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What Is Art For?

By DANIEL B. SMITH

Last April I asked the writer Lewis Hyde if he would take a trip with me to Walden Pond, in Concord, Mass. At 63, Hyde has boyishly tousled brown-gray hair, freckled, soft-looking cheeks and the slightly abstracted gaze of a man who spends a disproportionate amount of his time in library carrels. He has an ironic streak, but his default mode is a kind of easygoing acquiescence, and so one slate gray Saturday afternoon he picked me up in Cambridge, where he lives and works half the year, and drove us the 12 miles west to Walden.

Hyde knows the area well — among his ongoing projects is a detailed series of annotations of [Henry David Thoreau](#)'s essays — and he led me down a dirt path from the parking lot to the site of the cabin where, more than 150 years ago, Thoreau wrote his celebrated paean to solitude and self-reliance. The cabin no longer exists. In its place there is a lightly excavated, cordoned-off square of soil and, to its side, a waist-high cairn erected in commemoration by generations of pilgrims.

Our own visit wasn't commemorative, but it was a pilgrimage of a sort. Hyde has been writing and publishing for more than three decades, and he has received numerous high-profile awards, including a MacArthur "genius grant" in 1991, but his name is still obscure to most readers. His body of work is slim; he has published two books, a volume of poems and a smattering of essays, translations and edited anthologies. His reputation, however, is rich. [David Foster Wallace](#) called him "one of our true superstars of nonfiction." Hyde's fans — among them [Zadie Smith](#), [Michael Chabon](#) and [Jonathan Lethem](#) — routinely use words like "transformative" and "life-altering" to describe his books, which they've been known to pass hand to hand like spiritual texts or samizdat manifestoes. The source of much of this reverence is Hyde's first book, "The Gift" (1983), which has never been out of print (it was recently rereleased by Vintage in a 25th-anniversary edition) and which tries to reconcile the value of doing creative work with the exigencies of a market economy.

Hyde began his career as a poet in the naturalistic vein of Gary Snyder or Mary Oliver, but over the years he has transformed himself into an accomplished scholar. "The Gift," the core argument of which depends on establishing an analogy between the making of art and how objects accrue value in traditional "gift economies," has been praised as the most subtle, influential study of reciprocity since the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss's 1924 essay of the same name. His second book, "Trickster Makes This World" (1998), a cross-cultural study of the mischievous, mythological trickster figure (examples from the 20th century include Duchamp, [Picasso](#) and Ginsberg), weaves together literary strands from West Africa, India and China and concludes with a new translation of the "Homeric Hymn to Hermes," for which Hyde spent months working one on one with a tutor in ancient Greek. Jonathan Lethem told me that when he first read "The Gift," he pictured its author as a kind of inapproachable seer, either long dead or soaring so

high in the intellectual stratosphere as to be unreachable. “It’d be like reading a book by Nietzsche or Freud when they were alive and thinking, Oh, I gotta send this guy a note!”

Hyde’s admirers often point out with awe (and his reviewers with frustration) that his books are all but impossible to summarize. Hyde doesn’t object to this assessment. He wrote “The Gift” because he could find no place where his own motivations for writing poetry were well articulated, but articulating them required a poet’s suggestiveness. “One thing I’ve always liked to read is the kind of literature you find in Jung and Freud, which combines personal anecdote, philosophy, mythology, dreams,” he told me in his Cambridge office last May. “I like the way it jumps from one discursive realm to another.” His books exhibit this lively heterogeneity to an at-times dizzying extent; in the course of 12 pages in “The Gift,” Hyde hops from a discussion of a Pali Buddhist parable to Marx’s “Capital” to the Ford Pinto and then moves quickly on, in the next 3 pages, to Christmas, country-western music and the psychological fates of Vietnamese refugees in Southern California.

In the late 1990s, Hyde began extending his lifelong project of examining “the public life of the imagination” into what had become newly topical territory: the “cultural commons.” The advent of Internet file-sharing services like Napster and Gnutella sparked urgent debates over how to strike a balance between public and private claims to creative work. For more than a decade, the so-called Copy Left — a diverse group of lawyers, activists, artists and intellectuals — has argued that new digital technologies are responsible for an unprecedented wave of innovation and that excessive legal restrictions should not be placed on, say, music remixes, image mashups or “read-write” sites like [Wikipedia](#), where users create their own content. The Copy Left, or the “free culture movement,” as it is sometimes known, has articulated this position in part by drawing on the tradition of the medieval agricultural commons, the collective right of villagers, vassals and serfs — “commoners” — to make use of a plot of land. This analogy is also central to Hyde’s book in progress, which looks closely at how the tradition of the commons was transformed once it was brought from Europe to America.

