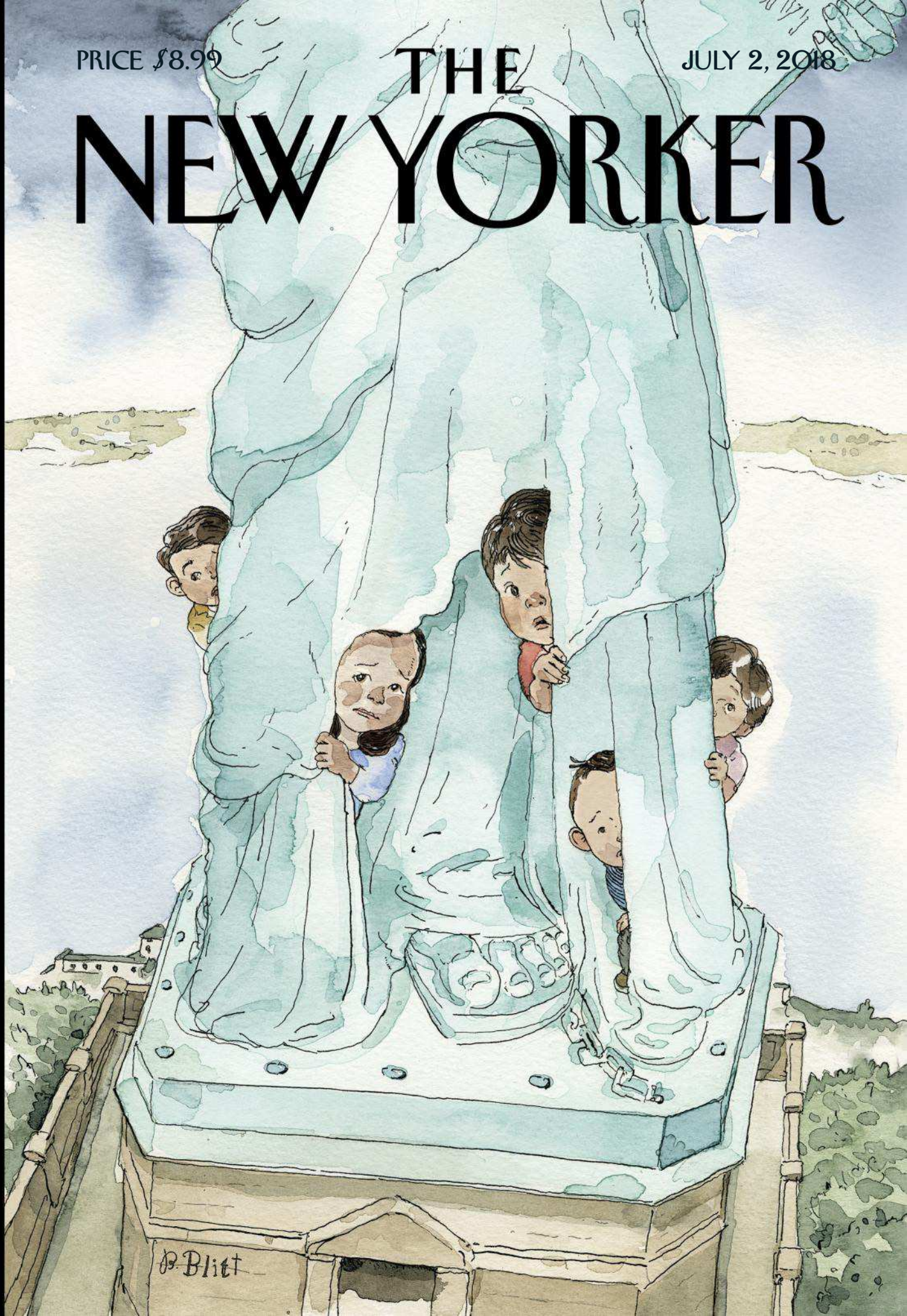


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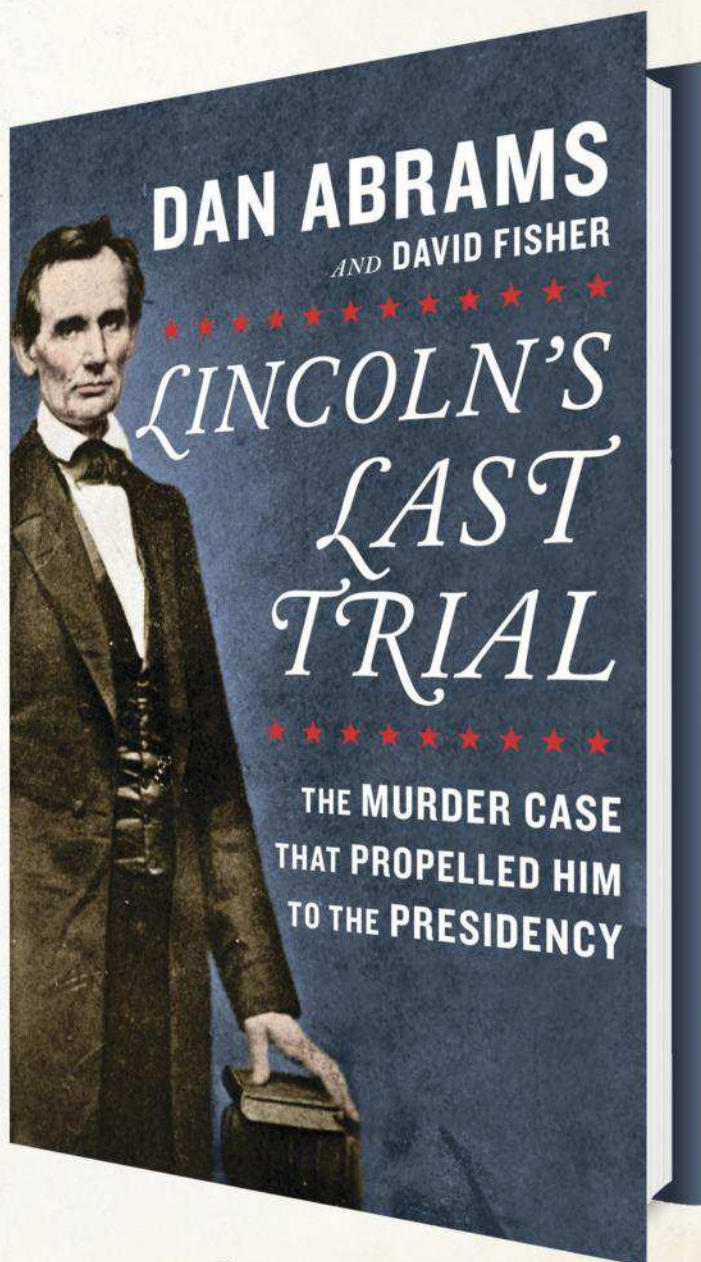
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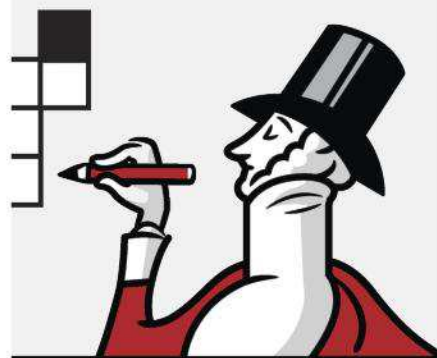
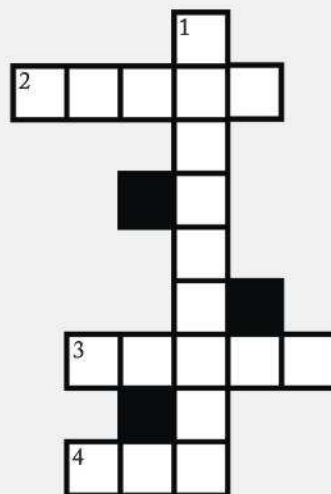
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## Introducing The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle



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2. Dulce et \_\_\_\_\_ (Horatian maxim).

3. Flavoring used in biscotti.

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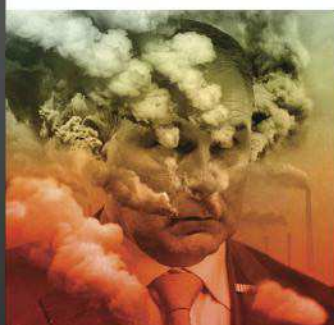
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A REPORTER AT LARGE APRIL 2, 2018 ISSUE

## SCOTT PRUITT'S DIRTY POLITICS

How the Environmental Protection Agency  
became the fossil-fuel industry's best friend.

By Margaret Talbot



William Ruckelshaus, who ran the E.P.A. under  
Nixon and Reagan, said that Pruitt and his top  
staff "don't fundamentally agree with the mission  
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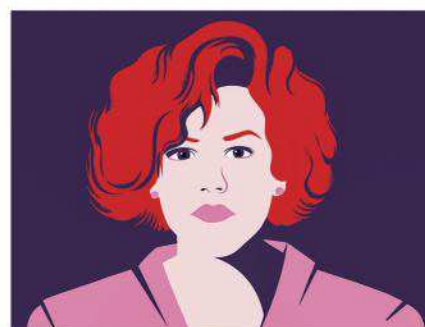
**Barry Blitt** (*Cover*) is a cartoonist and an illustrator. His latest book, "Blitt," is a collection of his illustrations for *The New Yorker*, the *Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and other publications.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



### DISPATCH

A report from the Texas border on immigration and family separation, by Sarah Stillman and Jonathan Blitzer.



### NEW YORKER RADIO HOUR

Molly Ringwald and Judd Apatow discuss the #MeToo movement and the long shadow of sexism in film.

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# THE MAIL

## THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY

Louis Menand's piece on privacy concerns ignores ethical questions about the private sector's surveillance and tracking of people, whom it tends to treat as consumers, not as citizens ("No-where to Hide," June 18th). When corporations track human beings through their clicks and purchases, they turn them into data points, purchase histories, and algorithm targets. Perhaps Menand should have considered the 1905 case of *Lochner v. New York*, in which, as Jeffrey Toobin explained in his overview of the *Citizens United* judgment, the Supreme Court's decision "turned the Fourteenth Amendment, which was enacted to protect the rights of newly freed slaves, into a mechanism to advance the interest of business owners." In 1886, as Toobin noted, Chief Justice Waite had declared on the Court's behalf that the Fourteenth Amendment, meant to address the nation's capitalist treatment of black people as property and free labor, also necessitated extending personhood status to corporations. Seen in this light, data-collecting companies like Facebook are not "parties whose motives are . . . benign," as Menand suggests. The real issue is not "liberty" or our right to govern ourselves but a peculiar twenty-first-century concern to not cede government to the private sector.

*Brian Gibson*

*Annapolis Royal, N.S.*

Menand notes that Louis Brandeis, in his 1890 essay "The Right to Privacy," made no claim for a constitutional protection of the right to privacy, instead asserting that privacy is a right "inherent in common law." However, Brandeis's dissent in *Olmsted v. United States*, in 1928, was based on his belief that the privacy of a telephone conversation is protected by the Fourth Amendment's prohibition of "unreasonable searches and seizures." This change in Brandeis's thinking was largely influenced by the writings of the Michigan Supreme Court chief

judge Thomas M. Cooley, who was probably the first jurist to assert that electronic communications were protected by the Constitution. In a footnote in his 1868 book, "A Treatise on the Constitutional Limitations," Cooley argued that "the importance of public confidence in the inviolability of correspondence . . . cannot well be overrated. . . . The same may be said of private correspondence by telegraph." And, Cooley added, for a telegraph operator to be required to bring private telegrams into court would be an "unreasonable seizure" as is directly condemned by the Constitution." Modern scholars see many parallels between the telegraph of Cooley's day and the Internet—an e-mail stored in a server is the modern version of a telegram. And it was Cooley who, in "A Treatise on the Law of Torts," from 1878, first used the emblematic phrase "The right to be let alone."

*Thomas C. Jepsen*

*Chapel Hill, N.C.*

As I was reading Menand's article, I couldn't help but think of how Michel Foucault would have felt about the state of data privacy that Menand describes. Today, as technology progresses, the breadth of legal ambiguity widens. As Foucault reminds us, for a regime to be effective it must be exhaustive. Under the current Administration, I fear that the malleability of words and truth opens opportunities not only for untold surveillance but also for fatigued public acceptance.

*Zachary C. Zeller*

*Westchester, N.Y.*

### EDITORS' NOTE:

The spot illustrations in the June 25, 2018, issue are by Gérard DuBois, not Alain Pilon.

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to [themail@newyorker.com](mailto:themail@newyorker.com). Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.



q/8

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**BADBADNOTGOOD**  
**NAO**

Saba / Preoccupations  
Vagabon / Hatchie  
Standing on the Corner  
Flasher / Madison McFerrin

q/9

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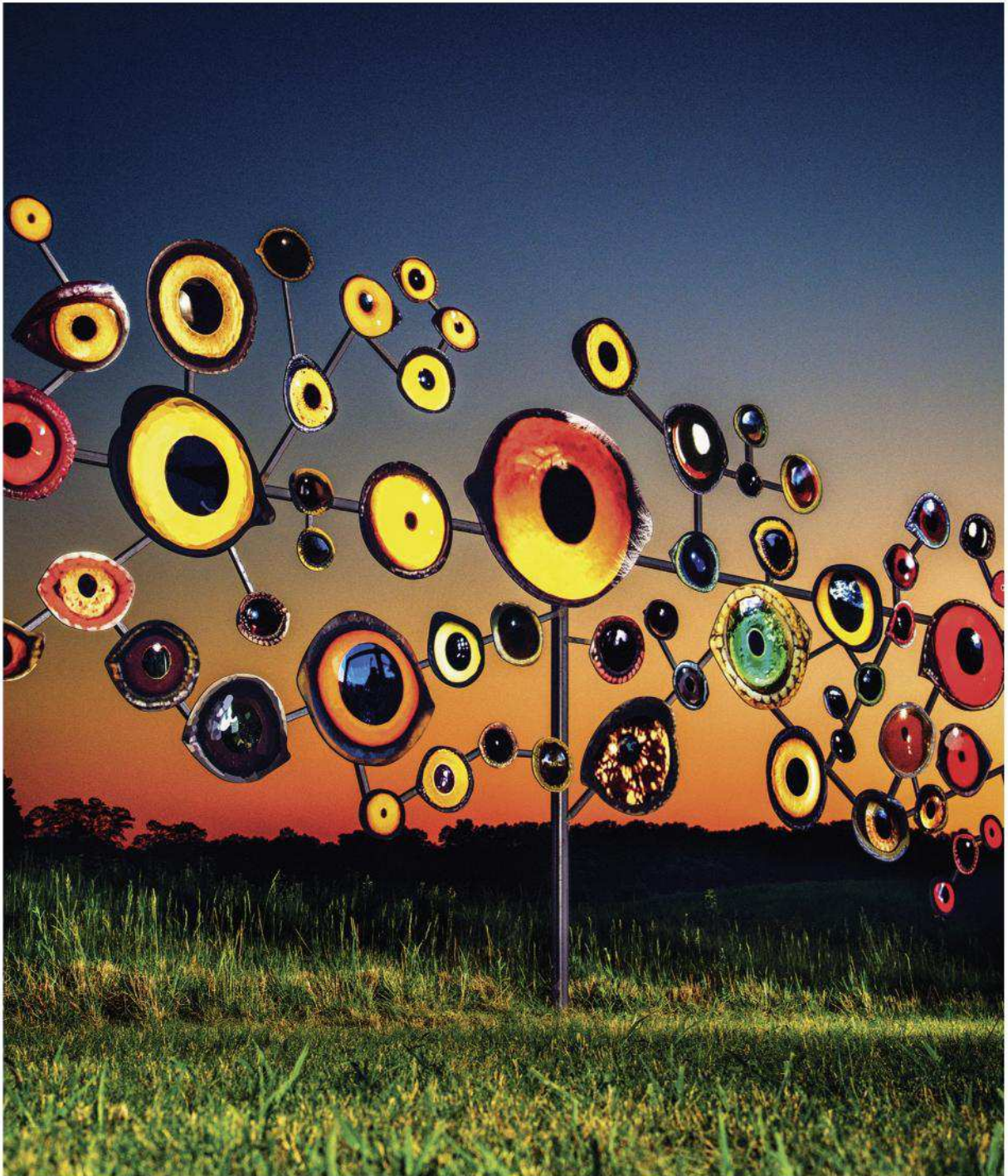
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JUNE 27 – JULY 3, 2018

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



On the five hundred acres of the Storm King Art Center, in Cornwall, New York, the sight of weeping willows or maples is no surprise—but a tropical-palm grove? The palm trees were transplanted by Mary Mattingly, one of the seventeen participants in **“Indicators: Artists on Climate Change”** (through Nov. 11). Also featured are sculptures by Maya Lin offering a glimpse into the secret life of grass and Jenny Kendler’s installation **“Bird Watching”** (above), representing a hundred eyes of as many threatened or endangered species.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC



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## NIGHT LIFE

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

### Ravi Coltrane

#### Birdland

At age fifty-two, the saxophonist Ravi Coltrane has had time to deal with any issues of personal and artistic identity arising from his illustrious family background. It's been a few years since he's released an album of his own, but Coltrane's lyrical work on "In Movement," with Jack DeJohnette and Matthew Garrison, gained him a well-deserved Grammy nomination in 2017.—*Steve Futterman (June 26-30.)*

### William Parker

#### The Stone at the New School

Still only in his mid-sixties, William Parker is a bona-fide patriarch of new jazz: a bassist, composer, and bandleader who first gained attention with Cecil Taylor in the eighties and has since collaborated with a galaxy of venturesome musicians. His residency finds him mixing up ensembles, with Parker investigating such auxiliary instruments as the ophicleide and the shakuhachi.—*S.F. (June 26-30.)*

### Andy Biskin's 16 Tons

#### Cornelia Street Café

Americana takes a twisted turn in the hands of the clarinetist Andy Biskin, whose 16 Tons ensemble pays tribute to Alan Lomax, the pioneering musicologist who brought a host of now immortal folk songs to public light. With the assistance of a drummer and three trumpeters, Biskin will give a good shake to such favorites as "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain" and "Sweet Betsy from Pike."—*S.F. (June 27.)*

### Tonstartssbandht

#### The Market Hotel

The lysergic duo Tonstartssbandht comprises the brothers Edwin and Andy White. For ten years, the siblings have conjured amorphous songs vibrating with a distinctive energy—which makes sense, given that the pair came up feverishly performing in D.I.Y. scenes in Montreal and Brooklyn. Their body of work is as expansive as it is unpredictable. Though Edwin has described their music as "boogie psych-pop," the songs, often brimming with distorted guitars and vocal melodies, seem programmed for a dance floor on Mars.—*Paula Mejia (June 27.)*

### Yo La Tengo

#### Liberty Belle

The name of this ethereally raucous trio's new album is "There's a Riot Going On," and it's not lost on its singing, songwriting husband-and-wife team, Ira and Georgia Kaplan, that the last time a group named an album similarly, in 1971, a sizable number of Americans were in the streets voicing concerns about the government. So it's safe to say that the band's latest record is an homage with more than a dollop of solidarity,

even if, sonically speaking, Yo La Tengo's immersive, instantly recognizable chug bears only the faintest resemblance to Sly Stone's groove opus. Both are on the right side of history.—*K. Leander Williams (June 28.)*

### Charles Tolliver's Music Inc.

#### Smoke

The late-career resurgence of the hard-blowing trumpeter Charles Tolliver, following a multi-decade disappearing act, is one of the more unexpected recent jazz sagas. His revitalized Music Inc. unit, which in its nineteen-seventies prime featured the pianist Stanley Cowell (the co-founder, with Tolliver, of the short-lived but now treasured Strata-East record label), will include the saxophonist and vocalist Camille Thurman on Friday and Saturday.—*S.F. (June 29-July 1.)*

### OSHUN

#### Betsy Head Memorial Playground

Niambi Sala and Thandiwe, the vocal duo known as OSHUN (pronounced "Oh-SHOON"), are the perfect opening act for the topical m.c. Talib Kweli, who headlines this SummerStage evening in Brownsville. When these songbirds (both N.Y.U. grads) ask audiences to put their hands in the air, they're probably looking for raised

fists. One of the vocal pair's first buzzworthy singles was an anti-Trump song called "Not My President," a slinky track that announced them as Afrocentrists (they're named for a West African river goddess) and adherents of neo-soul.—*Wilbert Cooper (June 30.)*

### The Royal Bopsters

#### Jazz at Kitano

Every era needs a group of slap-happy enthusiasts to extoll the virtues of *oop bop sh'bam*. These expert practitioners of vocalese (the art of applying original lyrics to preëxisting jazz improvisations, made most famous by the tongue-twisting trio Lambert, Hendricks, & Ross) include Pete McGuinness and Amy London.—*S.F. (June 30.)*

