOVICH



that three people are stuck paying cash in EZ-Pass lanes?" he asked, as he inched closer to the tollbooth. "Let's see if mine works."

"It works! So there's three different lanes that were blocked by people paying cash in EZ-Pass lanes, and only one technician." In the Soviet Union, Dmitry Orlov might say, they'd never have fired the tollbooth operators in the first place. Taleb was now running late—his streak of punctuality in jeopardy. As he drove, he began telling the cautionary story of Casanova, a guy who kept narrowly averting catastrophe (angry husbands, angry priests) and succumbed to the illusion of inevitable survival. All around Taleb himself, meanwhile, was danger. "Someone almost hit me in a big Sierra truck," he said. "I should have eggs to throw at them. Big gas guzzlers!"

Three days after the Presidential election, Jim Kunstler stood at a podium beneath a life-size portrait of George Washington, in Montpelier, Vermont, and called himself "an emissary from a place you may someday regard as foreign: New York State. . . . For the moment, we remain sister and brother states in a nation that is enduring a convulsion." He declared that the airline industry as

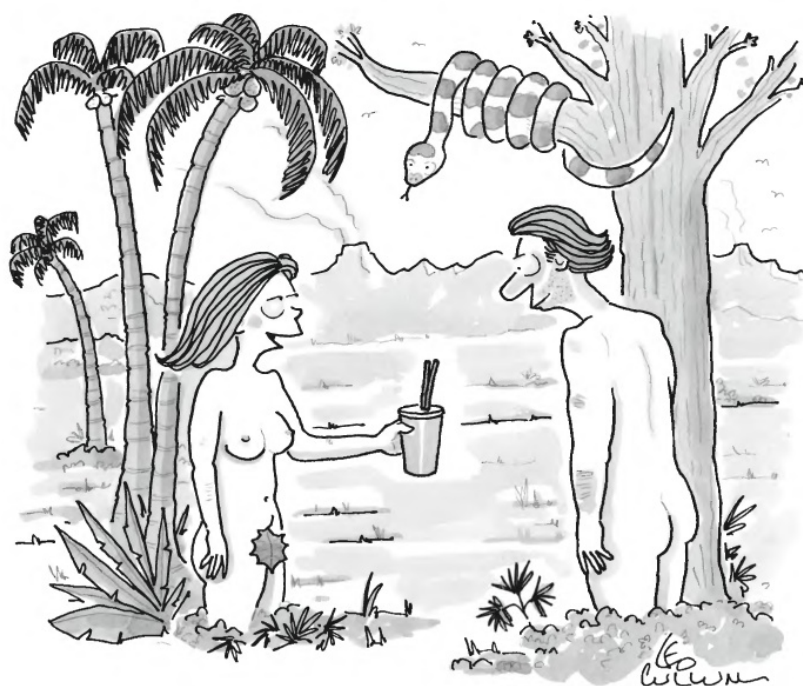
we know it will not exist within forty-eight months, or by the end of President Obama's first term. His audience was an assemblage of nearly two hundred neo-Luddites and anarchists and socialists and freegans and steampunks and home-schoolers and folksingers and knitters and yak farmers—Dmitry Orlov's future trading partners. These were people whose solution to the imminent death of the American dream was secession: a Vermont Independence Convention, sponsored by the Second Vermont Republic, a "nonviolent citizens' network and think tank opposed to the tyranny of Corporate America and the U.S. Government." (The first Vermont Republic existed from 1777 to 1791.) For the cause of secession, the S.V.R. had managed to secure, at no cost, the daylong use of the House chamber of the state capitol. A couple of teen-agers from Montpelier High School had sought and received the permission of their principal to skip class and join the revolution. They wore T-shirts that read "U.S. out of VT." One said, "There were going to be more of us if McCain won." His friend added, "Everyone's like, 'Why do we need to secede? We got Obama.'"

The convention's opening speaker was a trend forecaster named Gerald

Celente, who registered the domain name *panicof08.com* in the fall of 2007, anticipating what he called "an economic 9/11." "We're the only country in the world that has these things called self-storage units, where people have so much junk they have to move it off site," he said. "Well, guess what. Self-storage is going to live up to its true name, as people decide to move into those." He warned of an emergency bank holiday soon after Inauguration Day, and predicted tax revolts within the next two years.

Privately, Celente stressed to me that he's "very optimistic," because out of chaos comes greatness ("When you look at the Renaissance, it happened after the last Dark Age"), at least for those who are prepared. On the morning of the actual 9/11, in 2001, Celente had called his girlfriend in New York and told her to withdraw all her money and meet him at his house upstate, in Rhinebeck. She said, "Oh, Gerald, you're kidding." He wasn't kidding. He called his bank and asked them to wire all his money to Rhinebeck. They said, "Sorry, Mr. Celente, we can't. Wall Street is closed." He felt fortunate to have some gold. He thought of Indian Point, the nuclear power plant fifty miles down the Hudson, as another potential target, and immediately filled up both of his cars with gas, bought bags of dried figs, dates, and raisins, and readied his Chinese SKS rifle. ("It's accurate, it's light, it's simple: knock it down, put it back together in no time.") He figured he could be in Canada in four hours. "So when it happened, I was ready to move," he said. "Same thing with this. My money's out of the banks. I'm only interested in gold."