For the Copy Left, as for Hyde, the last 20 years have witnessed a corporate “land grab” of information — often in the guise of protecting the work of individual artists — that has put a stranglehold on creativity, in increasingly bizarre ways. Over dinner not long ago, he told me about the legal fate of [Emily Dickinson](#)’s poems. Dickinson died in 1886, but it was not until 1955 that an “official” volume of her collected works was published, by [Harvard University](#) Press. The length of copyright terms has expanded substantially in the last century, and Harvard holds the exclusive right to Dickinson’s poems until 2050 — more than 160 years after they were first written. When the poet [Robert Pinsky](#) asked Harvard for permission to include a Dickinson poem in an article that he was writing for Slate about poetic insults, it refused, even for a fee. “Their feeling was that once the poem was online, they’d lose control of it,” Hyde told me.

In highlighting the absurd ways in which intellectual copyright has overreached, Hyde brings to mind such iconic Copy Left figures as [Lawrence Lessig](#), a constitutional-law scholar at Stanford. Yet Hyde’s new book, which he allowed me to read in draft form (it is unfinished and untitled), addresses what he considers a more fundamental issue. We may believe there should be a limit on the market in cultural property, he argues, but that doesn’t mean that we have “a good public sense” of where to set that limit. Hyde’s book is, at its core, an attempt to help formulate that sense.

If this sounds like a heady goal, it is. But it is also eminently practical, and eminently American. For Hyde, redressing the balance between private (corporate, individual) and common (public) interests depends not just on effective policy but also on recovering the idea of the cultural commons as a deeply American concept. To that end, he excavates a history of the American imagination in which the emphasis is not on the lone genius (Thoreau scribbling hermetically in the Massachusetts woods) but on the anonymous pamphleteer, the inventor eager to share his discoveries. In an essay that offers a preview of his book (posted, fittingly, on his Web site), Hyde posits that the history of the commons and of the creative self are, in fact, twin histories. “The citizen called into being by a republic of freehold farms,” he writes, “is close cousin to the writer who built himself that cabin at Walden Pond. But along with such mainstream icons goes a shadow tradition, the one that made Jefferson skeptical of patents, the one that made even Thoreau argue late in life that every ‘town should have ... a primitive forest ... , where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common possession forever,’ the one that led the framers of the Constitution to balance ‘exclusive right’ with ‘limited times.’ It is a tradition worth recovering.”

For nearly 10 years, Hyde has devoted himself to that task.

Hyde’s Cambridge office is located in the back of a converted carriage house near Porter Square, in the residential heart of the town. The space was offered to him rent-free by an architect who had seen him speak about “The Gift” and who liked the idea of sponsoring a “poet in residence” at her firm. Hyde’s office is bright and inviting, with meticulous piles of papers covering the surfaces, books on American intellectual and legal history stacked on the shelves and, tacked to a far wall, photocopies of several abstract drawings by the artist Max Gimblett — part of a collaborative project to reproduce an ancient parable of Buddhist enlightenment.

The countercultural air these illustrations give off goes hand in hand with Hyde’s reputation. He has often been criticized for a sort of hippie anti-corporatism. Not surprisingly, he has also been praised for the same thing: in recent years, “The Gift” has been adopted as something like the theory bible of the [Burning Man festival](#). Yet the association hardly matches the style of his mind, which is sharp and skeptical and far from starry-eyed. Years ago, when Hyde’s hippie friends fled the city to “live off the land,” he would make sport of their idealism. “Smelting your own iron yet?” he would ask. “Distilling that kerosene?” He prefers to think of himself in an aesthetic light rather than a political one, as a writer who is upholding the tradition of the “poet-essayists who never stop being poets”: [Czeslaw Milosz](#), [William Carlos Williams](#), D. H. Lawrence, Emerson, Thoreau.

Hyde’s link with this tradition is temperamental as well as literary. In many ways, his life embodies the diversity of experiences and exchanges he is at such pains to value in his nonfiction. Although he is currently a fellow at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society and a tenured professor of creative writing at Kenyon College in Ohio, his self-identification remains that of a “scholar without institution” — a writer and thinker working outside the public and academic arenas.