### Algiers

#### Elsewhere

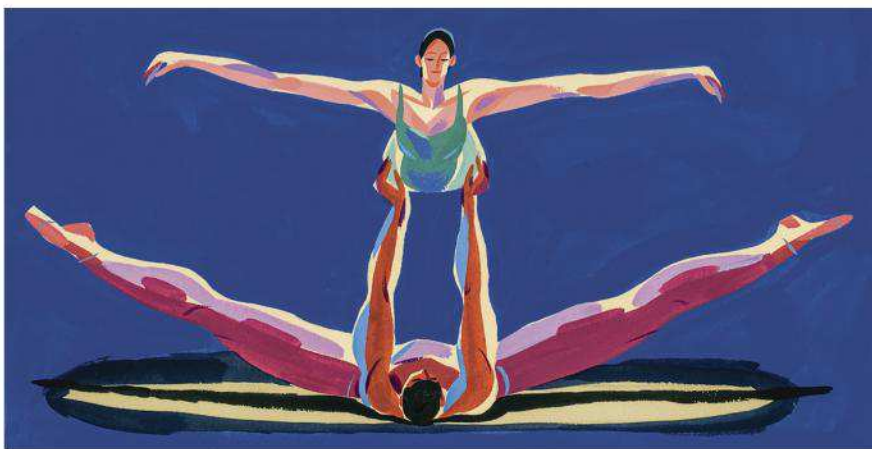
There's a patina of artifice in the sound of Algiers, but not in the band's gestalt. The songwriter Franklin James Fisher is more punk than gospel singer, but that hasn't stopped him from structuring his songs and emoting like one. His partners Lee Tesche (on guitar) and Ryan Mahan (on bass) shore up his socially conscious complaints with plenty of electronic

---

## ROCK, POP, AND SOUL



It's almost a cliché to express cynicism about the apparent love affair with heartbreak that has propelled the career of the U.K. falsetto-soul phenom **Sam Smith**. Three years ago, at the Grammys, he gleefully thanked the guy "who broke my heart" while picking up his fourth trophy of the evening—for Record of the Year. Last year, Smith returned with an album whose lead single, "Too Good at Goodbyes," suggested that he hadn't fared much better relationship-wise in the meantime; if there's anything like evolution to be found in the follow-up, it might be that on the kick-drum-driven "Midnight Train" Smith sneaks away, inexplicably, before the guy has the chance to leave him. The crowds at Barclays Center (on June 27) and Madison Square Garden (June 29-30) will be proof that listeners are quite content to board that train with him.—*K. Leander Williams*



Five years ago, the Joyce inaugurated its **Ballet Festival**, to explore the world of ballet beyond the big institutional companies. As it turns out, there's quite a bit out there. Dimensions Dance (June 26-27), from Miami, is a small new troupe founded by two former Miami City Ballet principals, Carlos Guerra and Jennifer Kronenberg. They'll dance Gerald Arpino's sexy "Light Rain" and a work by a current member of M.C.B., Ariel Rose. Joshua Beamish, best known in New York for his collaboration with Wendy Whelan in "Restless Creature," is based in Vancouver. His ensemble, MOVETHECOMPANY (June 28-29), performs a dance-theatre work based on Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death." Ashley Boudier, a principal at New York City Ballet with steely technique, brings her company, Ashley Boudier Project (July 2-3 and July 5); she has commissioned a solo for herself from her colleague Lauren Lovette. —*Marina Harss*

murk and gothic grunge, and the drummer Lee Tong gives them the punch of revival meetings. Many of the lyrics on "The Underside of Power," their dense, disarming album from last year, marked them as potent members of the resistance. —*K.L.W. (July 1.)*

## Bonobo Brooklyn Mirage

The British composer-producer Simon Green makes decorously layered mid-tempo electronic music, the kind equally suited to d.j. sets (such as Bonobo's gilt-edged Boiler Room New York mix, from January) and, as at the Brooklyn Mirage on Sunday, a full-band presentation. Beginning with "Black Sands," from 2010, Bonobo's music has become more oriented toward live instrumentation. The bro-caded tunes of the 2017 record "Migration," in particular, should gain some heft from the fluid band backing Green (who plays keyboards and bass), which includes a full string section. He heads up an all-star bill that also features St. Germain and Matthew Dear. —*Michaelangelo Matos (July 1.)*

## Pylon Reenactment Society Mercury Lounge

In the fertile art-rock scene of Athens, Georgia, in the early eighties, the band to beat was Pylon, a post-punk quartet that front-loaded

ominous, danceable bass lines and the screech of the magnetic singer Vanessa Briscoe. As its peers went on to grander stages, Pylon disbanded, in 1983, choosing cult status over a chance to accompany U2 on their first U.S. stadium tour. After a series of reunions, the band closed shop in 2009, upon the death of its guitarist lodestar, Randy Bewley. Pylon Reenactment Society is at once a tribute and a spinoff, with the singer (now Vanessa Briscoe Hay) energetically backed by tasteful musicians from Athens present. —*Jay Ruttenberg (July 1.)*

## DANCE

### American Ballet Theatre Metropolitan Opera House

"Don Quixote" is the steak frites of ballet: basic, satisfying, easy to love. Despite its title, the ballet has little to do with the novel by Cervantes, from which it draws only the character of the aged knight and his quest for an ideal woman. Really, it is a love story, involving a fiery young lady from Seville (Kitri) and her equally impetuous suitor (Basilio). It's also a ballet about the pleasure and the infectious energy of dance. A strong performance can be great fun. For sheer firepower, the cast led by Isabella Boylston and Daniil Simkin is a good bet (June 25 and June 28). Gillian Murphy and Cory Stearns should make a pleasing pair as well (June 27 matinée

and the evening of June 30). —*Marina Harss (June 25-30. Through July 7.)*

### Alexandra Bachzetsis The High Line

The choreographer, based in Zurich and Athens, makes conceptual pieces for the European museum market. At the High Line, on alternating evenings, she presents two intermittently absorbing studies of gender norms. In "PRIVATE: Wear a Mask When You Talk to Me," she displays one body—hers—moving dispassionately through a series of different situations: undulating in a skin-tight dress, riffing on the choreography of Michael Jackson and Trisha Brown, improvising Greek belly dance. In "Private Song," she does some of the same, joined by two other performers. —*Brian Seibert (June 25-28.)*

### Pilobolus / Ephrat Asherie Dance Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

**OUT OF TOWN** The artists of Pilobolus are more illusionists than dancers in the classic sense; they twist and interlock their bodies to create moving landscapes that defy human form, gravity, and a variety of other laws of nature. Their program at the Ted Shawn includes "Come to Your Senses," a medley of set pieces that focus on the five senses, as well as the nature study "Branches." The latter was created on the grounds of the festival last year, and augmented by a score that mixes natural sounds and New Age melodies. Ephrat Asherie Dance, an exciting young hip-hop company that specializes in surprising musical juxtapositions, appears in the smaller Doris Duke Theatre. "Odeon," which combines hip-hop, voguing, and other styles, is set to music by the early-twentieth-century Brazilian classical composer Ernesto Nazareth. —*M.H. (June 27-July 1. Through Aug. 26.)*

### Dorrance Dance Prospect Park Bandshell

"The Blues Project," which the now ubiquitous tap dancer Michelle Dorrance created in 2013 with the equally virtuosic hoofers Derick K. Grant and Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards, doesn't feel anything like a lecture. Driven by the expansive blues music of Toshi Reagon, it's an express train of tightly made segments, a rollicking entertainment suitable for a free outdoor show at BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn. Nevertheless, it is suffused with the racial history built into tap: shades of pain, shades of hope. —*B.S. (June 28.)*

### Urban Bush Women Club Helsinki Hudson

**OUT OF TOWN** The deluxe facility that the performing-arts organization Lumberyard is building in Catskill, New York, won't open till the fall, but several shows the institution is presenting in Catskill and nearby Hudson this summer serve as a teaser. First up is "Scat!" in which the veteran choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar tells the story of her family during the Great Migration. It's set in a jazz club, cabaret style, complete with tap shoes and a score by the distinguished trombonist Craig Harris, who joins a band and two scatting vocalists. —*B.S. (June 29-July 1.)*



## THE THEATRE

### Conflict Beckett

The conflict at the forefront of this 1925 play by Miles Malleon, receiving an excellent production from the Mint, is a political battle for a seat in Parliament. But Malleon is also exploring friction between classes, lovers, generations, and philosophies, as well as inner conflicts, embodied most tellingly in the character of the aptly named Lady Dare Bellingdon (Jessie Shelton), a young woman suddenly coming to grips with her privileged place in the world. A meeting between two soon-to-be rivals, Ronald Clive (Henry Clarke) and Tom Smith (Jeremy Beck), as directed by Jenn Thompson, is a masterpiece of tension and exposition. And Malleon is evenhanded in doling out the witticisms. When Dare suggests to her millionaire father (Graeme Malcolm) that he may be prejudiced when he calls Labour a party of robbers and thieves, Lord Bellingdon doesn't disagree: "If a man's got an open mind, he can't keep anything in it."—*Ken Marks (Through July 21.)*

### Pass Over Claire Tow

Antoinette Nwandu puts a chilling spin on "Waiting for Godot" with this tale of two African-American buddies, Kitch (Namir Smallwood) and Moses (Jon Michael Hill), who while away the time on a desolate street. They shoot the breeze, scrounge for scraps, dream of better things: "Got plans to rise up to my full potential," Moses says. One day, a jolly white visitor (Gabriel Ebert) arrives, wearing an incongruously elegant linen suit and bearing delicious food. He's nicer than the beat cop (Ebert again), who harasses or does even worse things to the young men, but then he could just be the polite face of a system keeping black people stuck in limbo. Eschewing didacticism, "Pass Over," soberly directed by Danya Taymor, for LCT3, combines daring near-experimental form and brutal content: what's at work is not some mysterious cosmic existentialism à la Beckett, but very real, very tangible racism.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through July 15.)*

### Skintight Laura Pels

Joshua Harmon is an expert at crafting witty comedies ("Bad Jews," "Significant Other," "Admissions") that scratch at social itches without drawing too much blood. In his latest, a successful lawyer (Idina Menzel, in her first major non-musical role) is horrified to discover that her fashion-mogul father (Jack Wetherall) has shackled up with a man fifty years his junior (Will Brittain, overdoing the hick shtick); she has a problem with the hunk's age and working-class background, not his gender. "Skintight," which is directed by Daniel Aukin for the Roundabout, purports to be about our society's obsession with youth and "hotness," but it's sharpest about privilege and class and the warped entitlement they create. Menzel even gets to deliver one of Harmon's signature breathlessly indignant rants. Still, it's hard to feel deeply moved by what happens to any of these spoiled-rotten characters.—*E.V. (Through Aug. 26.)*

### Songs for a New World City Center

This intimate song cycle, first staged Off Broadway in 1995, announced Jason Robert Brown as part of a generation of musical-theatre composers heavily influenced by both Stephen Sondheim's neurotic introspection and the pop-rock sound of Billy Joel. Brown went on to write such Broadway musicals as "Parade" and "The Bridges of Madison County," but his best-known song, "Stars and the Moon," is from this early work. Encores! Off-Center kicks off its summer season with a concert staging, directed by Kate Whoriskey and featuring Shoshana Bean and Colin Donnell.—*Michael Schulman (June 27-30.)*

### Sugar in Our Wounds City Center Stage II

In the first of what is to be a trilogy of theatre pieces examining queer life at critical moments in black history, the playwright Donja R. Love imagines a furtive relationship between two male slaves in 1862. But this is no fairy tale. The love story of James (Sheldon Best) and Henry (Chinaza Uche) is moored in the historical re-

alism of the antebellum South, personified in the figure of Isabel (Fern Cozine), a mercurial plantation mistress who persecutes her victims like a bird of prey. While writing the script, Love sought out any record of homosexual love between slaves. Save for a few coded references, he came up empty-handed. There is no substitute for this lost and irretrievable history, but, in the director Saheem Ali's heartfelt and painterly rendering, a kind of tribute has been paid.—*David Kortava (Through July 8.)*

### Vitaly: An Evening of Wonders Westside

Virtuoso shows such as Derek DelGaudio's "In & of Itself" and Derren Brown's "Secret" have demonstrated that magic has come of theatrical age. Vitaly Beckman, however, kicks it old-school, with bare-bones, slightly cheesy production values—oh, that synth-laden music!—and banter that may remind you of a nerdy cousin trying out his new tricks. Vitaly mainly relies on two effects: levitating objects and manipulating photographs. Both are undoubtedly impressive (at one point, he erases the pictures on driver's licenses borrowed from audience members, then

## OFF BROADWAY



Coney Island, with its freak shows, roller coasters, and other cheap thrills, has attracted artists from Buster Keaton to Beyoncé. The playwright Rinne Groff ("The Ruby Sunrise") took the boardwalk's past and present as inspiration for "Fire in Dreamland," in which a disillusioned woman contemplating Coney Island's recovery after Superstorm Sandy meets a European filmmaker studying the fire that destroyed the Dreamland amusement park, in 1911. Rebecca Naomi Jones, Kyle Beltran, and Enver Gjokaj star in Marissa Wolf's production (in previews, at the Public), which bends time to bring together parallel catastrophes.—*Michael Schulman*



replaces them with others), but they grow repetitive. A routine in which Vitaly pours various liquids into various glasses while blindfolded was a little sloppy at a recent performance. He may have bamboozled Penn & Teller on their TV show “Fool Us,” but New York audiences are harder to please.—*E.V. (Through Sept. 30.)*

## ART

### “Georgia O’Keeffe: Visions of Hawai’i” New York Botanical Garden

A suite of little-known works reveals that the desert modernist found a muse in the tropics, too. In 1939, during a nine-week sojourn in Hawaii—sponsored by a pineapple company—O’Keeffe found inspiration for more than a dozen paintings, two of which were used in magazine ads. One portrays a crimson heliconia flower, set off by a distant expanse of sea and sky; the other is a magnified view of a pineapple bud sprouting from a crown of dark, spiky leaves. The trip prompted

an epiphany; as she wrote to Alfred Stieglitz, “My idea of the world—nature—things that grow—the fantastic things mountains can do—has not been beautiful enough.” She captured the majestic rock formations and whitecaps of Maui’s Hana coast in the “Black Lava Bridge” trio. Other canvases depict a jagged waterfall disappearing into a verdant valley. In the garden’s conservatory, there are living examples of the flowers that captured O’Keeffe’s imagination—ginger, bird-of-paradise, hibiscus, and plumeria.—*Johanna Fateman (Through Oct. 28.)*

### “Giacometti” Guggenheim Museum

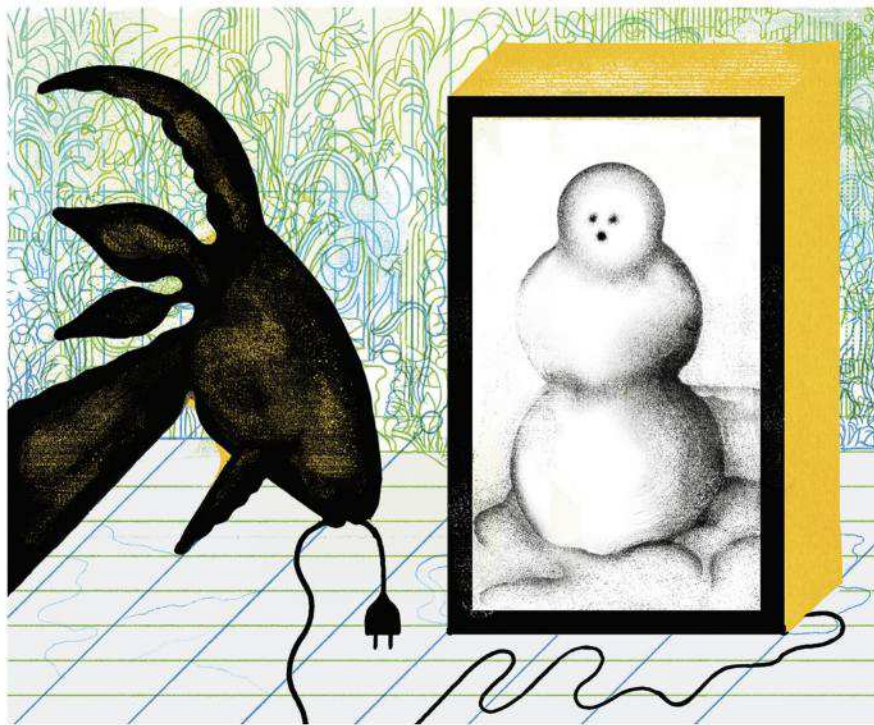
The Swiss master of the skinny sublime is the subject of a majestic, exhausting retrospective—pace yourself, when you go. The standard story of Giacometti, as a Surrealist who became a paragon of existentialism for his ravaged response to the Second World War, was well established by 1966, when he died, at the age of sixty-four. He hasn’t changed. The world has, though. What is he to 2018 and 2018 to him? Since 2010, three bronze figures by Giacometti

have become the first, second, and third most expensive sculptures ever sold. Auction antics hardly amount to historical verdicts, but, these days, trying to ignore the market when discussing artistic values is like trying to communicate by whisper at a Trump rally. Giacometti’s work surely deserves its price tags, if anything of strictly subjective worth ever does. The bad effect is a suppressed acknowledgment of his strangeness.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Through Sept. 12.)*

### “History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift” Metropolitan Museum

This two-room trove of twenty-seven magnificent paintings, sculptures, drawings, and textiles by a constellation of black artists working across the Deep South is at once an invaluable introduction and a missed opportunity. The exhibition is titled after a piece by Thornton Dial, an Alabama-born artist of such expressive finesse and audacity that critics have compared him to both Robert Rauschenberg and Willem de Kooning. But it’s precisely this kind of equivalence—validating “outsider” black artists by comparing them to “insider” white ones—that creates a sticking point before the show is given enough room to breathe. It opens with Dial’s 2004 piece “Victory in Iraq,” a coruscating eleven-foot-long panel, whose morass of materials—barbed wire, toy cars, the head of a mannequin, old clothes, wheels, cutlery, stuffed animals, and tin, and that’s only a partial list—is optically anchored by an ironic red-white-and-blue “V.” The Met’s decision to install the piece adjacent to Jackson Pollock’s “Autumn Rhythm,” from 1950—one of the jewels of its modern collection—feels like an unnecessary legitimizing strategy for a work of art that soars on its own merits.—*Andrea K. Scott (Through Sept. 23.)*

## IN THE MUSEUMS



A snowball’s chances in Hell might be nil, but a snowman is beating the heat in the garden of MOMA, where the Swiss artist **Peter Fischli** has installed his absurdist koan of a sculpture. What stands between “Snowman” and life as a puddle is an industrial freezer with a glass door. First conceived in 1987 with Fischli’s longtime collaborator, David Weiss (who died in 2012), the piece was commissioned by a heating plant in Saarbrücken, Germany, where it stood sentry at the front gate. The new version overlooks twenty sculptures selected by Fischli, as well as a crowd-pleasing favorite, Picasso’s “She Goat,” cast in bronze, in 1952, from scavenged materials. There’s no carrot nose on Fischli’s snowman, but Picasso placed a palm leaf along his goat’s head.—*Andrea K. Scott*

### Daniel Gordon Fuentes

**DOWNTOWN** The New York artist enters his blue period. Gordon is best known for piling on colors and patterns in still-life photographs that begin with image searches online and result in paper sculptures of fruit, flowers, vases, and shadows—trompe-l’oeil tableaux, which he shoots with a large-format camera. He also makes digital works based on the analog images, trading scissors and glue for cut-and-paste. The two photographs and three computer-based prints in this show are restricted to blue, although red and yellow sneak in, as grace notes of purple and green. The five pieces hang on four walls, which are wallpapered with enlarged details of the digital files. It’s a picture of a picture of a picture that is also a room. Gordon’s palette sparks thoughts of cyanotype, an early photographic process also used for architectural blueprints. William Gass wrote that blue is “most suitable as the color of interior life”—a good epigram for Gordon, as he juggles deep thoughts on photography and considerable visual pleasures.—*A.K.S. (Through July 8.)*

### Erin M. Riley P.P.O.W.

**CHELSEA** These impressive handwoven textiles—large still-lifes so detailed that they add up to



portraits—may make you feel as if you were snooping on someone's private life, rifling through a purse or a nightstand. Their subjects include nude selfies of extravagantly tattooed bodies, condoms, guitar picks, CDs, birth-control pills, and scraps of paper. Weavings are often thought of as simply decorative, but Riley's subjects are domestic violence, rape, and the psychological toll that they take. At times, the tone is oblique (a pair of bruised knees), but it is also direct. The largest work in the show, "Evidence" is a panoramic view of a rape kit, its various swabs, labels, and specimen containers arranged carefully in a line—an unflinching monument to trauma's lonely aftermath.—*J.F.* (Through June 30.)