Celente was followed at the podium by Kirkpatrick Sale, who has a running ten-thousand-dollar bet with Kevin Kelly, a founding editor of *Wired*, that a convergence of crises—financial, environmental, political—will render entire continents unlivable by 2020; Chellis Glendinning, the author of "My Name Is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization," who had flown in from New Mexico; and Lynette Clark, the chair of the Alaskan Independence Party, to which Todd Palin belonged for seven years. Assuming Alaska has not achieved na-



"Apple smoothie?"

tionhood by 2012, Clark, a U.S. Air Force veteran who now calls herself “an Alaskan, not an American,” intends to support a Sarah Palin Presidential run, and her popularity with the crowd in Montpelier served as a reminder that this is a revolution as yet untroubled by Bolshevik-Menshevik-style squabbles. (“That’s the exciting thing about collapse—the breaking down of barriers and definitions that just don’t work anymore,” Carolyn Baker, the author of the forthcoming book “Sacred Demise: Walking the Spiritual Path of Industrial Civilization’s Collapse,” told me.)

Clark—or Yukon Yonda, as she is known in her home village of Fox, north of Fairbanks—wore a grizzly-bear claw on a chain around her neck and gold nuggets for earrings. “When we need to pay a bill, we dig a hole in the yard and get the yellow rocks out,” she said. “It’s the most sustainable way.” She and her husband, Dexter, met while prospecting. They refer to their home as the Biosphere, make wine from rhubarb and raspberries, and have a house pig, Rosie, but they also enforce a strict “no trespassing” rule against stray animals—caribou, lynx, squirrels—that wander across their property line, which is one of several reasons that she always packs a Colt .45. Dexter is on the village Roadkill Committee. “When a moose gets killed on the highway, we go out, gut it, skin it, and disperse that meat through the community,” she said.

The speeches were accompanied by comic and musical interludes from the Bread & Puppet Theatre, whose members wore bear costumes and danced around with plungers, and by the singing of the Vermont secession anthem: “It’s Vermonters to the lifeboats, this is a sinkin’ ship...” For lunch, I joined Rob Williams, a co-founder of the Vermont Yak Company (“Once you go yak, you never go back”) and his friend Andrew, a bearded Ben & Jerry’s employee, at a café downtown called That’s Life Soup. Andrew and I ordered Yahoo President Obama Election Stew. Williams, who also edits a bimonthly newspaper called *Vermont Commons: Voices of Independence*, opted for the vegan chili. He is what Vermonters call a flatlander; before going yak, he spent eight years in New Mexico, where, as he explained, “there’s not enough water to



“He just doesn’t know what to do with himself since he passed away.”

go around.” Depending on the foreclosure rate, his migration may turn out to have prefigured an exodus from the so-called sand states of the Southwest, which Kunstler sees as likely targets of Mexican *reconquista*.

During the afternoon session, the founder of the Second Vermont Republic, a retired Duke economics professor named Thomas Naylor, who wore a green jacket, like a winner at Augusta National, offered his best pragmatic rationale for a successfully “genteel” coup. “Vermont has nothing, O.K.,” he said. “We have no big cities. We have no big buildings. We have *nothing*. Suppose the red-state, nuclear-armed army were to attack us. What would they do? Burn the sugar maples?” The tricky part comes during Stage Two: teaming up with New Hampshire, Maine, and the Canadian Maritime Provinces to form a “pretty little country about the size of Denmark.” He’d call it New Acadia. (Even secessionists are not immune from the temptations of expansion.) Naylor, who likens globalization to the Tower of Babel, refers to New York City as “the great Satan,” which, by his own admission, may explain the fact that his son is enrolled at the New School and living in the financial district.

Any good political convention has its breakout star—its Obama of 2004—and my internal polling mechanism pointed to Dennis Steele, a fifth-generation Vermonter and father of two, from the town of Kirby (pop. 500). Steele runs a Web site called chessmaniac.com, and was one of the last to speak. He wore a jean jacket and a Ron Paul cap over his longish hair, and taunted the presiding governor of the state of Vermont, Jim Douglas, for not venturing down the hall to acknowledge the insurrection. “This will be remembered as the most important movement in recent world history,” Steele said, and quoted the great revolutionary Ethan Allen (“The Gods of the hills are not the Gods of the valley”), whose name, if Kunstler’s predictions are to be trusted, may yet be liberated from an association with upholstered living rooms. Steele announced the formation of a new Green Mountain Brigade, and held up a petition with thirty-eight signatures that he’d collected: Kirbyites for a free Vermont. “That’s the first step of the revolution, besides drinking raw milk,” he said. ♦

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An audio interview with Ben McGrath.