As wide-ranging as Hyde’s intellectual flights have been, they haven’t carried him far from his origins. His Cambridge office is located six blocks from where he was born, in 1945, to a father studying for a Ph.D. in optical physics and a mother with a master’s in psychology. The atmosphere was intellectual, but in a way that Hyde now sees as narrow. “I was raised in a family where science was the real thing,” he says. “Science

was the thing you did.”

As a teenager, Hyde thought he might become a geologist. By the time he was through with his studies, he had made poetry his vocation. He attended the [University of Minnesota](#) in the early '60s, benefiting enormously from the various figures he encountered there: [John Berryman](#), who taught poetry at the university and became a model of impassioned devotion to literature; Robert Bly, whom he met on a bus to an antiwar demonstration in D.C. and who encouraged him to try his hand at translation; [Garrison Keillor](#), then the editor of the campus literary magazine, who was the first person to take Hyde's poetic efforts seriously and who published Hyde's earliest nonfiction. He spent a few years in a graduate program in comparative literature at the [University of Iowa](#) and then, bored by academia, quit and moved to western Minnesota to write.

It was in its way as much a move to the literary wilderness as was Thoreau's move to Walden. To make ends meet, Hyde worked as a carpenter and bluffed his way into a job as an electrician at a mobile-home factory. He eventually headed East, following a girlfriend — and was unceremoniously dumped while standing at a pay phone in West Virginia. Unmoored in Boston, armed with only a youthful bravado and an essay he wrote about schizophrenia titled “The Tuber Mind,” Hyde presented himself at the psychiatric ward at Cambridge City Hospital and announced, “I'm here to be your poet in residence!” He was hired as the night guy on the drunk ward.

Strangely, the job marked the beginning of Hyde's lifelong study of the roots of the creative imagination, and of his literary ascent. At the time, Berryman was writing and publishing his landmark “Dream Songs.” In the anguished, self-pitying tone of the poems, Hyde heard an echo of the tales spun by the residents on the ward, and he wrote a long essay drawing the parallel. “Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and the Booze Talking,” published in 1975, was widely anthologized and widely debated. More important, it won Hyde a \$7,500 grant from the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), which he lived on for a year and a half as he haunted libraries, tramped around and tried to figure out what he wanted to do next, and how. “I worked on how I work” is how he puts it.

At the time, Hyde's passion for poetry was quickly being matched by a passion for cultural anthropology, particularly the writings of Ivan Illich, an Austrian priest-cum-social-critic who drew wide public attention for his book “Deschooling Society” (1971) — a polemic against modern public education. Hyde traveled to Cuernavaca, where Illich ran a language center and salon for Western missionaries heading to Latin America. It was Illich who lent Hyde a book of anthropology that contained a chapter about Marcel Mauss's essay on gift exchange. Hyde's intellectual course for the next several years was set.

The work captivated Hyde. “There was language in this which seemed to me metaphorically related to creativity,” he told me. Mauss was a scholar of the old polymathic sort — a sociologist, a linguist, a historian of religion, a Sanskrit expert, a philosopher. His essay on gift exchange drew on the work of the seminal turn-of-the-century ethnographers Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski to explore aboriginal societies in which the person of consequence — the man or woman who is deemed worthy of adulation, respect and emulation — is not the one who accumulates the most goods but the one who disperses them. Gift economies, as Mauss defines them, are marked by circulation and connectivity: goods have value only insofar as they are treated as gifts, and gifts can remain gifts only if they are continually given away. This

results in a kind of engine of community cohesion, in which objects create social, psychological, emotional and spiritual bonds as they pass from hand to hand.

The ideas resonated deeply with Hyde. For nearly a decade he had been struggling to explain — to his family, to nonartist friends, to himself — why he devoted so much of his time and energy to something as nonremunerative as poetry. The literature on gift exchange — tales, for example, of South Sea tribesman circulating shells and necklaces in a slow-moving, broad circle around the Trobriand Islands — gave him the conceptual tool he needed to understand his predicament, which was, he came to believe, the predicament of all artists living “in an age whose values are market values and whose commerce consists almost exclusively in the purchase and sale of commodities.” For centuries people have been speaking of talent and inspiration as gifts; Hyde’s basic argument was that this language must extend to the products of talent and inspiration too. Unlike a commodity, whose value begins to decline the moment it changes hands, an artwork gains in value from the act of being circulated—published, shown, written about, passed from generation to generation — from being, at its core, an offering.