## MOVIES

### Before Summer Ends

The Swiss director Maryam Goormaghtigh's lyrical, acutely political comedy stars three thirtysomething Iranian men living in Paris, named Arash, Hossein, and Ashkan—nonprofessional actors playing versions of themselves—who go on a road trip two weeks before Arash moves back to Iran. Hossein is ironic and artsy; Ashkan is earnest and solitary; and Arash is a socially awkward, obese student who, as a teen-ager in Iran, deliberately gained weight to avoid military service—which he's still hoping to avoid when he goes home. As the men explore the French countryside, they chat about Iran and France, tradition and freedom, memories and aspirations. They also meet people along the way—notably, two musicians, Charlotte and Michèle, whose presence prompts Ashkan's dreams of romance. Then the idyll is shattered by new political circumstances. Goormaghtigh's poised, ample images and her wryly tender regard for her characters give the film dramatic grandeur to match its global embrace. In Farsi and French.—*Richard Brody* (French Institute Alliance Française, July 3.)

### Incredibles 2

At last, the Parr family is back. Anyone who reveres "The Incredibles" (2004) will remember them well: Bob (Craig T. Nelson) and his wife, Helen (Holly Hunter), better known as Mr. Incredible and Elastigirl; their daughter, Violet (Sarah Vowell), snarled in adolescence; and her brother Dash (Huckleberry Milner). Bringing up the rear, and manifesting his own alarming range of superpowers, is Jack-Jack, the baby, who gets the easiest laughs. The writer and director, as before, is Brad Bird, who not only picks up the plot where he left off but also, aided by the composer Michael Giacchino, maintains the energy levels of the first film. The animation is both coolly stylized and brightened with hot hues, and, if it somehow lacks the wow of the original, that may be unavoidable; how do you deliver so delightful a shock to a mass audience all over again?—*Anthony Lane* (In wide release.)

### Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom

All is not well on the volcanic island where—unwisely, in retrospect—Jurassic World opened its gates to visitors. The whole place is about to erupt, and as many dinosaurs as

## FESTIVALS



The leading New York showcase for independent films, BAMcinemaFest, presents movies first shown at other festivals (such as Sundance and South by Southwest) alongside world premières. This year's lineup is a particularly strong one, culminating in the closing-night screening, on June 30, of "Madeline's Madeline," Josephine Decker's furious, visionary drama of an outer-borough teen-age girl (Helena Howard), whose conflicts with her mother (Miranda July) are offset by her uneasy bond with a theatre director (Molly Parker). Howard, playing a young woman confronting mental illness and attempting to realize her artistic talents and ambitions, delivers an urgent performance with a distinctive blend of spontaneity and precision.—*Richard Brody*

possible must be shipped out. The task falls to Owen (Chris Pratt) and Claire (Bryce Dallas Howard), whose efforts are underwritten by a rich recluse named Lockwood (James Cromwell)—a good guy, unlike some of his employees. As ever, the film is faced with the problem of villainy: even when the beasts are unstoppably hostile, they're not being wicked. They're just doing what they do. The human baddies, however, seem like small fry. The director is J. A. Bayona, who is stuck with the lumbering demands of the franchise, and yet, in one terrific sequence, involving a small child and a giant claw, he plucks at our nerves as skillfully as he did in "The Orphanage" (2007). With Toby Jones.—*A.L.* (In wide release.)

### The King

In this contrived documentary, the director Eugene Jarecki drives Elvis Presley's silver 1963 Rolls-Royce across the country and films conversations with a select series of passengers—including Alec Baldwin, Ethan Hawke (a co-producer), David Simon, and Emmylou Harris—who consider Presley's legacy. Jarecki retraces the arc of Presley's life, from Tupelo, Mississippi, to Las Vegas, and invokes cultural myth to reflect on current-day reality. Though the film examines Presley's rise to fame (with a moving look at his Sun Records début) and crucial themes in his career (above all, his passage from sexual outlaw to establishment hero), Presley himself is mainly a

vague symbol in Jarecki's dash through the ills of American history, culminating in the election of Donald Trump. The results do little justice to Presley and to the many insightful interview subjects, including Chuck D and several of Presley's longtime friends; Jarecki in effect constructs his own monologue from their sound bites.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

### Pickpocket

The nimble crime of the title, perfected by a fiercely philosophical outlaw (Martin LaSalle), is itself a work of art, which Robert Bresson, in this 1959 film, reveals, in all its varieties, as a furtive street ballet. The story begins with money changing hands, and throughout the film Bresson burns into memory the clink of coins and the crumple of bills—which come off as the damning sound of evil made matter. The film is modelled on "Crime and Punishment": the criminal, Michel, jousts verbally with a cagey police inspector to assert his own superiority to the law, and crosses paths with a drunkard's toiling, spiritual daughter, Jeanne (Marika Green). Bresson, filming nonactors in austere precise images, also evokes Dostoyevskian emotional extremes: torment and exaltation, nihilistic fury and religious passion. But the movie, above all, affirms the miracle of redemptive love and its price in humility and unconditional surrender. In French.—*R.B.* (Anthology Film Archives, June 23, June 26, June 29, and streaming.)

## Saboteur

For his first thriller set in America, from 1942, Alfred Hitchcock runs loopily through a gamut of genres and a range of settings that depict a country living in the image of its movies. His set pieces take on the blue-collar drama, the Western, the high-society mystery, the urban police story, and the circus melodrama, while capturing the paranoia of a country newly at war. The plot concerns a worker in a munitions plant (Robert Cummings) who is wrongly suspected of sabotage and goes on the lam to pursue the real perpetrator. Soldiers on patrol behind cafeteria workers, Fascist terrorists lurking in towns and cities, and the chilling crackle of hectic radio warnings set a tone of ambient menace. The final scene, atop the Statue of Liberty, involves nightmarish horror, which Hitchcock leavens with a comically surreal triviality: at a time of war, life hangs, more than ever, by a thread.—*R.B. (MOMA, June 27, and streaming.)*

## Superfly

The real star of Director X's flashy, superficial remake of the classic 1972 drama is the screenwriter, Alex Tse, who amps up the complexity of the plot and expands the action to an international scale. The story, now set in Atlanta, involves a drug dealer named Youngblood Priest (Trevor Jackson) who wants to get out of the business—and to sell a huge load of cocaine in order to finance his retirement. Meanwhile, he faces a gang war sparked by his hotheaded associates (Jason Mitchell and Jacob Ming-Trent) and an envious member (Kaalán Walker) of an opposing gang, the white-clad Snow Patrol, headed by Q (Big Bank Black). Priest punctuates his chess-like maneuvers, involving corrupt officials and simmering resentments, with a series of self-justifying aphorisms of hard-won

wisdom; the action pivots on white police officers killing black people with impunity, but the horrifying vision of racial violence, a conspicuous reflection of the times, remains a mere plot point.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

## Two Plains & a Fancy

This ultra-low-budget, tongue-in-cheek Western, set in 1893, reaches heights of giddy imagination that elude more earnest productions. The film begins with its three urbane protagonists—Ozanne Le Perrier (Laetitia Dosch), a French geologist; Alta Mariah Sophronia (Marianna McClellan), a spiritualist; and Milton Tingling (Benjamin Crotty), a dandyish artist—wandering around Colorado in search of a renowned spa's hot springs. They find another one instead, but, along the way, they encounter other odd travellers, including two men from the future, who display their high-tech wares, and two cowboys, who give Milton his first gun. Their whimsical dialogue offers thrilling riffs on science and metaphysics, art and anthropology. Alta Mariah holds a séance that gives new meaning to the notion of a ghost town, and Ozanne's geological explanations of iconic Western landscapes cast the entire history of movie Westerns in a profound new light. The journey culminates in a masterstroke of threadbare spectacle. Directed by Whitney Horn and Lev Kalman; they wrote the script with Sarah Dziedzic.—*R.B. (BAM Cinémathèque, June 28.)*

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### Mise-En Festival

Various locations

Ensemble Mise-En, an industrious new-music group, traverses Brooklyn and Manhat-

tan for an ambitious, wide-ranging festival, including lectures, workshops, and concerts. First up is a portrait of Klaus Huber, a much admired Swiss composer and pedagogue, who died last October, at ninety-two. The second program emphasizes inventive works for solo performers; the third focusses on composers from Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Ireland. The net is spread wider still for a four-hour finale, featuring new and recent pieces by fifteen composers representing eleven countries.—*Steve Smith (June 27-29 at 8 and June 30 at 4.)*

## Kronos Quartet 92nd Street Y

The inveterate explorers of Kronos share an evening uptown with Soo Yeon Lyuh, a gifted young exponent of the *haegeum* (the two-stringed Korean fiddle, which produces an expressively plaintive kean). Lyuh performs first, with traditional accompaniment; Kronos follows with a globe-trotting mix of African, Indian, South American, and gospel selections. They end together, in Lyuh's haunting "Yessori (Sound from the Past)." The next day, Kronos travels to Katonah for its Caramoor Festival début, offering an eclectic grab bag of contemporary fare by Terry Riley and Steve Reich, along with arrangements of songs by Gershwin, Rhianon Giddens, and Laurie Anderson, among others.—*S.S. (June 28-29 at 8.)*

## Opera Saratoga Spa Little Theatre

**OUT OF TOWN** Nestled in New York's horse country, the company opens its festival season with Lehar's frothy and delightful "Merry Widow," starring Cecilia Violetta López and directed by John de los Santos, with Anthony Barrese as conductor. But, in a nod to the equestrian setting, the main event is a double bill of contemporary operas on sporting themes. David T. Little's "Vinkensport" is a strange, mysterious meditation on finching, a Flemish pastime in which competitors train their birds to sing from within locked boxes. Gareth Williams's "Rocking Horse Winner" is an affecting chamber-opera adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's short story about a boy whose pursuit of his family's financial well-being drives him to despair; Michael Hidetoshi Mori directs, with David Alan Miller as conductor.—*Oussama Zahr (June 29-30 at 7:30 and July 1 at 2. Through July 15.)*

## Maverick Concerts

**OUT OF TOWN** America's oldest continuous summer chamber-music series, housed in a barnlike wooden hall surrounded by stately trees, on the outskirts of Woodstock, New York, opens this year with a concise overview of what will follow throughout the rest of this eminently inviting festival. Elizabeth Mitchell, who sings in the indie-rock band Ida, leads off on Saturday morning with folksy fare for children; that evening, the stylish jazz pianist Kenny Barron performs unaccompanied. Then, on Sunday afternoon, the invigorating Trio Con Brío Copenhagen plays Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio, Per Nørgård's "Spell," and Tchaikovsky's Trio

## OUT OF TOWN

"**Peter Pan**" is the red-headed stepchild among Leonard Bernstein's stage works. Neglected in favor of pieces that are prettier ("West Side Story"), smarter ("Candide"), or more fun ("On the Town"), it was originally written to provide incidental music for a 1950 Broadway revival of J. M. Barrie's play. Nevertheless, the score is suffused with the composer's DNA, with hip-swinging rhythms, soaring melodies, and string parts tinged with yearning. A rare outing of the complete work, opening June 28 at Bard SummerScape, in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, stars the wickedly playful cabaret artist Peter Smith as Pan; the director Christopher Alden, who has a knack for untangling his characters' psychological intricacies, sets the piece in an abandoned fairground, where, presumably, childhood fantasies never grow old.—*Oussama Zahr*





in A Minor.—S.S. (June 30 at 11 A.M. and 8 and July 1 at 4. Through Sept. 2.)

## Michael Riesman Le Poisson Rouge

In 1999, when Philip Glass was commissioned to provide a new score for the iconic 1931 film “Dracula,” he evoked its nineteenth-century milieu with busy, grandiloquent music for string quartet. You could argue, though, that a solo-piano transcription by Michael Riesman, a close collaborator of Glass’s for more than four decades, better suits the film’s gothic severity, stylized horror, and fleeting whimsy. Riesman will perform live to accompany a screening, as part of the tenth-anniversary celebrations at this invaluable Bleecker Street bastion of adventurous sounds.—S.S. (July 3 at 7:30.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### Thomas Frank

Book Culture, on Columbus Ave.

The essayist Frank has been examining the fading culture of liberalism since he first diagnosed the rightward shift in regional American politics in his 2004 book, “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” His new collection, “Rendezvous with Oblivion: Reports from a Sinking Society,” paints a suitably anxious picture of what has happened to what was once called the American Dream. Frank reads from the work and takes questions.—K. Leander Williams (June 27 at 7.)

### Amber Tamblyn

Greenlight Bookstore

Through clear-eyed observation, Tamblyn, a poet, essayist, and sometime actress, has sought to uncover often overlooked truths about the lives of women. Though lyrical in form, her new novel, “Any Man,” is a thriller that follows the movements of a serial rapist whose victims, who are male, are summarily tormented by the confusion and questions endemic to sexual assaults. Tamblyn discusses the book with the author Morgan Jerkins.—K.L.W. (June 27 at 7:30.)

### Michelle Kuo

Brooklyn Historical Society

The premise of “Reading with Patrick,” a personal history written by Kuo, is something the author at first perceives as a personal failure of sorts. Kuo spent two periods in Helena, Arkansas, initially as a young schoolteacher embedded there for the Teach for America program, and years later as the friend and confidante of Patrick, one of her former students, who was then awaiting trial on a murder charge. Kuo shares the complexities of their relationship in a talk that also addresses the intersections of justice, educational policy, and racial politics in the Deep South.—K.L.W. (June 28 at 6:30.)

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Oxbow Tavern / Lucky Pickle Upper West Side

There’s something almost refreshing about how *unlocal* and *unseasonal* the menu is at Oxbow Tavern, a new restaurant on Columbus Ave. at 71st St. The fact that the lamb chops were flown in from Australia and the squab from California is proudly advertised. You can order a tureen of coq au vin or braised-pork ragout in the dead of summer. The chef and owner, Tom Valenti, was last seen at Ouest, a beloved haunt deeply mourned by the neighborhood when it closed, in 2015, after the rent outpaced the profits. His regulars seem to have been eagerly awaiting his return: at seven on a recent evening, the place was packed except for one high top by the bar, directly beneath a television playing “Rear Window.”

Whereas Ouest’s curved red leather booths conveyed a timeless, uptown glamour, the tin ceiling and worn wood floors at Oxbow seem to aim at shabby chic. But the menu looks familiar, with certain fan favorites revived: endive-and-Roquefort salad; a velvety chickpea pancake, topped with salty-sweet gravlax; wedges of lightly seared, crusted yellowfin tuna with red-pepper coulis. The bread may come toasted in a way that suggests it wasn’t baked that day; most proteins are served well done; and the rent must be high here, too, judging by the prices. But I quite enjoyed a shallow bowl of rock shrimp

in tomato-saffron broth with a side of herby aioli, which reminded me of something you’d find in rural France, and, in general, I felt relieved to be in a restaurant that wasn’t trying too hard to seem like it wasn’t trying too hard.

I prefer that very Upper West Side attitude to the attempts at outdated hipster aesthetics you can now also find in the neighborhood, exemplified by Jacob’s Pickles, which serves mac and cheese in cast-iron pans and cocktails in jam jars. The latest from its owners—who are also behind Maison Pickle, down the street, a maximalist mess where offerings range from a Reuben French dip to chicken-and-eggplant parmigiana—is a tiny dumpling shop called Lucky Pickle, where cash is not accepted and you must order using a touch screen, and where all food is put in to-go bags, whether or not you’re planning to go. (Inanelly, there are hooks to “recycle” the bags if you’re staying.) The dumplings, vaguely Asian and served five to an order, in broth or, in the case of the shrimp variety, melted butter, are mostly bland, with mealy filling. The fruit juices taste precisely like melted popsicles. But, to my surprise, I was delighted by what I had taken for pure gimmick: the pickle-flavored soft serve. As refreshing as cucumber water, its subtle but distinct hint of brine gives it a frozen-yogurt-like tang. I could have done without the candied-pickle-slice garnish, but I’ve found myself craving another big green swirl. (Oxbow Tavern, 240 Columbus Ave. Entrées \$17–\$37. Lucky Pickle, 513 Amsterdam Ave. Dumplings \$5–\$9.)

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT FAMILY VALUES

The theatre of cruelty unfolding at the southern border last week was the purest distillation yet of what it means to be governed by a President with no moral center. First, the Trump Administration, enacting its “zero tolerance” policy regarding migrants, forcibly separated children from their parents and detained them in a tent city and in a repurposed Walmart in parched South Texas. Photographs showed children penned in large metal cages and sprawled on concrete floors under plastic blankets. Many were sent on to facilities thousands of miles away. Those under the age of twelve, including babies and toddlers, were discharged to “tender age” shelters, a concept for which the term “Orwellian” does not quite suffice.

President Trump insisted that only an act of Congress could stop the separations, and that the Democrats were to blame. The Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen, claimed that separating parents and children was not a policy—she was simply following the law. All of this was false, as became obvious on Wednesday, when Trump signed an executive order revoking the policy that he’d said he could do nothing about and that Nielsen said didn’t exist. It would be nice to attribute this change of plans to a genuine change of conscience, but, in signing the order, Trump was transparently angry at being compelled to do so. He said, “If you’re really, really pathetically weak, the country is going to be overrun with millions of people, and if you’re strong then you

don’t have any heart. That’s a tough dilemma. Perhaps I’d rather be strong.”

The more likely explanation for the President’s about-face was the overwhelming political pressure that he had come under. Among those denouncing the separations were Franklin Graham, the evangelist and Trump enthusiast; all four living former First Ladies; members of Congress from both sides of the aisle; the president of the American Academy of Pediatrics; and sixty-six per cent of American voters. A number of major airlines refused to comply with the policy. (“We have no desire to be associated with separating families, or worse, to profit from it,” a statement from American Airlines read.) Offers of pro-bono legal assistance for the families flooded into Texas.

It would be nice, too, to think that the executive order presented a sustainable way out of the crisis. But zero tolerance will continue to wreak havoc, and incarcerating children with their parents, as

the order stipulates, is no real solution. Meanwhile, it’s not clear what will become of the twenty-three hundred children who have already been detained. Erik Hanshew, an assistant federal public defender in El Paso, who has been trying to assist the parents of such children, wrote in the *Washington Post* that his meetings with clients “have been crushing. One man sobs, asking how his small child could defend himself in a detention facility. One cries so uncontrollably, he is hardly able to speak.” Hanshew has to explain to his clients that, since the infrastructure and the planning for this detention scheme were so inadequate, he may never be able to tell them where their children are, or who is taking care of them.

Administration officials portray the challenges at the border in stark, binary terms: either we treat all border crossers, including asylum seekers, as dangerous criminals to be incarcerated or we wantonly open the gates to all the world. There is, of course, a middle path, providing workable and humane alternatives to detention. One strategy is to let migrants live in the community, while submitting to varying degrees of oversight, from wearing ankle bracelets to checking in regularly with caseworkers. A 2000 study by the Vera Institute of Justice found that eighty-three per cent of asylum seekers who had initially been found to have credible reasons to fear remaining in their home country and who were released in the United States with a requirement to return for a hearing did so. Ninety-five per cent of participants in a monitoring program run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement between 2011 and



2013 showed up for their proceedings.

Alternatives to detention are also cheaper. In 2014, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that the ICE monitoring program cost ten dollars and fifty-five cents per person per day, as opposed to a hundred and fifty-eight dollars for detention. And a 2015 report from the Center for Migration Studies found that, among asylum seekers, “access to early, reliable legal advice is the single most important factor in fostering trust in the legal system and, as a result, ensuring compliance with the adjudicatory process.” It’s hard to imagine a scenario less likely to foster trust in the legal system than one in which your children are taken from you with no explanation of how or when you might get them back.

The Administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama also experimented with keeping families together when incarcerating migrants and asy-

lum seekers. It did not go well. The largest family facility, a former state prison in Taylor, Texas, was run by a private-prison company, Corrections Corporation of America, under a \$2.8-million-a-month contract with the federal government. (The detention of immigrants has been a boon to the for-profit prison industry.) In 2008, the American Civil Liberties Union sued ICE, asking for improvements, such as installing curtains around the open toilets, increasing the hours of school instruction, and allowing the children to keep toys in their cells and to wear pajamas when they went to bed instead of prison uniforms. A federal judge in Texas ruled in favor of the A.C.L.U., and chided the federal government for letting a prison company dictate conditions for detaining immigrants. A magistrate judge monitoring the facility later concluded, “It seems fundamentally wrong to house children and their noncrimi-

nal parents this way. We can do better.” The Obama Administration stopped confining children in the facility in 2009.

The Trump Administration also faces legal challenges—the executive order calls for families to be detained indefinitely, in apparent violation of a 1997 consent decree known as Flores, which allows migrant children to be held for a maximum of twenty days—and it, too, may lose in court. In a recent opinion, Dolly M. Gee, the federal judge who will be considering the order, called family detention “deplorable.”

In the meantime, it will be important to remember what the President was willing to do in the name of toughness. It will be important to remember that Attorney General Jeff Sessions justified taking children away from their parents by quoting Biblical Scripture. It will be important to be on guard for what this Administration may try next.

—Margaret Talbot

## THE LEISURE CLASS RULES OF PLAY



Robert Mercer, the New York hedge-fund magnate whose huge donations to pro-Trump groups in 2016 have been credited with putting Donald Trump in the White House, has kept a low profile since the election. But his daughter Rebekah, who runs the family’s foundation, now has a way to relive the thrill of the campaign with friends around her dinner table. In March, on a ski vacation at a rented house near Vail, Colorado, she brought a batch of copies of the “Rules of Play” for an elaborate parlor game called the Machine Learning President. Essentially, it is a race to the Oval Office in three fifteen-minute rounds. It’s a role-playing game, more like Assassin than like Monopoly, although players of this game do start out with an allotment of “cash” to spend on pushing their agendas, which can include “algorithmic policing” and “mass deportation.”

“Tonight, the name of the game is

POWER,” reads the first page of the “Rules of Play.” Each player, it goes on, “will assume a new political identity.” Instead of becoming Colonel Mustard or Mrs. Peacock, as in the board game Clue, each player takes on the role of a political candidate or a “faction,” in the game’s parlance. Among the possible roles are Mike Pence, Elizabeth Warren, Black Lives Matter, Russia, Y Combinator, Tom Steyer, Wall Street, Evangelicals, the Koch Network, and Robert Mercer himself. (Through a lawyer, Rebekah Mercer acknowledged possessing the game’s “Rules of Play” but denied any role in the creation of the game or that the game reflects her family’s views.)

Rebekah Mercer, the second of Mercer’s three daughters, worked for her father’s hedge fund, Renaissance Technologies, before quitting to homeschool her children. Unlike her reclusive father, who once told a colleague that he prefers the company of cats to that of people, Rebekah likes to socialize. She is said to have brought Kellyanne Conway and Steve Bannon into the Trump campaign, and she is a guiding force at the annual costume ball hosted by her family at its Long Island estate. (For the 2016 party, which President-elect Trump attended, the theme was “Villains and Heroes.”)

The goal of each player in the Ma-

chine Learning President is to win the Presidential election, over three rounds of play, designated as Super Tuesday, the Primary, and the General Election. Each candidate or faction starts with a “Briefing Dossier,” which “outlines your starting Cash, Influence, and Tech capabilities.”

“During each round,” the Rules continue, “Candidates and Factions should be building alliances to increase their political Power and Voter turnout.” This can be accomplished through “political bargaining,” by “buying ads,” or by “investing in tech.” Just as the Monopoly player might get ahead by drawing a good Community Chest card, players of Mercer’s game try to utilize “machine learning”—that is, artificial intelligence driven by algorithms—to enhance their odds of winning. The “Rules of Play” don’t mention Cambridge Analytica, the now bankrupt data-mining firm that used vast amounts of online information obtained from Facebook without users’ consent to pinpoint and persuade voters, and in which the Mercer family invested millions of dollars—but the Machine Learning President echoes the firm’s tactics.

In the section of game instructions that lists the possible identities that players can assume, Tom Steyer, the liberal hedge-fund billionaire who is financing a campaign to impeach Trump, is de-



scribed as seeking “Minimum Wage Increase,” “Universal Basic Income,” and “Full path to citizenship (for undocumented immigrants).” The Rules include a description of Mercer’s father’s “character.” “Robert Mercer,” the instructions say, “sits atop one of the most powerful geo-political networks on the planet,” which is “driven by a next-generation technology stack with a business model.” They go on to note that “the Mercer Family is both a rival and an ally of the Kochs,” and claim that although the Mercers lack the “scale of business” of the Kochs, whose private company is the second largest in America, they compensate for it “with a constellation of over a dozen data analytics, machine learning, and electioneering companies around the world.” They continue, “The Mercers are building a global far-right movement to embed Judeo-Christian values” while “keeping government small, ineffective and out of the way.”

The player who assumes the persona of Robert Mercer starts the game with six hundred million dollars in “cash” to implement his “policy wishlist,” which includes “Mass Deportation of Undocumented Immigrants,” the creation of a “biometrics/Citizens ID,” the use of “Predictive/Algorithmic Policing,” and “Freedom of Religious Discrimination (healthcare, hiring).” In other words, the stakes are higher than buying Boardwalk or sinking your opponent’s battleship. There is no mention of a Get Out of Jail Free card.

—Jane Mayer

## PSST DEPT.

### WANNA BUY A MATTRESS?



It’s not hard to explain New Yorkers’ thing for speakeasies. The bigger the sweaty, elbowing crowd in a given location, the stronger the craving for exclusivity. The principle has generally been applied to the night-life realm—not to home goods. But that may be changing. Grace Edwards, a writer for the Netflix show “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,” recently found herself in need of a mattress. She wanted better cus-

tomor service than could be found at a chain like Sleepy’s (now Mattress Firm), so she consulted Yelp.

She was surprised to discover that the best-reviewed mattress store in town was not a cool, venture-backed startup like Casper but an outfit called Craig’s Beds, in midtown. Edwards went to the address, which, she said, turned out to be “a shitty office building near Penn Station.” No sign of a mattress store. She took an elevator to the sixth floor, where she found empty hallways and a sign taped to the wall: “Craig’s Beds Is by Appointment Only.” There was a phone number and an explanation: “We want each visitor to get the personal attention they deserve.” She called the number. “Hello?” a voice answered. “This is Craig.” He told her to come back the following week.

At the appointed time, Edwards knocked on the door of Suite 605, and a cheerful, bespectacled man opened it and invited her in. The “store” turned out to be a small room that contained a dozen bare mattresses. Here’s where a shopper’s internal danger meter might begin flashing yellow. Edwards had wanted personal attention, “but I didn’t realize it would be just me and Craig,” she said. But then Craig began asking about her sleep habits. They established that she was a side sleeper with lower-back pain. She tried out some mattresses.

Within an hour, they’d covered her life and her career, and Craig had introduced her to his side project: taking aerial photographs of New York City. (His Instagram account, @craigsbeds, has nearly a hundred thousand followers and is mostly cityscapes.) Edwards settled on a mattress called the Jennifer—“A hybrid that has latex and shit in it”—which cost twelve hundred dollars and appeared to have been manufactured by Craig himself. She likes it. “Honestly, I have no complaints,” she said.

The following week, Edwards recounted her experience to her colleagues, who found much to discuss. “They thought I definitely could have gotten rolled up in one of those mattresses,” she recalled. But, mostly, “they enjoyed that his name is Craig.” The name conjures up Craigslist, and is therefore redolent of the thrills and perils of anonymous Internet encounters. “It’s a little creepy,” Edwards said.

Soon, word of the store made its way to these offices. The number was called, and an appointment was made. At 11 A.M. one recent Wednesday, Craig—last name Fruchtmann—answered the door of Suite 605. This time, he was joined by an older man with a white goatee. “Dad, could you step out for a minute?” Craig whispered. (The man was Barry Fruchtmann, Craig’s father.)

According to Craig, the speakeasy approach happened by accident: he’d been working for Barry, who runs a textile business from an office across the hall, and he began selling mattresses over



Craig Fruchtmann

the Internet to gain some independence. At first, he sold Simmons Beautyrest to online shoppers. But local customers kept wanting to stop by and try out the merchandise. So he set up his appointment system, and business grew by word of mouth. The phone number is his cell phone, and he tries always to answer it. “Even if I’m eating, I’ll say, ‘Hey, I’m just finishing my dinner. Can I give you a call in fifteen minutes?’”

Customers like the personal attention. “And New Yorkers especially like the feeling of discovery,” Craig said. “Of finding something that’s not a chain and nobody else knows about it.” Do they ever seem troubled by being alone with a stranger? “Put yourself in *my* shoes,” he said. “Sometimes it’s weird for me! People have done some strange things in here to try out beds.” (He described a male customer who insisted on simulating his lovemaking technique.)

Craig will sell national brands like

Serta and Simmons upon request. But these days he makes most of his own inventory, with the help of a fabricator, in New Jersey. They've re-created all the popular styles: foam, coil, hybrids, and an old-fashioned, two-sided tufted model, which can be flipped over. "I call it the Cranky Old New Yorker," he said. "It's for the person who says, 'Why can't I just get a mattress like they used to make?'" Prices range from five hundred to two thousand dollars. Craig's own mattress line is called Summerfield—his paternal grandmother's maiden name. Why not Craig's?

"Well," Craig said, "I didn't break *all* the rules." The mattress industry generally names its products for streets and women: Rachel, Tiffany. Female customers think it's cute. "And guys don't want to sleep on a guy's name. Nobody wants to sleep on Harold." Or Craig.

—Lizzie Widdicombe

## THE ROAD

### NO SLEEP TILL SANTA MONICA



Ry Cooder—the guitar wizard, songwriter, film-score composer, itinerant scholar and interpreter of soulful sounds from around the world and his own back yard—always disliked being

the main dude onstage. "Being the front guy is a hard job," he said the other day. "I'm still not sure about it. I'd rather be sharing the stage with other people." And yet here he was in a midtown hotel lobby, the morning after a gig at Town Hall—a week into his first front-guy tour in six years. "Never thought I'd do this again," he said. "Touring? Out of the question. Just not feasible. We had to start from scratch. I had nothing in place. No *machine*, like the big acts have, the country guys especially. Me and Joachim already got rid of all the stuff, sold all the cases."

Joachim is his son, drummer, and right hand, who, along with the rest of the band and the crew, had retreated to Weehawken, New Jersey, for the night. Cooder and his wife, Susan Titelman, had opted for the Algonquin, in hopes of a decent night's rest.

"I haven't been sleeping," he said. He'd had to leave a few balms back home in Santa Monica: his Lorazepam pills, which his doctor had un-prescribed, and a "multitudinous" stomach-soothing brew of seaweed, meat, and vegetables. "The broth didn't make it on tour," he said. "We didn't have room for a broth tech."

Cooder, who is seventy-one, had his hair in a ponytail, under a black watch cap, and was wearing a black drum-shop sweatshirt, black pants, and rubber sandals over white socks. He spoke with a kind of growling drawl—a grawl, maybe.

One corollary of Cooder's reticence in performance has been his tendency,

in the past dozen-plus years, to make ventriloquist concept albums in the guise of fictional, historical, or extraterrestrial characters, starting, in 2005, with "Chavez Ravine," a record of songs about the Mexican-American community that was displaced by Dodger Stadium. "It's like being an actor. Or a novelist," he said. "Wouldn't you rather hear the stories of other people as opposed to your own? That seems so claustrophobic to me."

Recently, though, Joachim, who is thirty-nine, suggested that his father do a straight-up Ry Cooder album like the ones he became known for in the seventies: "Go back to your American roots sound again."

Another friend told him, "Stop being other people."

Once Cooder and his son had recorded the album, "The Prodigal Son" (the title track is a reconsideration of a recording from the nineteen-thirties by a quartet called the Heavenly Gospel Singers), the label started booking tour dates.

"I panicked," Cooder said. The most pressing problem was that he had no one to sing the burly gospel parts that are so essential to his sound. Terry Evans, one of his longtime singers, had died in January; another, Arnold McCuller, was on the road with James Taylor. (Both of them had sung on the album.) "These guys, with that sound of the old gospel quartet—it's an art form as obscure as scrimshaw, or duck carving. It's hard to find young people who understand this style and can sing it." McCuller twigged him to the Hamiltones, a trio in North Carolina. "They come from the real quartet families," Cooder said. "That is the key to the whole damn thing. You gotta have lineage." The Hamiltones found space in their schedule, and Cooder had the rudiments of a machine.

The new album, like most of the old ones, has some political overtones, but, before setting out on tour, Joachim advised his father to go light on the patter. "He said, 'Don't bear down on the audience like you might've done. Keep it simple, don't talk too long.'" For the most part, Cooder had obliged, the night before, although Woody Guthrie's "Vigilante Man," a longtime Cooder bottle-neck keen, had grown a sharp new verse about Trayvon Martin. One could imagine, or maybe need not, another verse about ICE. The vocal exertions of "Jesus





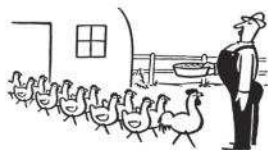
on the Mainline” left Cooder dizzy and depleted. “That one takes all I got,” he said. “Should’ve had an oxygen tank offstage. Take a little hit. Actually, I tried that once, years ago. It doesn’t really work.”

He went on, “Joachim tells me, ‘You don’t have to work so hard.’ He’s concerned. But last night I got with it.”

Cooder’s wife appeared. Time to rejoin “the cats” in Weehawken and catch the bus to Virginia. The tour rolls on. The lobby of the Algonquin began to teem, unaccountably, with elderly Vietnamese in silken ceremonial dress. “Look at that hat!” Cooder said, referring to a woman’s *khan dong*—a halo of layered blue silk. Curious, Ry and Susie followed her outside, where a throng of Vietnamese-Americans was mustering, to march up the Avenue of the Americas, in the Immigrants Parade. “Holy Moses,” Cooder said. “There’s this Vietnamese folk music called *cai luong*. It’s the wick-est, funkier shit in the world. It’s impossible to learn.”

—Nick Paumgarten

## SILICON VALLEY POSTCARD CHICKEN BIG



Good afternoon, and welcome to the Golden Beaks, the awards show that dares to ask, Who is the most beloved back-yard chicken in Silicon Valley? We grant you, the love affair between chickens and tech workers is an unlikely one: they’re the world’s two demographics that are least likely to engage in eye contact. Recently, however, the *Washington Post* reported that having a fully automated chicken coop bursting with heritage breeds is, to the Silicon Valley resident, an “eco-conscious humblebrag on par with driving a Tesla.” To a certain portion of the Bay Area’s professional class, chickens have accrued a significance far beyond being the Pet Who Makes Breakfast.

A poultry correspondent recently e-mailed sixty-three Bay Area owners of back-yard chickens, almost all of them participants in Tour de Coop, an annual bicycle tour of Silicon Valley coops which has drawn up to twenty-five hundred

chicken voyeurs. The correspondent visited six coops in person. He was soon covered with feathers and dust, as if he’d spent the weekend at Cher’s.

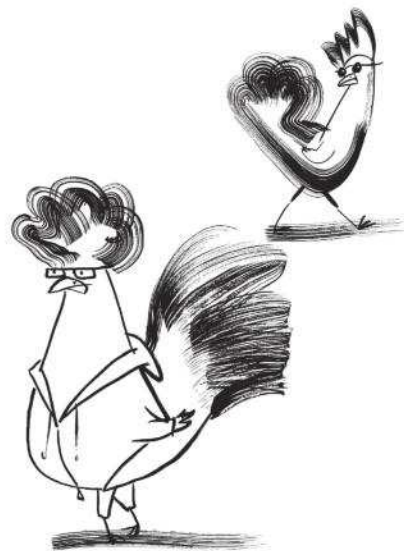
Let’s say hello to the four finalists! Meet Chewbacca. Chewbacca is a Giant Blue Frizzled Cochin rooster who lives in a compound of gingerbread-style coops and sheds in Monte Sereno which merits the term Disneyesque. Chewbacca’s owner, Laura Menard, a teacher and a breeder, made sure that the coop Chewbacca shares with the hens Hana, Luka, Leia, and Padme is electrified and plumbed, and equipped with an automatic, nipple-based watering system. It has antique windows, hand-milled wooden rosettes, a metal roof, motion detectors, and timer-activated lighting in the roost area. The coops are adjacent to a patch of artificial grass and a burbling fountain. Chewbacca eats organic feed supplemented with scraps of Menard’s organic human diet; Menard checks in on him a minimum of four times a day. She said, “Cochins are very fluffy, so I need to trim around his, uh, vent. Chewbacca gets some private grooming.”

The next chicken in the running is Marjo. Isabelle Cnudde, a former software engineer for NetApp who lives in Los Altos, rescued Marjo, a white Leghorn, from a factory farm in 2015. Then Cnudde had a brainstorm. “I have a dog who does tricks,” she said, “so I thought, Why not a chicken?” Cnudde painstakingly taught the bird to peck a queen of hearts from a lineup of playing cards. “Friends and neighbors were amazed,” she said. Cnudde posted video of Marjo doing the trick online; soon “America’s Got Talent” came calling. (“I declined,” Cnudde said. “Marjo would not have liked that. She was a back-yard girl.”) Although Marjo died of natural causes, in April, a video of the hen on the Humane Society’s Facebook page has been viewed seventy-six thousand times. That’s a lot of eyeballs.

Meet Gwynnie, a rooster. He is the property of a U.C. Berkeley psychology professor who sometimes employs Leslie Citroen, a breeder and professional chicken whisperer, who charges two hundred and twenty-five dollars an hour for poultry consultation. Gwynnie gets a weekly bath and blow-dry. The professor, who likes to carry Gwynnie

strapped to her body in a human infant carrier, including when she is in business attire, has registered the rooster as an emotional-support animal because she is worried that his pre-dawn crowing could upset her neighbors, who might alert the authorities and try to have him removed.

Next, we have Betty, the property of Chris and Suzanne Kasso, who live in Los Altos. Chris, a manager at Oracle, explained how, in 2010, despite never having performed surgery, he operated on Betty when she developed an impacted crop. After reading an article online about chicken surgery, Chris asked



Suzanne to hold Betty firmly on their kitchen island while he made an incision with a sterilized razor blade. “A lot of fermented grass was stuck in there,” Chris said. He described a foul odor as well. Following the directions in the online article, he closed the wound with Super Glue and thread.

The poultry correspondent pondered the four nominees’ claims to belovedness and winnowed the field down to the late Marjo and Chewbacca: the former because of her hard data (seventy-six thousand views, “America’s Got Talent”), and the latter because of his ample creature comforts (glamorous coop and private grooming). In the end, given the scientific bent and wonkiness endemic to the region in question, it seemed only right to honor hard data. Congratulations, Marjo. To the other nominees, a hearty thanks and an extra handful of desiccated mealworms. Keep on cluckin’.

—Henry Alford

## SEEING PAIN

*Using brain imaging to unravel the secrets of suffering.*

BY NICOLA TWILLEY

*Research is illuminating the neural patterns behind pain's infinite variety.*

On a foggy February morning in Oxford, England, I arrived at the John Radcliffe Hospital, a shiplike nineteen-seventies complex moored on a hill east of the city center, for the express purpose of being hurt. I had an appointment with a scientist named Irene Tracey, a brisk woman in her early fifties who directs Oxford University's Nuffield Department of Clinical Neurosciences and has become known as the Queen of Pain. "We might have a problem with you being a ginger," she warned when we met. Redheads typically perceive pain differently from those with other hair colors; many also flinch at the use of the G-word. "I'm sorry, a lovely auburn," she quickly said, while a doctoral student used a ruler and a

purple Sharpie to draw the outline of a one-inch square on my right shin.

Wearing thick rubber gloves, the student squeezed a dollop of pale-orange cream into the center of the square and delicately spread it to the edges, as if frosting a cake. The cream contained capsaicin, the chemical responsible for the burn of chili peppers. "We love capsaicin," Tracey said. "It does two really nice things: it ramps up gradually to become quite intense, and it activates receptors in your skin that we know a lot about." Thus anointed, I signed my disclaimer forms and was strapped into the scanning bed of a magnetic-resonance-imaging (MRI) machine.

The machine was a 7-Tesla MRI, of which there are fewer than a hundred

in the world. The magnetic field it generates (teslas are a unit of magnetic strength) is more than four times as powerful as that of the average hospital MRI machine, resulting in images of much greater detail. As the cryogenic units responsible for cooling the machine's superconducting magnet clicked on and off in a syncopated rhythm, the imaging technician warned me that, once he slid me inside, I might feel dizzy, see flashing lights, or experience a metallic taste in my mouth. "I always feel like I'm turning a corner," Tracey said. She explained that the magnetic field would instantly pull the proton in each of the octillions of hydrogen atoms in my body into alignment. Then she vanished into a control room, where a bank of screens would allow her to watch my brain as it experienced pain.

During the next couple of hours, I had needles repeatedly stuck into my ankle and the fleshy part of my calf. A hot-water bottle applied to my capsaicin patch inflicted the perceptual equivalent of a third-degree burn, after which a cooling pack placed on the same spot brought tear-inducing relief. Each time Tracey and her team prepared to observe a new slice of my brain, the machine beeped, and a small screen in front of my face flashed the word "Ready" in white lettering on a black background. After each assault, I was asked to rate my pain on a scale of 0 to 10.