Hyde worked on “The Gift” for seven years, barely scraping by, spending long months hunting through obscure folk tales for narratives that reflected what he came to call “the commerce of the creative spirit.” When the book was finally published, the critic Martha Bayles castigated it in *The New York Times* for naïvely “esp[ying] a noble savage in every struggling artist” — a critique that was echoed elsewhere. Yet the artistic community immediately embraced Hyde’s work. A bevy of poets, including Robert Pinsky, Donald Hall and Gary Snyder, published a group letter in *The Times* responding to Bayles’s review and praising Hyde’s “search to regain the unity of economic, aesthetic, social and religious life.” [Bill Viola](#), the pioneering video artist, remembers New York artists in the 1980s excitedly exchanging dog-eared, marked-up copies. “In a society that mostly talks about money,” says [Margaret Atwood](#), who keeps a half-dozen copies of “The Gift” on hand at all times to distribute to artists she thinks will benefit from it, “Lewis carved out a little island where you can say, ‘Life doesn’t always work that way.’”

Since the mid-1980s, when his work began to gain in popularity, Hyde has often been invited to speak publicly about creativity and gift exchange. Invariably, the discussions following his lectures have wound their way to a practical question: If creative work doesn’t necessarily have any market value, how is the artist to survive?

In the course of writing “The Gift,” Hyde underwent an intellectual transformation on this subject. He began the work believing there was “an irreconcilable conflict” between gift exchange and the market; the enduring (if not necessarily the happy) artist was the one who most successfully fended off commercial demands. By the time he was finished, Hyde had come to a less-dogmatic conclusion. It was still true, he believed, that the marketplace could destroy an artist’s gift, but it was equally true that the marketplace wasn’t going anywhere; it had always existed, and it always would. The key was to find a good way to reconcile the two economies.

Following this line of thinking, Hyde grew enamored of a bill introduced in 1994 by the Democratic senator [Christopher Dodd](#) of Connecticut. The “Arts Endowing the Arts Act” was an unusual piece of legislation. It proposed auctioning off 20 additional years of copyright protection for creative works and using the proceeds to build a permanent endowment for the arts and humanities. In essence, Dodd wanted to create a

gift economy.

The bill failed to gain any traction. The entertainment industry, led by Disney, which faced the imminent expiration of its massively lucrative copyrights on Mickey Mouse, Pluto and Donald Duck, lobbied for the expansion of copyright terms without restriction. In 1998, the [Sonny Bono](#) Copyright Term Extension Act passed, adding 20 years to the length of copyright, both pro- and retroactively, and ensuring that thousands of creative works poised to enter the public domain remained in private hands.

As we sat in Hyde's office on a warm day last spring, he talked passionately about why the C.T.E.A. was not only unfortunate but also unconstitutional. For Hyde, as for many legal and political scholars, the C.T.E.A. (the "Mickey Mouse Protection Act" to its detractors) represents a blatant abrogation of the purpose of intellectual-property law. As he sets out to show in his book, copyright was enshrined in the Constitution for civic rather than commercial purposes. For the founders, intellectual property was a great privilege; copyrights and patents were primarily meant to serve, in Madison's words, as "encouragements to literary works and ingenious discoveries." By extending copyright retroactively, Hyde told me, the C.T.E.A. negated the logic of incentive: Mickey Mouse can't be invented twice.

Hyde is not a free-culture purist; he holds copyrights on his books, and those copyrights contribute to his income. But the passing of the C.T.E.A. convinced him, as it did many observers, of what Hyde calls a looming "market triumphalism." "I see in the paper that there is now a Congressional proposal to have a White House level 'IP Czar,'" he wrote in an e-mail message to me in May. "Daily this stuff ticks me off!"

The C.T.E.A. spurred Hyde to action. He wrote letters to every member of the Senate Judiciary Committee. He published an op-ed, the first of his career. In 1999, with the writer [Brendan Gill](#) and Archibald Gillies, then the director of the [Andy Warhol](#) Foundation, he started the Creative Capital Foundation, a nonprofit that offers financial support to artists in return for a small percentage of any net profits generated by their work, which the foundation uses to finance other projects. He helped organize a low-fee writers' room in Boston. And in 2004, he became a fellow at Berkman.