Initially, I was concerned that I was letting the team down. The capsaicin patch hardly tingled, and I scored the first round of pinpricks as a 3, more out of hope than conviction. I needn't have worried. The patch began to itch, then burn. By the time the hot-water bottle was placed on it, about an hour in, I was surely at an 8. The next set of pinpricks felt as if I were being run through with a hot metal skewer.

"You're a good responder," Tracey told me, rubbing her hands together, when I emerged, dazed. "And you've got a lovely plump brain—all my post-docs want to sign you up." As my data were sent off for analysis, she pressed a large cappuccino into my hands and gently removed the capsaicin with an alcohol wipe.

Tracey didn't need to ask me how it had gone. The imaging-analysis software, designed in her department and



now used around the world, employs a color scale that shades from cool to hot, with three-dimensional pixels coded from blue through red to yellow, depending on the level of neural activity in a region. Tracey has analyzed thousands of these “blob maps,” as she calls them—scans produced using a technique called functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Watching a succession of fiery-orange jellyfish flaring up in my skull, she had seen my pain wax and wane, its outlines shifting as mild discomfort became nearly unbearable agony.

For scientists, pain has long presented an intractable problem: it is a physiological process, just like breathing or digestion, and yet it is inherently, stubbornly subjective—only you feel your pain. It is also a notoriously hard experience to convey accurately to others. Virginia Woolf bemoaned the fact that “the merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.” Elaine Scarry, in the 1985 book *The Body in Pain*, wrote, “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.”

The medical profession, too, has often declared itself frustrated at pain’s indescribability. “It would be a great thing to understand Pain in all its meanings,” Peter Mere Latham, physician extraordinary to Queen Victoria, wrote, before concluding despairingly, “Things which all men know infallibly by their own perceptive experience, cannot be made plainer by words. Therefore, let Pain be spoken of simply as Pain.”

But, in the past two decades, a small number of scientists have begun finding ways to capture the experience in quantifiable, objective data, and Tracey has emerged as a formidable figure in the field. By scanning several thousand people, healthy and sick, while subjecting them to burns, pokes, prods, and electric shocks, she has pioneered experimental methods to survey the neural landscape of pain. In the past few years, her work has expanded from the study of “normal” pain—the everyday, passing experience of a stubbed toe or a burned tongue—to the realm of chronic pain. Her findings have already changed our understanding of pain; now they promise to

transform its diagnosis and treatment, a shift whose effects will be felt in hospitals, courtrooms, and society at large.

The history of pain research is full of ingenious, largely failed attempts to measure pain. The nineteenth-century French doctor Marc Colombat de l’Isère evaluated the pitch and rhythm of cries of suffering. In the nineteen-forties, doctors at Cornell University used a heat-emitting instrument known as a “dolorimeter” to apply precise increments of pain to the forehead. By noting whenever a person perceived an increase or decrease in sensation, they arrived at a pain scale calibrated in increments of “dols,” each of which was a “just-noticeable difference” away from the adjacent dols. Last year, scientists at M.I.T. developed an algorithm called DeepFaceLIFT, which attempts to predict pain scores based on facial expressions.

The most widely adopted tools rely on the subjective reports of sufferers. In the nineteen-fifties, a Canadian psychologist named Ronald Melzack treated “an impish, delightful woman in her mid-seventies” who suffered from diabetes and whose legs were both amputated. She was tormented by phantom-limb pain, and Melzack was struck by her linguistic resourcefulness in describing it. He began collecting the words that she and other patients used most frequently, organizing this vocabulary into categories, in an attempt to capture pain’s temporal, sensory, and affective dimensions, as well as its intensity. The result, published two decades later, was the McGill Pain Questionnaire, a scale comprising some eighty descriptors—“stabbing,” “gnawing,” “radiating,” “shooting,” and so on. The questionnaire is still much used, but there have been few surveys of its efficacy in a clinical setting, and it’s easy to see how one person’s “agonizing” could be another person’s “wretched.” Furthermore, a study by the sociologist Cassandra Crawford found that, after the questionnaire’s publication, clinical descriptions of phantom-limb pain shifted dramatically, implying that the assessment device was, to some extent, informing the sensations it was intended to measure.

Meanwhile, as the historian Joanna Bourke has shown, in her book *The Story of Pain*, attempts to translate the McGill Pain Questionnaire into other lan-

guages have revealed the extent to which cultural context shapes language, which, in turn, shapes perception. In mid-century Montreal, Melzack’s talkative diabetic might have described a migraine as lacerating or pulsing, but the Sakhalin Ainu traditionally rated the intensity of pounding headaches in terms of the animal whose footsteps they most resembled: a bear headache was worse than a musk-deer headache. (If a headache was accompanied by a chill, it was described with an analogy to sea creatures.)

By far the most common tool used today to measure pain is the one I employed in the scanner: the 0-to-10 numerical scale. Its rudimentary ancestor was introduced in 1948, by Kenneth Keele, a British cardiologist, who asked his patients to choose a score between 0 (no pain) and 3 (“severe” pain). Over the years, the scale has stretched to 10, in order to accommodate more gradations of sensation. In some settings, patients, rather than picking a number, place a mark on a ten-centimetre line, which is sometimes adorned with cheerful and grimacing faces.

In 2000, Congress declared the next ten years the “Decade of Pain Control and Research,” after the Supreme Court, rejecting the idea of physician-assisted suicide as a constitutional right, recommended improvements in palliative care. Pain was declared “the fifth vital sign” (alongside blood pressure, pulse rate, respiratory rate, and temperature), and the numerical scoring of pain became a standard feature of U.S. medical records, billing codes, and best-practice guides.

But numerical scales are far from satisfactory. In Tracey’s MRI machine, my third-degree burn felt five points more intense than the initial pinpricks, but was it really only two points less than the worst I could imagine? Surely not, but, having never given birth, broken any bones, or undergone serious surgery, how was I to know?

The self-reported nature of pain scores leads, inevitably, to their accuracy being challenged. “To have great pain is to have certainty,” Elaine Scarry wrote. “To hear that another person has pain is to have doubt.” That doubt opens the door to stereotyping and bias. The 2014 edition of the textbook *Nursing: A Concept-Based Approach to Learning* warned practitioners that Native Americans “may pick a sacred number when asked to rate

pain,” and that the validity of self-reports will likely be affected by the fact that Jewish people “believe that pain must be shared” and black people “believe suffering and pain are inevitable.” Last year, the book’s publisher, Pearson, announced that it would remove the offending passage from future editions, but biases remain common, and study after study has shown shocking disparities in pain treatment. A 2016 paper noted that black patients are significantly less likely than white patients to be prescribed medication for the same level of reported pain, and they receive smaller doses. A group of researchers from the University of Pennsylvania found that women are up to twenty-five per cent less likely than men to be given opioids for pain.

In addition, once pain assessment became a standard feature of American medical practice, doctors found themselves confronted with an apparent epidemic of previously unreported agony. In response, they began handing out opioids such as OxyContin. Between 1997 and 2010, the number of times the drug was prescribed annually grew more than eight hundred per cent, to 6.2 million. The disastrous results in terms of addiction and abuse are well known.

Without a reliable measure of pain, physicians are unable to standardize treatment, or accurately assess how successful a treatment has been. And, without a means by which to compare and quantify the dimensions of the phenomenon, pain itself has remained mysterious. The problem is circular: when I asked Tracey why pain has remained so resistant to objective description, she explained that its biology is poorly understood. Other basic sensory perceptions—touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing—have been traced to particular areas of the brain. “We don’t have that for pain,” she said. “We still don’t know exactly how the brain constructs this experience that you absolutely, unarguably know hurts.”

Irene Tracey has lived in Oxford almost all her life. She was born at the old Radcliffe Infirmary, went to a local state school, and studied biochemistry at the university. Her husband, Myles

Allen, is an Oxford professor, too, in charge of the world’s largest climate-modelling experiment, and they live in North Oxford, in a semidetached house comfortably cluttered with their children’s sports gear and schoolwork. In 1990, Tracey embarked on her doctorate at Oxford, using MRI technology to study muscle and brain damage in



patients with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. At the time, the fMRI technique that she used to map my brain in action was just being developed. The technique tracks neural activity by measuring local changes associated with the flow of blood as it carries oxygen through the brain. A busy neuron requires more oxy-

gen, and, because oxygenated and deoxygenated blood have different magnetic properties, neural activity creates a detectable disturbance in the magnetic field of an MRI scanner.

In 1991, a team at Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston, showed its first, grainy video of a human visual cortex “lighting up” as the cortex turned impulses from the optic nerve into images. Captivated, Tracey applied for a postdoctoral fellowship at M.G.H., and began working there in 1994, using the MRI whenever she could. When Allen, at that time her boyfriend, visited from England one Valentine’s Day, she cancelled a trip they’d planned to New York to take advantage of an unexpected open slot on the scanner. Allen spent the evening lying inside the machine, bundled up to keep warm, while she gazed into his brain. He told me that he had intended to propose to Tracey that day, but saved the ring for another time.

It was toward the end of her fellowship in Boston that Tracey first began thinking seriously about pain. Playing field hockey in her teens, she’d had her first experience of severe pain—a knee injury that required surgery—but it was a chance conversation with colleagues in a pain clinic that sparked her scientific interest. “It was just one of those serendipitous conversations that you find yourself in, where this whole area is opened up to you,” she told me. “It was, like, ‘God, this is everything I’ve been looking for. It’s got clinical application,

interesting philosophy, and we know absolutely nothing.’ I thought, Right, that’s it, pain is going to be my thing.”

By then, Tracey had been recruited to return home and help found the Oxford Centre for Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Brain. Scientists had already largely given up on the idea of finding a single pain cortex: in the handful of fMRI papers that had been published describing brain activity when a person was burned or pricked with needles, the scans seemed to show that pain involved significant activity in many parts of the brain, rather than in a single pocket, as with hearing or sight. Tracey’s plan was to design a series of experiments that picked apart this larger pattern of activity, isolating different aspects of pain in order to understand exactly what each region was contributing to the over-all sensation.

In 1998, while her lab was being built, she took her first doctoral student, a Rhodes Scholar named Alexander Ploghaus, to Canada, their scientific equipment packed in their suitcases, to use a collaborator’s MRI machine for a week. Their subjects were a group of college students, including several ice-hockey players, who kept bragging about how much pain they could take. While each student was in the scanner, Tracey and Ploghaus used a homemade heating element to apply either burns or pleasant heat to the back of the left hand, as red, green, and blue lights flashed on and off. The lights came on in a seemingly random sequence, but gradually the subjects realized that one color always presaged pain and another was always followed by comfortable warmth. The resulting scans were striking. Throughout the experiment, the subjects’ brain-activity patterns remained consistent during moments of pain, but, as they figured out the rules of the game, the ominous light began triggering more and more blood flow to a couple of regions—the anterior insula and the prefrontal cortices. These areas, Tracey and Ploghaus concluded, must be responsible for the anticipation of pain.

Showing that the experience of pain could be created in part by anticipation, rather than by actual sensation, was the first experimental step in breaking the phenomenon down into its constituent elements. “Rather than just seeing that



all these blobs are active because it hurts, we wanted to understand, What bit of the hurt are they underpinning?" Tracey said. "Is it the localization, is it the intensity, is it the anticipation or the anxiety?" During the next decade, she designed experiments that revealed the roles played by various brain regions in modulating the experience of pain. She took behavioral researchers' finding that distraction reduces the perception of pain—as when a doctor tells a child to count backward from ten while receiving an injection—and made it the basis of an experiment that showed that concentrating on a numerical task suppressed activity in several regions that normally light up during pain. She examined the effects of depression on pain perception—people suffering from depression commonly report feeling more pain than other people do from the same stimulus—and demonstrated that this, too, could change the distribution and the magnitude of neural activity.

One of her most striking experiments tested the common observation that religious faith helps people cope with pain. Comparing the neurological responses of devout Catholics with those of atheists, she found that the two groups had similar baseline experiences of pain, but that, if the subjects were shown a picture of the Virgin Mary (by Sassoferato, an Italian Baroque painter) while the pain was administered, the believers rated their discomfort nearly a point lower than the atheists did. When the volunteers were shown a secular painting (Leonardo da Vinci's "Lady with an Ermine"), the two groups' responses were the same. The implications are potentially far-reaching, and not only because they suggest that cultural attitudes may have a neurological imprint. If faith engages a neural mechanism with analgesic benefits—the Catholics showed heightened activity in an area usually associated with the ability to override a physical response—it may be possible to find other, secular ways to engage that circuit.

Tracey's research had begun to explain why people experience the same pain differently and why the same pain can seem worse to a single individual from one day to the next. Many of her findings simply reinforced existing psychological practices and common sense, but her scientific proof had clinical value.

"Countless people who work in cognitive behavioral therapy come up at the end of talks or write to me," Tracey told me. "They say how helpful it has been to empower their education of the patient by saying that, if you're more anxious about your pain, or more sad, look, here's a picture telling you it gets worse."

These early experiments repeatedly demonstrated that pain is neurologically complex, involving responses generated throughout the brain. Nonetheless, by identifying regions that control ancillary factors, such as anticipation, Tracey and her team were gradually able to zero in on the regions that are most fundamental. In 2007, Tracey published a survey of existing research and identified what she called "the cerebral signature of pain"—the distinctive patterns produced by a set of brain regions that reliably act in concert during a painful experience. Some of these regions are large, and accommodate many different functions. None are specific to pain. But, as we stared at the orange blobs of an fMRI scan on her laptop screen, Tracey rattled off the names of half a dozen areas of the brain and concluded, "With a decent poke, you'd activate all of that."

In 2013, Tor Wager, a neuroscientist at the University of Colorado, Boulder, took the logical next step by creating an algorithm that could recognize pain's distinctive patterns; today, it can pick out brains in pain with more than ninety-

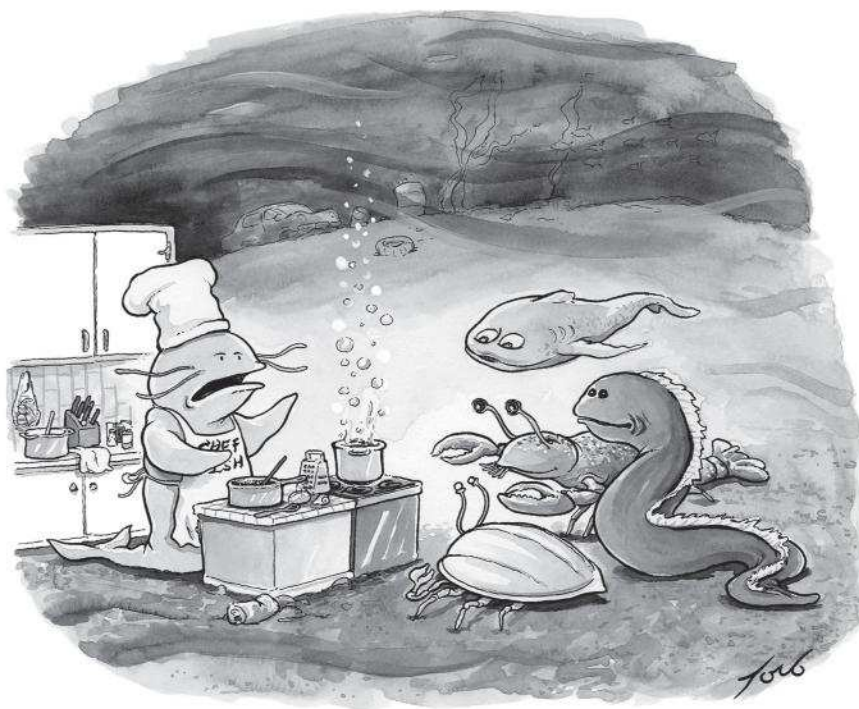
five-per-cent accuracy. When the algorithm is asked to sort activation maps by apparent intensity, its ranking matches participants' subjective pain ratings. By analyzing neural activity, it can tell not just whether someone is in pain but also how intense the experience is. "What's remarkable is that basic pain signals seem to look pretty much the same across a wide variety of people," Wager said. "But, within that, different brain systems are more, or less, significant, depending on the individual."

Among the brain's many pain-producing patterns, however, there is only one region that is consistently active at a high level: the dorsal posterior region of the insula. Using a new imaging technique, Tracey and one of her postdoctoral fellows, Andrew Segerdahl, recently discovered that the intensity of a prolonged painful experience corresponds precisely with variations in the blood flow to this particular area of the brain. In other words, activity in this area provides, at last, a biological benchmark for agony. Tracey described the insula, an elongated ridge nestled deep within the Sylvian fissure, with affection. "It's just this lovely island of cortex hidden in the middle, deep in your brain," she said. "And it's got all these amazing different functions. When you say, 'Actually, I feel a bit cold, I need to put a sweater on,' what's driving you to do that? Probably this bit."

The importance of the dorsal posterior insula had previously been highlighted



*"I feel like I have all this anger inside but no one special to share it with."*



*"You arrived as bottom-feeders, but you shall leave as bottom-gourmands."*

in a somewhat horrifying experiment conducted by Laure Mazzola, a neurologist at the Lyon Neuroscience Research Center, in France. It is common for surgeons treating patients with drug-resistant epilepsy to disable the portions of the brain in which the seizures are occurring. Before surgery, neurologists often stimulate the area and its surroundings with an electrical probe, to make sure they're on target. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Mazzola stimulated various parts of the posterior insula in pre-surgical patients and recorded their responses. When she reached the dorsal region, Tracey told me, the patients "were leaping off the bed." The presence of a probe in the brain shouldn't in itself hurt, because there are no pain receptors there. Yet activating this area was apparently enough to create a brutally convincing synthetic pain.

The day after my fMRI scan, Tracey took me to her department's Clinical Pain Testing lab, a room that she refers to as her "torture chamber." A red illuminated sign blinked "Do Not Enter," and Tracey removed a retractable belt blocking the door. Inside were all the devices that she and her team use to

hurt people scientifically. As I reclined in a blue dentist-style chair under the room's lone fluorescent light, she and a couple of her colleagues burned the back of my hand with a laser. Someone pressed a device about the size of a camera's memory card against my forearm. It was rippled with heating elements, which were covered with a thin layer of gold foil to conduct the heat to the skin. "We can raise the temperature by thirty degrees in under a second," Tracey said.

Each of the methods has a particular use. Lasers and electrodes can deliver precise increments of pain in experiments requiring a quick transition between different levels of stimulation. Capsaicin, because it sensitizes the central nervous system, is best for simulating chronic pain. Inflatable rectal balloons mimic the distinctive pain caused by damage to internal organs. All of them have been designed with the aim of reliably producing in laboratory conditions sensations that hurt enough to mirror real life but don't cause lasting harm, which would be unethical. A scientist hoping to gather publishable data can't just hit someone with a hammer and hope that each blow is as hard as the last one, even if an institutional eth-

ics committee would permit such a thing.

Tracey has developed protocols to inflict the maximum amount of pain with the minimum amount of tissue damage. Using psychological tricks and carefully choreographed shifts in intensity, she has also devised ways of heightening a subject's perception of pain. At the same time, research identifying the regions most crucial to the experience of pain has inadvertently pointed the way to the creation of artificial pain purely through targeted neurostimulation. It does not take much imagination to discern the potential for misuse of this kind of knowledge. For this reason, the International Association for the Study of Pain (I.A.S.P.) has a code of ethics, and its members are pledged not to inflict or increase pain except in an experimental setting.

A more nuanced ethical issue involves the potential use of neuroimaging as a sort of lie detector—to expose malingerers or increase payouts in injury-compensation suits. "Pain is enormously important in law," Henry Greely, the director of the Center for Law and the Biosciences, at Stanford University, told me. "It's the subject of hundreds of thousands of legal disputes every year in the United States." Many are personal-injury cases; others involve Social Security and private-insurance disability. Greely pointed out that the lack of an objective test for pain means not only that people who deserve compensation miss out (and vice versa) but also that millions of billable hours are spent on these suits. With an agreed-upon empirical metric for pain, he estimates, the vast majority of cases would be settled rather than litigated.

Greely believes that the routine use of fMRI evidence in court is likely a decade away, but there are already signs that it is coming. In 2008, a colleague of his, Sean Mackey, was asked to serve as an expert witness in the case of a man who was suing an asphalt manufacturer after suffering first- and second-degree burns. The man's lawyers were planning to use brain-imaging data to show that the injuries had left him in chronic pain. The company's legal team wanted to put Mackey on the stand to argue that the current state of pain science could not justify this as an objective assessment. The case was eventually settled out of court, but the judge ruled that, despite



a demurring opinion from Mackey, the scans were admissible as evidence.

All the scientists I spoke to were careful to stress that they think the field is not far enough advanced for an fMRI scan to be used as legal evidence of pain, or to overrule a subjective report. Some are convinced that it will never reach that point. Karen Davis, a researcher at the Krembil Brain Institute, in Toronto, told me, "Pain is, literally by definition, a subjective experience. That makes self-report the only true measure." Greely is less sure: "I'm willing to agree that it's still truly a subjective state, but there are objective things that can give you more or less confidence in the reality of that subjective state."

Davis is sufficiently worried about the legal ramifications of pain neuroimaging that she recently chaired an I.A.S.P. task force to consider the subject. Researchers who have spent their careers investigating the ways that pain is altered by mood, context, and suggestion are naturally skeptical of the idea that personal testimony can be proved or disproved by making someone spend an hour lying horizontal and immobile in a rigidly controlled, socially isolated, loud, boring, and claustrophobic environment. Although fMRI is often taken to be a transparent window into brain function, Davis told me that it would be more accurate to think of it as a low-resolution, somewhat out-of-synch set of stills from a black-and-white movie. While electrical impulses that travel along neurons last only about a millisecond, blood, which fMRI measures as a proxy, arrives on the scene slightly after the fact, and dissipates slowly.

Most brain imaging has been carried out in 3-Tesla MRI scanners, which cannot resolve detail below a scale of two millimetres. Neurons are so tiny that a cube of brain tissue that size will contain tens of thousands of them. Even the 7-Tesla that scanned my brain had only a maximum resolution of one millimetre. Tracey cautions against overestimating how much "blob maps" can explain. "Underneath that blob there's an awful lot of nuance, and there's an awful lot of anatomy," she said. To help validate her findings, she often combines magnetic imaging with other techniques, such as measurements of electrical activity using an EEG.

Relatively few people have had their brains scanned while being hurt, and an algorithm like Wager's, which has correctly predicted pain in the brains of a small cohort of healthy volunteers, cannot be reliably extrapolated to apply to the population as a whole. But Greely believes that overcoming this deficiency is simply a matter of doing more studies. He predicts that, once researchers have collected enough data and developed standardized protocols, neuroimaging will follow in the path of forensic DNA—a scientific breakthrough whose results were eventually considered robust enough to use as evidence in court. Our trust in DNA evidence is increasingly seen as problematic, but Greely is unperturbed. "No evidence is perfect," he said. "The stuff courts rely on most—eyewitness testimony—is known to be awful, but we use it anyway."

When I asked Tracey whether she thought her work could eventually rid the world of pain, she snorted in a polite attempt not to laugh. Most pain, she explained, is "the good kind." Hurting yourself when you touch a hot surface is unpleasant, certainly, but it's also crucial. While in Oxford, I met one of her frequent collaborators, the neurobiologist David Bennett, whose research involves patients who, because of rare genetic mutations, cannot feel pain. "You might wonder, Why are humans born with this system where they have to feel pain?" Bennett said. "And these patients give you the answer to that very quickly, because not feeling pain is a health disaster." Often, he told me, such people die young. Historically, they frequently became circus freaks: the earliest clinically documented example was a Czech immigrant to the United States, whose case was described by a Dr. Dearborn in the Bronx, in 1932. According to Dearborn, the patient earned a living on the vaudeville circuit as Edward H. Gibson, the Human Pincushion, inviting audience members to come up onstage and push pins into him.

Bennett said that patients of his have chewed off the tips of their own tongues and scratched their corneas. They suffer hearing loss from untreated ear infections, unwittingly rest their hands on hot surfaces, and walk on broken legs,

which leaves their limbs deformed. In an evolutionary context, Bennett explained, it makes sense that we are built in anticipation of pain: we are soft, and the world is a dangerous place. Undergoing an extremely unpleasant response to harm helps us avoid further injury in the moment and teaches us to reduce its likelihood in the future.

But there's a "bad kind" of pain, too—one that is not the result of any obvious external source. Chronic pain is often defined, somewhat misleadingly, as "pain that extends beyond the expected period of healing." In reality, once you've "gone chronic," as Tracey puts it, pain is the disease, rather than a symptom. That view represents a shift in understanding, brought about in part by her work. Until recently, chronic pain was thought of merely as prolonged "normal" pain. But neuroimaging has shown that, if a chronic-pain sufferer and an unafflicted person are given the same burn or pinprick, their brains manifest activity differently. Chronic pain, Tracey said, is now understood as "something new, with a life of its own, with its own biology and its own mechanisms, most of which we really don't understand at all."

Until a couple of years ago, Tracey, like most researchers in the field, focussed on the good kind of pain; this was crucial to understanding the basic neurobiology involved. Yet the true problem is chronic pain. Estimates suggest that somewhere between ten and thirty per cent of the American population suffers from chronic pain. Its cost to society is some six hundred and thirty-five billion dollars each year—more than that of cancer and heart disease combined. And behind such statistics is the heavy psychic and emotional toll on those who spend every conscious moment suffering. A journalist who was given a diagnosis of fibromyalgia twenty years ago told me that his entire identity is subsumed by his experience of incessant, whole-body agony: "It's who I am now. I'm broken. I need to be fixed, but I can't be fixed."

Tracey's latest research has investigated a key neural mechanism of chronic pain. It is situated in the brain stem, a hard-to-reach, tube-shaped mass of gray matter at the top of the spinal cord, which functions as the conduit for communication

between the brain and the body. Experiments on animals had identified two mechanisms within the brain stem that, respectively, muffle and boost pain signals before they reach the rest of the brain. Since Tracey's lab first succeeded in imaging the region, more than a decade ago, she has been able to show how these two mechanisms operate. "It can completely block the signals coming in," she said of one, explaining that it is responsible for situations in which you don't feel pain even though you should—for instance, when your brain is distracted by the euphoria of crossing the finish line of a marathon. Unfortunately, in some people the mechanism that exacerbates pain is dominant. Scanning the brains of patients with diabetic nerve pain, Tracey and Segerdahl found enhanced communication from the brain stem, via the spine, to the parts of the brain known to contribute to the sensation of pain.

Tracey told me that it seems we may all be predisposed by our brain stems to feel pain more acutely or less, but that in chronic-pain patients it's as if the volume knob of pain were turned all the way up and jammed there permanently. No one knows why this hypersensitization occurs. Studies of twins suggest that our pain response is, in part, heritable, but there are close correlations between chronic pain and many other factors—gender, age, stress, poverty, and depression. Tracey has begun to study whether recurrent experiences of acute bodily distress early in life trigger brain-stem changes that make chronic pain likelier later on. With colleagues in Oxford, she is involved in a longitudinal study of extremely premature babies and another of teen-age girls who suffer particularly painful periods.

Although the results of this work won't be known for many years, her brain-stem research is already on its way to a clinical application. A few years ago, in collaboration with the rheumatologist Anushka Soni, Tracey began imaging the brains of osteoarthritis patients before and after knee-replacement surgery. Roughly a fifth of patients who have knee replacements find that the operation doesn't meaningfully reduce their pain, and, again, no one knows why. But when Tracey analyzed the scans she found that the unlucky patients had increased activity in the mechanism of the

brain stem known to amplify pain signals. Their brains revealed that they had "gone chronic"; they were not just ordinary people whose knees hurt.

Although it's not feasible to give every prospective patient a brain scan, results from fMRI experiments correlate strongly with responses to a questionnaire called painDETECT, which was developed to diagnose nerve malfunction. Such a questionnaire could predict the likely outcome of surgery, so that patients could make an informed decision about whether the procedure was worth it. Tracey is also testing, on a group of twenty-four volunteers, a compound that she hopes could dampen activity in the problematic brain-stem region. In time, patients who seem predisposed to less successful surgical outcomes may be given a drug that makes relief likelier by adjusting their brain-stem biochemistry.

Drug development could be the most influential result of Tracey's work. Pain medications have become something of a pharmacological graveyard, she told me; their development is often abandoned after patients report no improvement. "But their pain rating might still be up for all these other reasons—they're anxious, they're depressed, they're expecting to be in pain," Tracey said. "We've thrown out drugs that probably had high efficacy because we had the wrong measure—we relied on the subjective rating." She believes that drug tests will become much more reliable once their efficacy can be measured against an objective target. She is part of an academic consortium that has received a large grant from Europe's Innovative Medicines Initiative to help establish a set of measurable biological signs that can be used to ascertain whether new drugs are effective at disarming known pain mechanisms, regardless of whether the person taking them experiences any relief. Ultimately, she expects that various combinations of therapies will need to be delivered, in order to quiet the particular neural systems responsible for each individual's unique experience of suffering.

A few weeks after my ordeal in the fMRI machine, Andrew Segerdahl e-mailed me the resulting images. I looked for the brain regions I'd been told were important, but all I could see

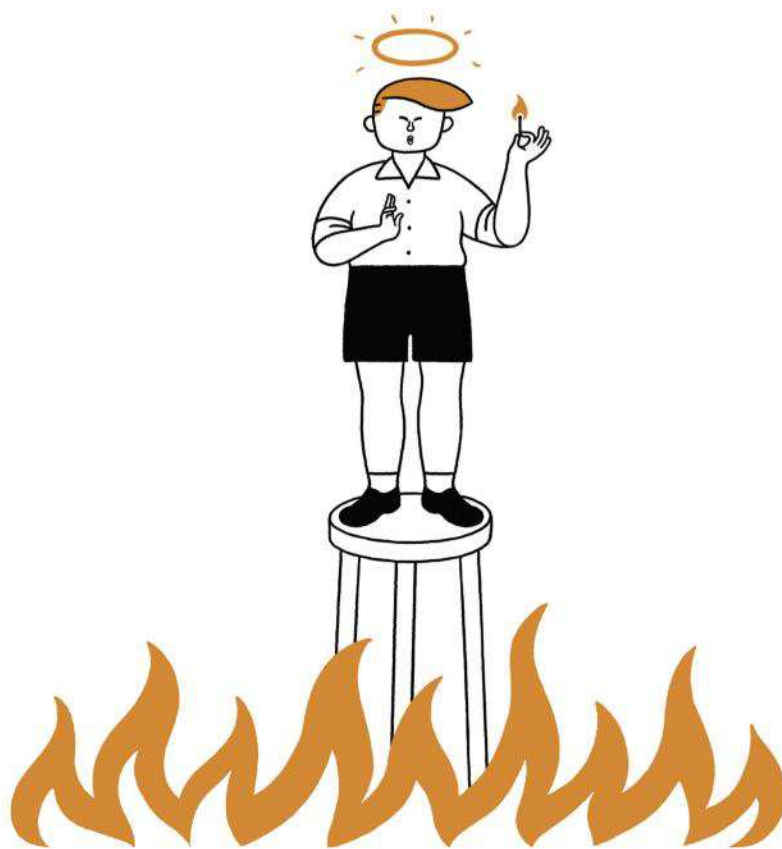
was a brain on fire. Everything was orange, particularly in the left hemisphere. (The pain was being inflicted on my right leg.)

Over the phone, Segerdahl talked me through my scans. "That map is actually really difficult to make sense of," he said. "Your brain is really, really, really lit up—there's just a lot going on." But then he showed me a sequence of images that had been processed in such a way that the color coding appeared only in regions that had elevated blood flow while I endured the prolonged pain of the capsaicin cream. The characteristic pattern of pain began to emerge, and Segerdahl recited the names of the active regions like old friends.

Then came a set of maps that showed my brain during the exquisite moment of relief when the cooling pack was applied. There were many regions with activity levels—the images looked almost as busy as the heat maps—but the blobs were subtly different in shape and location. In my brain, pain was shading into pleasure, and, curiously, many of the same regions were involved, activated in a slightly different pattern. "There's quite a lot still to be understood in terms of the relief side of this equation," Segerdahl said. He hesitated. "It's, like, I'm super interested in it, but I almost don't want to touch it yet, because it's the ultimate goal."

Tracey has been looking at pleasure for almost as long as she's been studying pain. "They are two sides of the same coin," she told me. Many signs of their interrelation crop up in her work. Chronic-pain patients typically also suffer from anhedonia—the inability to experience pleasure—and research suggests that their brains' reward systems are wired slightly differently from those in other brains. Pain is naturally a more urgent research priority, given that most of us find it intolerable, but fully understanding it will require a better understanding of its opposite. "There's a Jeremy Bentham quote I like," Tracey said. "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. These are the two things that drive us, as animals, to do what we do." ♦





## LITTLE ST. DON

*A reading from the Book of St. Don.*

BY GEORGE SAUNDERS

ONCE, WHEN St. Don was in the fullness of his years, the people brought before him a woman caught in adultery and asked should they stone her. St. Don grew quiet, attempting to know the hearts of the people. Did the people *want* to stone her? Would they like him more if he urged them to stone her or if he urged them *not* to stone her? He sensed that they were actually dying to stone her. For all were holding rocks and a few even had rocks in both hands. And St. Don spoketh as follows: "What she did? Whatever it was? Was bad. So bad. Am I saying you should stone her? Well, I hear that some people have been saying she definitely should be stoned." And the people believed, and began to chant, "Stone her! Stone her!" At this, St. Don smiled: for

it meant that they now liked him more than they would have liked him had he suggested they not stone her, or just stayed neutral about it.

ONE DAY, ST. DON and a few of his business colleagues saw a blind man begging in the street. "St. Don," said Michael Cohen, "tell us, is that man blind through his own sin, or did his parents sin?" And St. Don replied, "Hey, I didn't do it. Both, probably. How should I know? I find it, honestly, a little disgusting. Let's clear out."

With that, St. Don spat into the dirt. And the others waited for St. Don to make clay from his spit and the dirt and apply it to the blind man's eyes and thus heal him. But nothing doing. St. Don just spat into the dirt again,

saying, "Did I say let's get going or what? Are you morons deaf?"

And they all got going.

A STORY FROM the early years of the life of St. Don: During his childhood, the mother of one of Little St. Don's school friends passed away, in a freak accident, while attending a circus. At the funeral, the people were amazed when Little St. Don stood up on one of the pews and began to speak unto them. He told a story about the time he, Little St. Don, had a terrific time, at a different circus. People seemed to really like him at that circus. It was the best circus that ever occurred. The people couldn't get over it, how he could name each and every animal that came trotting out. Still, it was sad about the death of Mrs. Murphy and all. Then again, who sits right under the flying trapeze? Crushed, wow, that had to hurt. Speaking of flying trapezes, had everyone seen his recent report card? It was—the teachers were all saying this—one of the best report cards anyone had ever seen, since the beginning of time, including probably, you know, Napoleon or whoever. And Napoleon was a pretty smart cookie. But wow, how sad, to be crushed by a falling trapeze person. Poor Mrs. Murphy. Not her day, folks, I'll tell you that.

Nearly forty minutes later, the people were astonished to find Little St. Don still standing on that pew, still talking. And lo, the crowd drifted away, until there were only, like, four people left, and three were fast asleep, and then, of course, the corpse of Mrs. Murphy was still there, and yet, in what soon became known as the Miracle of Mrs. Murphy's Funeral, St. Don would later claim that the crowd grew and grew, until the church could barely contain the multitude.

LITTLE ST. DON was once invited to the birthday party of his best friend, Todd. As the cake was being served, a neighbor, Mr. Aryan, burst in, drunk, threw the cake against the wall, insulted Todd's mother, and knocked a few toddlers out of their seats, requiring them to get stitches. Then Todd's dad pushed Mr. Aryan roughly out the front door. Again, Little St. Don mounted a chair, and began to speak,

saying what a shame it was that those two nice people had both engaged in violence.

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ONE DAY, IN church, Little St. Don heard the priest speaking of someone named Jesus Christ, who was greater and more powerful than any one of us, paradoxically, through his very gentleness. Little St. Don, thinking deeply upon these things, reasoned thusly: “Gentle, sure, yeah, that’s great. Jesus sounds like a good guy. Pretty famous guy. Huh. Maybe kind of a wimp? Within our school, am I about as famous as Jesus was when alive? Now that he’s dead, sure, he’s super-famous. But, when alive, how did he do? Not so great, I bet. Anyway, I like Saviours who weren’t crucified.”

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HEAR THEE NOW the story of how Little St. Don once helped avert a terrible tragedy. A young black man, Jamie, hung a banner outside his dwelling, saying “Please Help Stop Race-Related Violence.” A crowd of white people had there gathered, agitated for reasons they could not quite articulate. Little St. Don climbed onto a nearby lawn chair and, using a megaphone someone had conveniently brought along (and actually it was he, Little St. Don), spoke loudly to Jamie, his voice reaching even inside the dwelling, asking Jamie why he hated the military so much.

And the crowd was satisfied, and left that place, sore amazed.

•  
THEN CAME A GREAT challenge in Little St. Don’s life. Some stiff accused him of being involved in some alleged cheating on some meaningless history test. Actually, that stiff was Mrs. Jones, his history teacher, who had recently got divorced and had some sort of weird digestive issue, and whenever she stood behind you her stomach gurgled, so it was like there was a freaking trash compactor back there wearing too much perfume and occasionally making moans of unhappiness at what had to be a pretty miserable life, what with that face.

What might be a good nickname for Mrs. Jones? pondered Little St. Don. Gurgling Gloria? Lonely Jonesly?

Anyhoo.

Little St. Don was unafraid, even in the office of the principal (Fat Bald

Jim), and, leaping atop a small stool there, spoke directly unto his accuser, Mrs. Jones. “As far as this fake test-cheating thing? What about all the people who get killed by refrigerators falling on them?” he sayethed. “Big issue, folks. Why do all these refrigerators keep falling on people? Probably it’s the gangs. Might also be that black kid—don’t get me wrong, I love the blacks, but that black kid who had that banner up praising MS-13? Maybe he’s standing behind the fridges, pushing them over. I’ve been hearing about that.”

Yet, in spite of the power of these words, Little St. Don still got detention.

In the wilderness that was detention, Little St. Don entered a deep state of contemplation. What was the meaning of life? What should he be when he grew up? Why was the world so unfair? You live in a big house, the biggest, actually, and everyone in the whole school knows your name, and you are always giving these amazingly well-attended talks, from chairs and stools, and yet, for all of that, people don’t always do what you say, or admit that you are above reproach in all things and always have exactly the right idea about everything, even better ideas than the so-called experts, like Mrs. Gut-Symphony Jones, though you never even crack a book.

Sad.

And then there came upon Little St. Don a powerful vision.

All around him? Carnage. In his city, on this very street, gangs were rampaging, people were trembling in fear, cars were burning, the sounds of machine-gun fire filled the air, people were taking terrible advantage of him. And of his country. Well, admittedly, mostly of him.

Little St. Don arose and went to the window. Hmm. That quiet street out there was not typical, he realized. Carnage sometimes went mute, apparently. That ice-cream truck? Who knew what was going on inside there?

•  
ST. DON WOULD recall this great trial years later, when he accidentally had an affair with a porn star and inadvertently paid her to keep silent. In the course of time, all came to light. St. Don kept his counsel, stayed quiet. Very, very quiet. Really kept his counsel. Then, on the birthday of his wife, he stated publicly

that he hadn’t bought her much, because he was too busy.

And yet still he retainethed office.

St. Don was continually pulling off these sorts of miracles, to the amazement of the people, especially those on the left. And the center. And those on the more reasonable right. And even those on the far right, numbering among them even then those who had acquired much gold supporting Little St. Don, such as, for example, his chief scribe, St. Sean of Hannity, might be heard to mutter, in the privacy of their dwellings, as the hour grew late, “Wow, how long can this hustle keep going?”

•  
SHORTLY AFTER WHAT came to be known as the Detention Vision, one of St. Don’s friends, Little Rudy, proposed beating up a boy named Sandy, who, it was believed, had been the one who had narced out Little St. Don over the whole test-cheating witch hunt. And Little St. Don spoke unto Rudy, saying, “Well, yes, it was bad, what Sandy did. Was it criminal? I don’t know. Do we go around beating up criminals? Maybe we should. I wish we did. Some people do. Strong people. At other, better schools. Because those criminals? Are some bad folks, folks. I do consider what Sandy did somewhat criminal. We’ve got to be tough, people. Got. To. Be. Tough. Believe me. But some people—like Sandy, or Mrs. Jones—they don’t get that. They’re, like, best friends with all the criminals. Next thing you know, our class’s pet rabbit, Briggs, is dead in his cage—killed by what? Criminals. Was it Sandy? Maybe so. Mrs. Jones? Should she also be beaten up? It’s not me saying that. We’ll see what happens.”

And the other kids rushed to Mr. Briggs’s cage, only to find him very much alive, kind of massaging an old carrot he had in there, with both front paws, like he was logrolling or something like that, and Little St. Don said, “It will happen, folks. Believe me.”

And a few years later Mr. Briggs did, indeed, pass away.