For all his activism, however, Hyde maintains that little of true political worth will be accomplished until the very terms of the "intellectual property" debate are changed. This was brought home to me one rainy evening last April, when Hyde and I met at a Harvard auditorium to attend a lecture on corruption in Congress by Lawrence Lessig. For a decade, Lessig has been the most-visible exponent of the position that institutions like Berkman were founded to promote: that the Internet should serve as a virtual communal space. In 2002, Lessig helped found Creative Commons, an organization that carves a middle path between the near-absolute stringency of intellectual-property law and absolute generosity by allowing creators to specify the level of control they want to maintain over their work.

After the lecture, as we walked across the darkened campus, I mentioned to Hyde that I had found Lessig's talk to be logical and well crafted.

"A little too well crafted, if you ask me," Hyde said.

This took me by surprise — Hyde is a polite man who rarely speaks critically of others — and I later asked him to elaborate. "Look, Lessig is a lawyer," he said. "I like him, I think he's solid. But it's a very particular

way of thinking.” Hyde himself makes use of the Creative Commons, yet there’s a formality to the setup that troubles him. “All of the C.C. licenses use the lever of the law,” he said. “They have the assumption of private ownership behind them. So Lessig, in a certain sense, is confining himself to one slice of this stuff, which is not as capacious as a true commons would be.”

“Capaciousness” is the keynote of Hyde’s own approach to the commons and suggests why he might feel a little out of place at a Harvard think tank. To date, the most prominent thinkers to adapt the idea of the commons to contemporary issues have been lawyers — most notably, Lessig and a current Berkman co-director, Yochai Benkler — and, being lawyers, they have an instinct to draw sharp distinctions that lead to policy solutions. Thus Lessig is careful to distinguish between “rivalrous” resources, like drinking water, in which one person’s use by definition competes with another’s, and “nonrivalrous” resources, like the English language, which cannot be depleted no matter how many people make use of them.

Hyde is interested in this distinction, too. “Shakespeare’s plays,” he writes, “will never collapse, no matter how many people read them — and such commons therefore serve as a kind of limiting case for the argument that the market will serve us well in every sphere of life.” Yet he is more interested in “fleshing out” (a pet phrase) how the commons can embody cherished values — indeed, cherished American values — that private property cannot. As Hyde sets out to show, the contemporary impulse to think of culture as “intellectual property” contains far more of “property” than the founders intended.

Thinker-politicians like Jefferson, Adams and Madison were just as familiar as we are with the metaphor that likens created work to physical property, especially to a landed estate. But they thought of that landed estate in a new way — as the basis of a republic. An American’s land was his own — he owed allegiance to no sovereign — but his ownership imposed on him an almost sacred moral requirement to contribute to the public good. According to Hyde, this ethic of “civic republicanism” was the ideological engine that drove the founders’ conception of intellectual property, and to his mind, it undercuts the ethic of “commercial republicanism” that dominates our current conception of it. Our right to property is not absolute; our possessions are held in trust, as it were. Seen through the prism of early civic Republicanism, Hyde asks, what might the creative self look like? Do we imagine that self as “solitary and self-made”? Or as “collective, common and interdependent”?

There’s a line of Emerson’s from ‘Self-Reliance,’ ” Hyde told me one day in his office, “where he says of [Benjamin Franklin](#): ‘Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin? Every great man is a unique.’ Well, it’s crazy! There’s a long list of masters who taught Franklin! And yet the Emersonian song is the one that sticks in everyone’s head.”

Suffice it to say that Hyde goes to heroic lengths to unstick it — and with a striking directness. A full 60 pages of his new manuscript are devoted to debunking the Emersonian view of Franklin as “America’s first self-made man” and replacing it with a portrait of Franklin as a “commoner,” a man whose defining talent was for absorbing, repurposing and synthesizing the culture around him, like some colonial M.C. The law of conservation of charge, the eponymous stove, the precise path of the Gulf Stream: Hyde shoves aside each of Franklin’s “discoveries” to uncover thick foundations of pre-existing knowledge and scientific collaboration. The point of all this is not to prove that Franklin wasn’t a genius but to show that his genius didn’t burst out of thin air. “It takes a capacious mind to play host to ... others and to find new ways to

combine what they have to offer,” Hyde writes, “but not a mind for whom there are no masters, not a ‘unique.’ Quite the opposite — this is a mind willing to be taught, willing to be inhabited, willing to labor in the cultural commons.”