Many similar miracles were reported, and signs, and Little St. Don’s fame grew and grew.

•  
AT THAT TIME, in that country, there was, living nearby, a man of many years, Mr. Gonzalez, who had been working



among them near unto three decades, on a green card. Twenty years earlier, he had been convicted of a misdemeanor. And it came to pass that ICE cameth and arrested him as he was sitting on his porch, and an hour or so later his adult daughter arrived home from her fourth job, and she spoketh to Little St. Don, being much aggrieved, saying unto him, “My dad never showed up at his second job, and the people at his third job haven’t seen him. Have you seen him? I’m so worried. He works so hard for all of us, every day, and his heart is not so good lately, Little Don.” (And with her eyes she could not see, and lo, did not get it about him being a saint, which was why she erred by calling him merely Little Don, which got under his skin in a big way, even back then.) She was crying. She had her baby in her arms, baby Victoria. Nice baby. He loved kids. Who didn’t? And Little St. Don thought unto himself, Good thing the old man wasn’t watching the baby when ICE got here.

For in truth it was he, Little St. Don, who had called ICE, as a prank, with his pal Little Stephen Miller, for the two of them had not many friends, except each other. And they would sometimes call ICE, for fun, doing their part to reduce the level of infestation. And then sometimes they would go ride bikes.

A SPARROW FELL from a tree. Little St. Don ran over it with his bike, on purpose. A white-haired lady from down the block came and unfairly accused Little St. Don of knocking the sparrow out of the tree with a rock, then running it over with his bike on purpose. Her old coot of a husband doddered over to see what the trouble was. Little St. Don quickly hid the rock with which he had killed the sparrow. Then he hired a spokesperson. That girl Traci, from homeroom.

And Little St. Don thoughteth to himself, Man, was that a good throw. One of the best throws ever.

Quoth now the old lady to Traci, “This young man hit that sparrow with a rock and then ran over it on purpose, with his bike.”

“Truly,” answered Traci, “it is sad that all animals must, in time, die.”

“No, he *killed* it,” the old lady said. “With the rock. Then the bike.”

“Which one was it, the rock or the

bike?” answered Traci. “Can’t be both. If you’re going to make a serious accusation like this against a sitting saint, you should get your story straight. Otherwise, you seem a little, you know . . .”

Then Traci did that thing of circling a finger around the ear area, suggesting: “Senile? I’m not saying that. But some people are discussing that.”

“But I saw it,” the old woman replied. “Saw it with my own—”

“Ma’am, I think you need to calm down,” sayethed Traci to the old sinner. “Accusing a saint of murder—that’s a big deal. Also, I’m not sure it’s ‘murder’ if it’s just a bird. Kind of disrespectful to all those actual human beings who’ve been murdered. And their families. Especially in combat.”

AFTER THE OLD sinner and her old, weak sinner husband left that place in confusion, Little St. Don went unto the place he was staying, and thought upon many things, while playing Legos. He built a factory and a farm and did skillfully arrangeth the people therein so that it seemed that they were looking up at him. Being Lego people, they had movable arms, and he raised one arm on each, so it seemed that they were waving up at him. Or taking some kind of pledge.

Then Little St. Don noticed that a few of the little Lego people’s arms had slowly begun to drop. Stupid failing Lego company—couldn’t even make an arm that stayed up. And now it seemed that the little Lego people, or at least a few of them, were looking up at him skeptically. Doubt dawning on their tiny noseless faces. What? What, you stupid hicks? thought Little St. Don. Get those little arms up, pronto. You think anybody else is interested in you at all? Where are those little coal miners?

THEN ST. DON left that place and went unto the living room. And turning on the TV he heard, from some preacher, the words of Jesus, as follows: “Suffer the little children, and forbid them not to come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.” And he took these words to heart, and would recall them, and abide by them, wisely, years later, when there were some issues at the border, but only a few of the words, like the first four.

This is the word of the Lord. ♦

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# THE AWKWARD AGE

*With "Eighth Grade," Bo Burnham turns on the medium that made him famous.*

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN



When Bo Burnham was in eighth grade, he starred in a middle-school production of "Footloose," in the Kevin Bacon role. Offstage, he was hardly a dance rebel. Lanky and blond, he was late to puberty; at pool parties, he would keep his hands under his armpits to hide his lack of body hair. He was a budding theatre geek, but also did basketball, math league, and the student council. He liked "Austin Powers" and Rubik's Cubes and Lou Bega's "Mambo No. 5." He had discovered George Carlin and told a classmate that he wanted to be a comedian, but he was also considering becoming a pastor. He had a girlfriend,

Cassie, who was also in "Footloose"—she sang "Let's Hear It for the Boy." He asked her out over AOL Instant Messenger, because he was too scared to do it in person. Their first kiss was at a party, after Tom Brady won his second Super Bowl.

The indignities of junior high are perennial, but every hell has its novelties. Instant Messenger is dead, but kids now have Instagram and Snapchat to magnify every humiliation, insecurity, and after-school power play. Burnham, meanwhile, is twenty-seven and (the clergy's loss) a successful comedian, after finding certain fame as a teen-age YouTube star. He has now

written and directed his first film, "Eighth Grade," about a middle-school girl named Kayla who is mortified by life. The movie, which premiered at Sundance and will be released this month, avoids the John Hughes-style nostalgia of most coming-of-age comedies. Instead, it submerges the viewer into Kayla's unquiet, iPhone-addled consciousness.

Burnham's subject is the way kids today hover over themselves, documenting life even as they're living it. Kayla posts halting advice videos ("Topic of today's video is Being Yourself, and it's, like, you know, well, aren't I always being myself?"), which, unlike Burnham's early output, basically no one watches. Her experience of social media is all-consuming, immersive—what the media theorist Douglas Rushkoff calls "present shock." In one sequence, she ravenously scrolls Instagram in her darkened bedroom, as Enya's "Orinoco Flow" blasts on the soundtrack. Later, a boy at a pool party challenges her to a breath-holding contest, and she plunges underwater. The two scenes have a similar effect: they make the viewer, however briefly, forget to inhale.

"I did not set out to write a movie about eighth grade," Burnham told me one afternoon in May. "I wanted to talk about anxiety—my own anxiety—and I was coming to grips with that." Burnham speaks like a college bro, but at an amped-up pace; he rarely finishes one sentence before launching into another, and he often has a Red Bull in his hand. Although he has been a working standup since his senior year of high school, he has suffered from abject stage fright. He had his first panic attack at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2013, during the opening night of his show "what." More followed: in front of three thousand people in Providence, Rhode Island; on an Amtrak train between shows in New York and Washington, D.C., where he also had panic attacks onstage. "It's a feeling of riding your nervous system like a bull," he said. "And then being in the real world with anxiety feels like you're riding a bull and everyone else is an equestrian."

The screenplay that became "Eighth Grade" began with multiple main characters, but the voice that felt most

*"Anxiety makes me feel like a terrified thirteen-year-old," Burnham said.*



authentic was Kayla's. "Anxiety makes me feel like a terrified thirteen-year-old," Burnham explained. Because his own anxiety set in later, he didn't use himself as a model. He watched hundreds of teen vlogs; the girls tended to talk about their souls, and the boys about Minecraft, so he made his protagonist a girl. Without preaching about the ills of social media, he wanted to "take inventory emotionally" of what it feels like to be a thirteen-year-old online. "In my adult life, and especially in my standup career, I'd felt like the way my anxiety is interfacing with the Internet is very specific and strange," he went on. "The Internet isn't helping it. It's exacerbating it. The Internet means a lot to me, and no one is talking about it correctly."

Burnham was in a black S.U.V. headed to Rockland County, New York, where he shot the film, last summer. He pulled up at Suffern Middle School, which doubled as Kayla's: a chunky brick edifice encircled by yellow buses. Inside, he strode down hallways of beige lockers and pale-green tiles, wearing an untucked white oxford shirt, blue slacks, and white shoes with exposed ankles; at six and a half feet, he holds himself tentatively, as if still adjusting to his height. The walls were papered with school projects, including one for which the students had to choose an inspirational person: Anne Frank, Derek Jeter, Lin-Manuel Miranda. "My production designer would just think this is the most incredible thing ever," Burnham said.

He had come to shoot a symposium with real eighth graders, for a possible special feature. In the library, near a display of "Star Wars" books, a small film crew was setting up lighting equipment. "We don't have to worry about things being a little gritty," he said, repositioning the chairs. "I don't want it to feel like the Iowa caucus." Eleven pre-selected students burst through the door, in a swarm of gossip and backpacks. Burnham greeted them in cooler-cousin mode. "What's your name, buddy?" he asked a kid in head-to-toe Nike gear. One girl, Brooke, had appeared as a featured extra in the film, picking at the elastic on her braces. "They're off!" Burnham observed, as she flashed a smile.

"I got them off in December," Brooke said.

As the kids sat in a circle, whispering about rappers ("Ice Cube's so over-rated"), Burnham waved away a sheet of prepared questions, saying, "I'm just going to wing it." The cameras rolled. "O.K., guys, thanks for being here," he began, wedged into a metal classroom chair. "My name's Bo. I was an eighth grader."

"Hi, Bo."

"You all were probably born when I was in eighth grade, which makes you young and me old. Let's go around and introduce ourselves and say our favorite thing. My name's Bo. I like popcorn." They listed their favorite things: Broadway, sushi, volleyball, long walks on the beach. Burnham asked each of them to describe eighth grade in a word. The answers included "average," "underwhelming," "overwhelming," "stressful," "responsibility," and "headache."

"How many people have phones?" Burnham asked. All of them raised their hands. "Does anyone use Facebook?"

"That's for old people," a boy said.

Brooke added, "It's the Instagram for, like, twenty-one and up."

Burnham asked what role the Internet played in their social lives, and added, "Don't do a defensive boy answer that means 'I'm afraid of my emotions.'"

A boy in a gray T-shirt said, "Literally, like, your whole life can be ruined in, like, a second." Other responses were less dire: "I like it because I can just express myself"; "It's a big deal if you get eight hundred followers." The conversation turned darker when Burnham asked the students how they felt about America. "Politics has been mixed with social media because of the President we have now, and I feel like those are two different realms that should stay apart," a boy in a red shirt said.

Brooke added, "I feel like everything combined is just becoming a big, huge mess sometimes. I don't watch the news that often, but when people talk about it, it's all, like, 'Trump did this today,' or 'Trump did this today.' What's a different topic? We had the March for Our Lives walk—why not talk about that?" In "Eighth Grade," Kayla's school

has a live-shooter drill, a fact of life so routine that it's rendered as boring. But the Suffern students seemed more worried about guns than about Instagram addiction. "Nowhere's really safe," a girl with dreadlocks said.

Another girl said that politics had turned her friends against one another. Burnham sighed. "That's a bummer," he said. "You should be totally pre-political at this age." Wrapping up, he asked the eighth graders what they thought grownups didn't understand about them. The answers were tellingly contradictory: they wanted their parents' full attention, but also sleepover privileges. "Adults just believe that all kids are glued to technology," one girl offered.

A boy who identified himself as a competitive gamer spoke up. "A lot of people just see me as this happy, loving kid, but I don't show anyone my other side, because I don't want them to be worried about me," he said softly. "So, when I'm alone, I'm being my other self."

Burnham leaned forward and told him, "I'm sorry you feel that way. It is not unique. I felt that way when I was a kid. I feel that way now."

Three years after eighth grade, Burnham's life changed completely. He was living in Hamilton, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, where he was brought up with his two older siblings. He had shot up to six feet three inches, growing so fast that his back had stretch marks. He had switched from public school to St. John's Prep, a competitive all-boys Catholic high school, because his mother worked as the school nurse and he got free tuition. He became fixated on grades; once, he wrote an extra ten-page paper so that he could nudge a B+ into an A-. He had unrelenting stomach problems, and spent hours of the school day in the bathroom. For a time, the doctors thought that he might have a hole in his intestines, but he later realized that it was anxiety.

Four days before Christmas, 2006, when he was sixteen, Burnham uploaded a video to YouTube. He'd been writing crude, funny songs along the lines of "South Park," and wanted to share them with his brother, Pete, who



was at Cornell. Bo appears in the corner of his bedroom, in front of a navy-blue wall, wearing a knit cap and a Shakespeare in the Park T-shirt. (He had seen Liev Schreiber in “Macbeth” that summer.) “Hi, gang. I just woke up, so I thought I’d senerade—*serenade* you, rather—with a song,” he tells the camera, then sits at a keyboard. “Digest it. Soak it in. Then use it as you will.” He bangs out a ditty called “My Whole Family Thinks I’m Gay”: “Maybe it’s ‘cause of the way I walk/That makes them think that I like . . . boys.”

YouTube was less than two years old—Justin Bieber had not yet been discovered there—and still resembled a newfangled version of “America’s Funniest Home Videos.” With his potty mouth and schoolboy precocity, Burnham bridged the pop-culture comedy of “Team America: World Police” and “Avenue Q” with a new crop of do-it-yourself Web stars such as Chris Crocker (“Leave Britney alone!”). Within weeks, “My Whole Family Thinks I’m Gay” appeared on Break.com, a site aimed at males under thirty-five. Immediately, the video leaped from nine thousand views to a million. (Viewership now

exceeds ten million.) Burnham followed it with more impish numbers, including a guitar ballad about Helen Keller and a rap called “3.14 Apple Pi.” Carl’s Jr. offered him a five-thousand-dollar sponsorship, but he couldn’t bring himself to write a song about a cheeseburger. Word spread at school, where one teacher approached him to say, “I’ve got a challenge for you. Stop posting those videos.”

During Burnham’s senior year, as he was studying for his S.A.T.s, a Hollywood agent called offering to represent him. He was accepted at Harvard, Brown, and New York University’s experimental-theatre program (he sent his videos with his applications), but wound up deferring so that he could tour. When Burnham was seventeen, Judd Apatow saw him perform at Montreal’s Just for Laughs festival. “Unlike everybody else on earth, who struggles for years to figure out how to be funny and have some presence onstage, he was riotously funny and entertaining from moment one,” Apatow told me. (He later helped Burnham develop a screenplay that was never produced, a naughty take

on “High School Musical.”) “He found a way to express that time of your life when you’re young and both incredibly cocky and completely insecure at the same time.”

Burnham didn’t make it to college; instead, he became a full-time standup, particularly popular with college kids. He had a short-lived sitcom on MTV, “Zach Stone Is Gonna Be Famous,” about a teen-ager who films his own reality show, and toured increasingly complex and self-scrutinizing one-man shows. As Burnham’s career grew, he came to be seen as a comic emissary from Planet Millennial. When he played Britain in 2013, the *Independent* wrote, “He could well be the quintessential comedian for a generation growing up online.” His shows have a high-strung, smash-cut rhythm, as frenzied and inconclusive as a late-night Web surf. His most recent special, “Make Happy,” which appeared on Netflix in 2016, darts from a Keith Urban parody to a mimed segment called “What Making a Peanut-Butter Sandwich Feels Like When You’re High.”

Along the way, Burnham became a skeptic about the technology that made him famous. Toward the end of “Make Happy,” he asks, “What’s the show about?” He crouches at the edge of the stage. “It’s about performing. I try to make my show about other things, but it always ends up becoming about performing.” He brings up the house lights. “Social media—it’s just the market’s answer to a generation that demanded to perform, so the market said, ‘Here, perform everything to each other all the time for no reason.’ It’s prison. It is horrific.” Staring down the audience, he delivers a *cri de coeur*: “If you can live your life without an audience, you should do it.” Shortly afterward, he followed his own advice and abandoned standup for two years.

Burnham has spent his short adult life trying to shake the label “teen YouTube sensation.” (“I hate that term ‘young comedian,’” he said in one of his early acts. “I prefer ‘prodigy.’”) His friend Aidy Bryant, a “Saturday Night Live” cast member—they both played comedians in “The Big Sick”—told me, “I feel like so much of his online tale is about being young, but he’s just



such a cranky old man.” Still, because Burnham is a product of the Internet, and because his work deals with the tribulations of youth, he is sometimes asked to play generational pundit.

In early June, I met Burnham in San Francisco, where he’d been invited to speak at the Social Innovation Summit, a two-day conference. Despite having “Eighth Grade” screenings lined up at Pixar and Google, he acknowledged that Silicon Valley was a strange place to market Kayla’s story. “She looks up how to give a blow job on YouTube, which is owned by Google,” he said, and imagined a confrontation with a tech executive: “These are the kind of safeguards you should put on!”

Inside the hall, a talk on “Transforming Social Impact” was finishing up, and the jargon of tech utopianism filled the air: “change-makers,” “virtuous circle,” “the future of fun.” Burnham sat in the front row and watched two scientists talk about cervical-cancer screening in India, followed by a sushi chef turned clown who was developing a “high-tech circus”; the guy flashed a picture of Leonardo da Vinci, whom he called “an incredible creative.”

Burnham was introduced by Caroline Barlerin, the head of Community Outreach and Philanthropy at Twitter, for a conversation entitled “Generation #Hashtag.” They sat on cream-colored couches and spoke over a hydrangea centerpiece. Barlerin, in a bright-magenta blouse, asked Burnham to describe how he uses comedy for social commentary.

He clenched his fingers. “I don’t try to worry too much about being thematically consistent,” he said. “I don’t think our *days* are thematically consistent. I might have a scary morning and then a funny afternoon and then a depressing night—probably in that order.” The crowd laughed; a media coach in the audience tweeted the line, adding, “PREACH, my guy.” Burnham went on, “The current moment, to me, is very confusing, and it’s hard for me to really grasp it. How do you satirize the Internet when it’s self-satirizing, you know?”

Barlerin said, “Something people may or may not know: we are in the presence of a famous YouTube celebrity.” Burnham started to squirm. She asked him, “So, if we look forward  $x$

amount of time, what do you see changing in terms of youth and technology?”

He ran his fingers over his face. “I don’t know. I think there are probably certain elements about social media that we’ll look back on in the way we look back on smoking, where we’ll be, like, ‘Maybe we shouldn’t all have been doing that.’ The equivalent of ‘My doctor smoked’ will be, like, ‘My shrink had a Twitter.’” The audience laughed again. Burnham was less Maleficent cursing Sleeping Beauty’s christening than a court jester mildly needling the royals. Then he turned a mite more aggressive: “You want to say a swear on television, you have to go in front of Congress. But, if you want to change the neurochemistry of an entire generation, it can be, you know, nine people in Silicon Valley.” More laughs.

Barlerin smiled. “Messages for the social-innovation community? You’ve got some great dreamers and doers out here.”

Burnham’s limbs were in knots. “You guys all know way more than I do,” he said. “I can just say, having worked with three hundred middle schoolers over the summer, that it is very important to them—and you really, really do have the well-being of an entire generation in your hands. God bless you, and I hope you do right by them.”

On his way out, attendees lined up for selfies. A woman whose nametag said “Good Vibes Only” asked him to



Facetime her daughter. A guy representing McDonald’s called out, “What do you feel the purpose of art is in things like social issues?”

“I don’t know?” Burnham said, slipping outside. In the car to Pixar, he admitted that the Silicon Valley happy talk was “cringe-y,” but added, “I was probably using some buzzwords, too, to get my point across.” His comments had already been hashtagged and tweeted, a hall-of-mirrors experience that re-

mindened him of Kayla. “In the movie, she’s meta-commenting on herself in a way she’s totally unaware of. She thinks she’s living one coherent life.”

When Burnham was little, he would perform “Bo Shows” for his family in the living room—no talking allowed. He had glimmers of Tom Sawyer: after testing out of first-grade math, he charged his friends ten dollars apiece to attend a weeklong “math camp” at his house. The instruction was minimal, but his mother still remembers him shaking the shoebox for cash as parents dropped their kids off.

Burnham was the artistic black sheep of a sporty family. His father, Scott, runs a construction business, where Bo’s brother, Pete, works. His sister, Samm, is also employed there part time and lives nearby. His mother, Pattie, works as a hospice nurse; she was featured on an episode of “This American Life” on the theme “death and taxes.” One morning, she picked Burnham and me up in Boston, driving a black Toyota, for a tour of his old stomping grounds. “That’s where the P. F. Chang’s used to be,” she said from the driver’s seat.

“You are getting the most bizarre tour,” Burnham said.

The first stop was Liberty Tree Mall, in Danvers. Burnham strolled in wearing a gray T-shirt and jeans. In “Eighth Grade,” Kayla visits a mall with some cool upperclassmen. When she tells them that she got Snapchat in fifth grade, one of the high-school boys balks: “She’s seeing dicks in *fifth grade*? She’s, like, wired differently.” The mall was a high-stakes locale for Burnham, too. In eighth grade, he and a friend locked eyes during a movie while the friend was making out with a girl. “He’s just, like, staring at me, terrified,” Burnham recalled.