In Franklin, Hyde has found a subject to give canonical voice to his own beliefs. Despite Franklin’s notorious talents of self-promotion, he was explicit that his inventions were not and should not be his to claim as property. Offered an exclusive patent on the Franklin stove, he refused on the grounds that the invention was based on previous innovations — specifically, on theories of heat and matter articulated by [Isaac Newton](#) and the Dutch physician Hermann Boerhaave. “That as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others,” Franklin wrote in his “Autobiography,” “we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously.”

Of course, you might say, this was an easy position for Franklin to take: he was rich. People need their copyrights to live. But that’s exactly Hyde’s point: copyrights are utilitarian things. They generate money to pay a mortgage and buy groceries and continue working. Extended too far beyond their practical usefulness, copyrights not only contradict their original intent; they also wall creators off from the sources of their inventiveness. Genius, Hyde believes, needs to “tinker in a collective shop.”

“I’ve thought of doing a version of Emerson in which you simply take every sentence of ‘Self-Reliance’ and flip it,” Hyde says. “So like at the beginning he says, ‘Yesterday I read in a book somebody stating very well an idea I had myself, and I felt ashamed that I hadn’t expressed it myself.’ Well, you could say, ‘Yesterday I read in a book somebody stating very well an idea I had myself, and I felt glad that I was not alone, and that my ideas were not my ideas.’ You know, where is the master who could teach Emerson?”

There happens to be an answer to this question — many answers, in fact. As Emerson himself acknowledged, his intellectual life was chaotic with debts, influences and fellow travelers. And the greatest influence of all was an influence that looms large in Hyde’s own work as well, and whose quietly unsettling, deeply informed prose bears a more-than-passing resemblance to his own: Thoreau. Hyde still isn’t sure if Thoreau will make an appearance in his commons book, but it’s possible. In 1998, he published an essay in which he took the same approach to Thoreau as he does to Franklin, showing that for all his vaunted individualism, Thoreau could not have produced his work without the rich community and communal institutions surrounding him in Concord. It was the first expression of the thesis that would grow into the heart of Hyde’s new project, and it was the first piece of the project that I read.

It was also the impetus for our trip to Walden, and to the site of Thoreau’s cabin. Although, as Hyde’s essay strives to make clear, it wasn’t really Thoreau’s cabin at all but Emerson’s. The older man owned the land and acquired the structure after his protégé vacated. He offered the land in the first place because he believed — rightly as it turned out — that with a little space and solitude, Thoreau could do great work. He had already employed Thoreau as a handyman and tutor and given him access to his circle of illustrious friends and his unrivaled library. In other words, “Walden,” the premier document of American individualism, was in a sense born out of the generosity of the American prophet of self-reliance.

I had hoped to talk about these issues as Hyde and I walked alongside the pale water to Thoreau’s cabin, but the path was too narrow for us to chat comfortably, and we made our pilgrimage mainly in silence. The next

day, however, things got a little more capacious, as it were. Hyde invited me to have brunch with him and his wife at his house in Cambridge. It is a beautiful, bright house, in whose back garden stands the trellis-covered studio — a former turkey pen — where Hyde was a tenant when he wrote “The Gift.” Afterward, as we sat around his dining-room table, Hyde got up, pulled a CD by the Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn off a shelf and handed it to me. The album contained a song called “The Gift.” “I’ll leave you with this ringing in your ears,” he said, and pressed play on his stereo. The melody was jaunty, and the lyrics were unambiguously based on Hyde’s masterpiece:

In this cold commodity culture

Where you lay your money down

It’s hard to even notice

That all this earth is hallowed ground ...

The gift keeps moving

Never know where it’s going to land

You must stand back and let it

Keep on changing hands.

As Cockburn strummed and sang, I read through the liner notes and noticed that Hyde was credited as an inspiration alongside E. E. Cummings and, wryly, the manager of the Chernobyl nuclear-power plant. I mentioned this to Hyde. He grinned, opened his hands and gave a curt bow. “All illustrious company to be in,” he said.

Daniel B. Smith is the author of “Muses, Madmen, and Prophets: Hearing Voices and the Borders of Sanity,” from which his last article for the magazine was adapted.

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