He passed the AMC, where he used to buy jalapeño hot dogs, and reached the food court. “The mall was a self-contained, autonomous space for kids,” he said, “where they could pretend like they’re free out in the real world when they’re not, really.” Nearby was a claw-crane game, with a tank of plush toys. Burnham had shot a scene with one for the movie but wound up cutting it. “It’s a pretty good metaphor for

childhood: playing something you don't know is completely rigged."

Pattie drove us to Miles River Middle School, where Burnham attended eighth grade. Unlike the school in Suffern, it was bold-colored, with jazzy green tiles and lipstick-red lockers. An eighth grader with curly hair beelined to Burnham and introduced himself as Max.

"A lot of things have changed around here," Max told him. "Right here used to be telephones."

The assistant principal cut in. "Max, I do have a tour arranged for him already."

Max was undeterred. "You're a real frickin' early-two-thousands kid," he told Burnham. "Not only did you grow up going to a great school; you grew up with some of the greatest game consoles."

"It was so good meeting you, dude," Burnham told him, as a teacher passed out ice-cream sandwiches. "Keep killing it."

A trio of girls who had volunteered to give a tour led Burnham down the hall; class was just letting out. Suddenly, children were everywhere, and Burnham towered over them like a rangy Gulliver. A tiny boy peered up from a water fountain and squeaked, "We're practically the same person!"

"Trust me: carrots and celery," Burnham told him. "You'll be right up here."

"Tell me a joke," another boy demanded. Burnham told him a knock-knock joke ("Dwayne who?" "Dwayne the tub, I'm ddowning!"), and the kid let out a high-pitched whinny. More kids mobbed Burnham. "I feel like I'm in 'Lord of the Flies,'" he said. "I wish I had bread to feed you guys."

"Why are you here?" a girl yelled.

"I don't know!" Burnham said, laughing. "I'm thinking of adopting some of you." Hands flew up, and the students screamed for attention. "I don't like desperation in my children," he told them.

"I'm very sweet and pleasant," a girl growled back.

Burnham escaped to a basketball court. The tour guides led him through the music room, the auditorium where he performed "Footloose," the cafeteria.

"Every day I bought a Choco Taco," he told them. "Do you know what a Choco Taco is?" (He worries that the Internet is as unregulated now as sugar was during his childhood.) The assistant principal presented him with a branded mug and a stress ball. "You *need* a stress ball after leaving this place," he said.

Next, Pattie drove us to Gloucester, where she and Scott moved from Hamilton a few years ago. Their house is

bright, with skylights and a big kitchen island, around which the Burnhams gathered to reminisce. In the movie, Kayla opens a time capsule that she made for herself in sixth grade; Pattie had found Burnham's 2001 time capsule in the attic, addressed to the Bo of 2008. There were Polaroids

of sixth-grade Bo at a school nature retreat, about to dissect a turtle; a picture of J. Lo. from a magazine; purple confetti glued onto paper, with the caption "I LOVED MAGIC." On loose-leaf paper, 2001 Bo had written a letter to 2008 Bo, which 2018 Bo read aloud:

Hey older Bo!

How are things going? Right now I am 5' 4" with blonde hair and blue eyes and very scared of heights. The Patriots won the superbowl this year but I was soo sick I fell asleep at half time. I hope you've been in some commercials or maybe even movies. Are you going to Duke to play basketball? If not that's ok. . . . Who have you gone out with? I hope you had a good next 6 years.

Your friend and self,  
Bo Burnham

"He just was a good kid," Pattie said warmly.

"I was terrified of being not good," Burnham corrected her.

"Why were you so hard on yourself?" she said. "I wonder."

Burnham said, half joking, "It was you telling me I was the best, smartest thing that ever lived, and then I needed that validation from the entire world going forward. That's probably a pretty classic thing with people of my generation."

Pattie insisted that she and Scott never pressured him over academics—he was just a naturally good student. "I think he has a photographic memory," she boasted.

Burnham corrected her again: "I have a lazy streak, and I would want to game the system to get good grades."

I asked about his first YouTube upload, "My Whole Family Thinks I'm Gay." Did they actually think he was gay? "God, no," Scott said. Pattie added, laughing, "We thought our daughter was a lesbian!" Scott recalled the night, in 2006, when Bo's sister called to inform them that he had posted some racy songs on the Internet, including one about eating fetuses and another about having a tiny penis. "Pattie ran right into his room, pulled him out of his bed, and said—I don't hear her swear very often—'Get those effing things off!'"

Burnham fidgeted. "I forgot about this."

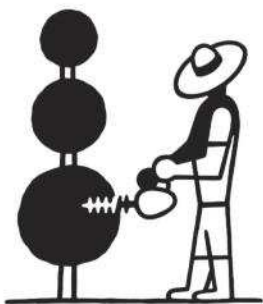
His parents went on to explain that the videos, including "My Whole Family Thinks I'm Gay," were taken down within six hours, before Bo came back days later with a slightly sanitized version, which they let him post. "I thought it sounded homophobic," Pattie said, unexpectedly tearing up. "I also didn't want him out there on the Internet. I didn't really know what it meant. It sounds like I'm not supportive." She laughed at the fact that she was crying.

Burnham assured her that her instincts were right: "It was typical 2006 shock-jock offensive comedy done by a sixteen-year-old without any tact."

"This felt so out of character for him," Pattie continued, with another cry-laugh. "He hadn't done anything impulsive his whole little life." Suddenly agitated, Burnham paced in and out of the room. When he came back, he said, "I've told this story so many times, never telling that you took down the videos, probably because I didn't want to remember. All that stuff—I don't like it. I don't like where I started." He leaned on the kitchen island. "I like that I started and I got here, but I'm fucking sixteen years old doing comedy! Everyone sucks at sixteen."

"That's nothing to worry about at twenty-seven," his father reassured him.

He kept going: "Comedy is really reaching and going for something, so, when you misstep, you misstep bad. People go *down* nowadays for jokes." He paced again. "It actually has been





the way my career has always been, which is that the current thing I'm working on I usually think is a complete repudiation of everything that came before it. I'm always trying to appeal to the people who have hated me up until then."

In Burnham's early days as a touring comedian, his parents would accompany him; Pattie recalled dropping him off for his first gig at the Improv, in Hollywood, with the apprehension of a mother leaving her child on the first day of school: "We drive off, I look at Scott, and I'm, like, 'What in God's name have we done?'" Life on the road was wearing, especially when Burnham talked to his friends from home. "Apparently, I was the one to be jealous of," he told me, "but I was in Ramada Inns in fucking Bismarck, North Dakota, and everyone else was in college."

A few days after the tech summit, Burnham was back home in Los Angeles, where he lives with his girlfriend and their two dogs. He had booked a short set at Largo at the Coronet, the comedy club in West Hollywood. He has been dipping his toes back into standup, preferably in "low-stakes" situations, and said that the panic attacks have stopped.

"The movie really freed me," he said by the stage door, wearing a red sweater with a pair of earbuds around his neck. "It used to feel like life and death, because it was." He went to a café around the corner to eat some noodles, and continued, "If I can be honest about it, then I'm not keeping a secret, and that makes it easier. If the audience knows I'm struggling with anxiety, which they do now, I'm less scared going up there."

He sat down and ordered a spicy tuna bowl, an udon soup, and a Coke. "I really wish I had a day off," he said, rubbing his eyes. The next day, he was off to Seattle for a screening with Elsie Fisher, who plays Kayla. Burnham had found her on YouTube, doing a red-carpet interview (she played Agnes in "Despicable Me") in which she talks about liking homemade brownies and Ryan Reynolds. Burnham saw a "genuine" quality that won her the part over a hundred other girls. "She's helped me

by getting me out of my head," he said. "I can see the experience through her eyes." ("He's just such a dork," Fisher told me. "A good dork.")

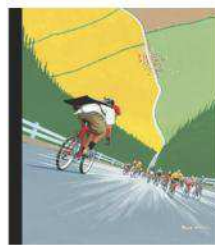
Before "Eighth Grade," Burnham's only directing experience was with standup comedians. In 2017, Chris Rock saw an HBO special that Burnham directed for the standup Jerrod Carmichael. "It blew my mind," Rock recalled. "The way it was shot—the lighting and the pace. It reminded me of Martin Scorsese shooting Bob Dylan." Rock tracked Burnham down and, he said, "begged him to direct my special. I totally put myself in his hands. It was the best decision I've ever made. I was Snoop and he was Dr. Dre."

The food came five minutes before showtime at Largo, so Burnham wolfed down a few bites and took the rest to go. He had planned to do a surprise ten-minute set, but Largo had posted his name on its Web site. Now there were fans in the audience just to see him, some of whom looked as if they could pass for Kayla's classmates. Burnham ambled onstage, to wild applause, and deadpanned, "Hello. My name is Anthony."

He tried out some new songs, including an R. Kelly parody about affirmative consent and a ballad about an intrepid chicken. Between songs, he circled downstage, dropped random one-liners ("I think pirates should take a little bit better care of their fucking maps—this thing is *tea-stained*"), and sat back down, as if he'd entered a room looking for something and then forgotten what it was. To appease the fans, he played an oldie called "From God's Perspective":

I don't think masturbation is obscene.  
It's absolutely natural and the weirdest  
fucking thing I've ever seen.  
You make my job a living hell.  
I sent gays to fix overpopulation. Boy,  
did that go well.

When it was over, he walked offstage and said, mock triumphantly, "I survived!" Earlier, I had told him that "Eighth Grade" was "visceral," in the way that adolescence feels when you're in the middle of it. "I wish *life* was a little less visceral," he responded. "I'm getting better at it. The worst thing about a panic attack, to me, is that I feel more alive than I've ever felt." ♦



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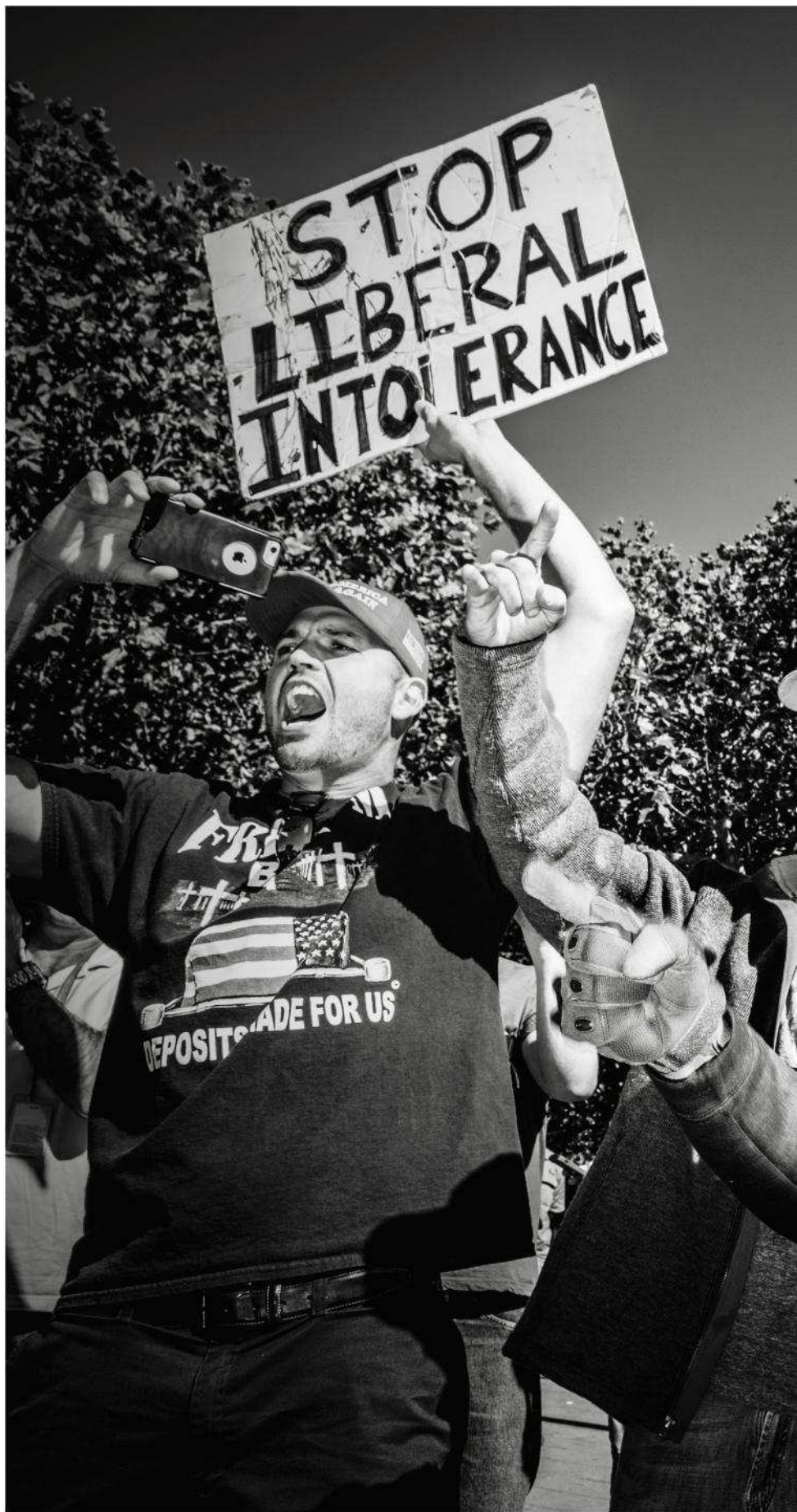
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THE  
NEW YORKER

One afternoon last fall, I sat in the Free Speech Movement Café, on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, drinking a fair-trade, shade-grown coffee. Students at nearby tables chatted in Spanish, Japanese, Russian, and English; next to me, a student alternated between reading a battered copy of “The Myth of Sisyphus,” by Camus, and checking Facebook on her phone. “This café,” a placard read, “is an educational reminder for the community that the campus freedoms we take for granted did not always exist, and, in the democratic tradition, had to be fought for.” In the fall of 1964, left-wing students at U.C. Berkeley demanded the right to hand out anti-war literature on Sproul Plaza, the red brick agora at the center of the campus. The administration refused, citing rules against the use of school property for external organizing. The students’ struggle, which became known as the Free Speech Movement, consumed the university’s attention for much of the academic year, and made minor national celebrities of the movement’s undergraduate leaders—especially Mario Savio, who was rakish enough to be a counter-cultural icon and articulate enough to be interviewed on television. Joan Baez went to Berkeley to show support for the students, singing “We Shall Overcome” from the steps of Sproul Hall. In the end, the students won, and some of them went on to join the next generation of professors and university administrators. “Freedom of speech,” Mario Savio once said, “is the thing that marks us as just below the angels.”

Fifty-three years later, the mood on campus was distinctly less celestial. Like the agitation throughout the country, the agitation at Berkeley had many long-roiling causes, but its proximate cause was easy to identify: a right-wing professional irritant named Milo Yiannopoulos. A former Breitbart editor and a self-proclaimed “Internet supervillain,” he was known less for his arguments than for his combative one-liners and protean, peroxide-blond hair. Another word for “Internet supervillain” is “troll,” and, whenever too many news cycles passed without any mention of him, Yiannopoulos showed up somewhere unexpected, such as the White House press briefing room or a left-leaning college



*“Would I rather devote our precious resources to more class sections, overdue building repairs,*

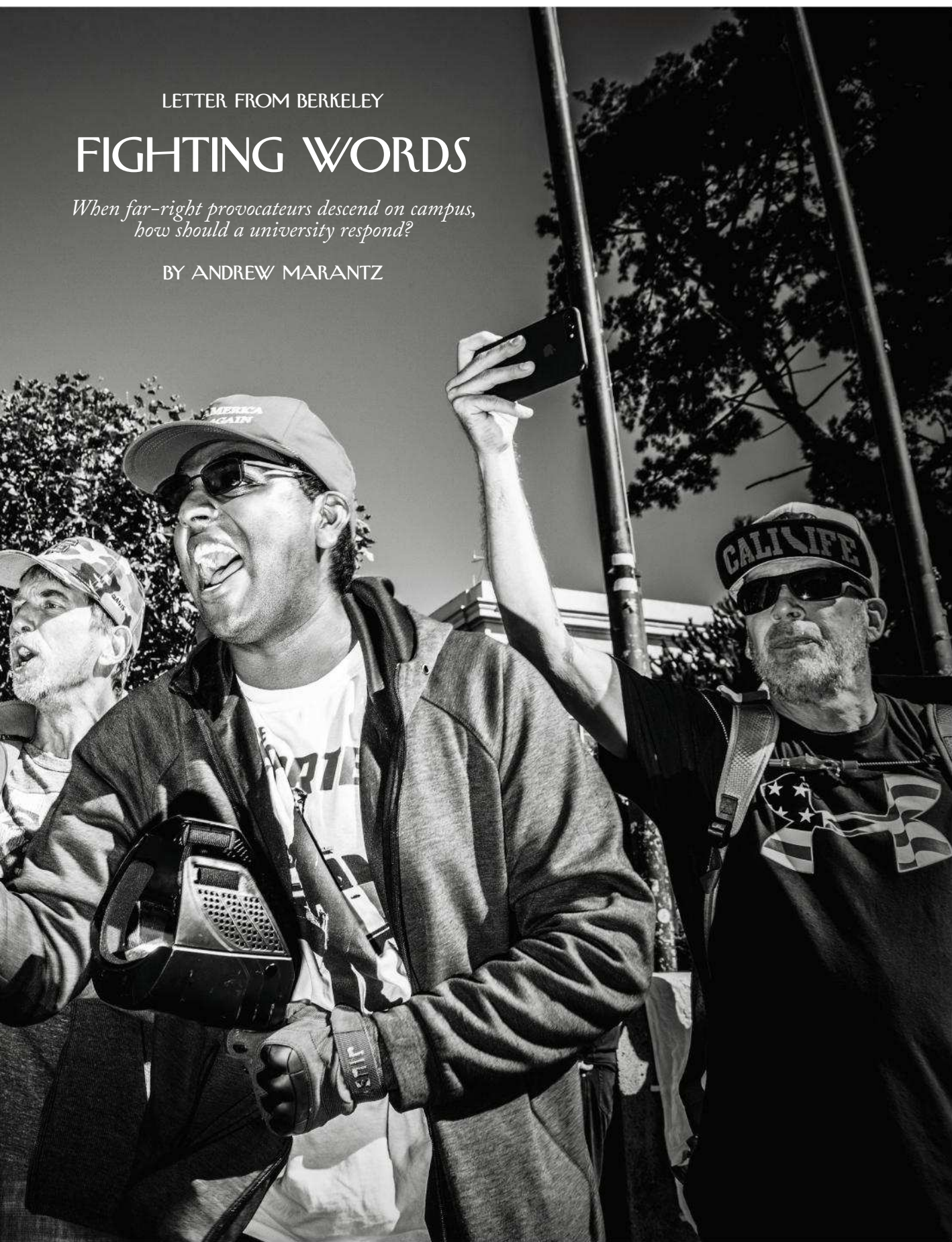


LETTER FROM BERKELEY

# FIGHTING WORDS

*When far-right provocateurs descend on campus,  
how should a university respond?*

BY ANDREW MARANTZ



*or many other things we badly need?" the chancellor of U.C. Berkeley said. "Absolutely. But we have to make this work."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK PETERSON

campus, hoping to provoke a reaction.

In the process, he convinced his supporters that he should be a poster child for campus free speech, a principle that is universally lauded in theory but vexingly thorny in practice. In the 2017-18 academic year, Politico reported, an unusually large number of universities struggled “to balance their commitment to free speech—which has been challenged by alt-right supporters of President Donald Trump—with campus safety.” One expert on campus life called this “the No. 1 topic of the year.” Many college administrators were forced to devote their scarce time and money to securing on-campus venues for pugnacious right-wing speakers such as Ann Coulter and David Horowitz; arch-conservative policy entrepreneurs such as Heather Mac Donald and Charles Murray; and avowed racists such as Richard Spencer. These are names that a lot of Americans would prefer to forget. All of these figures hold views that are divisive, or worse. Yet this is precisely what makes them useful test cases. The Supreme Court’s most important First Amendment opinions often concern the lowliest forms of human expression: a burning cross, a homophobic slur, a “BONG HiTS 4 JESUS” banner.

Yiannopoulos, who claims to disdain identity politics but rarely forgoes an opportunity to call attention to his sexual

orientation, spent much of 2016 and the early part of 2017 on what he called the Dangerous Faggot Tour, visiting dozens of colleges across the country. Each stop was part Trump rally, part standup show, part PowerPoint deck, and part bigoted rant. At U.C. Santa Barbara, a group of young men wearing red “Make America Great Again” hats carried Yiannopoulos into the venue on a litter; he then delivered, in a genteel Oxbridge accent, a lecture called “Feminism Is Cancer.” At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he projected a photo of a transgender student, subjecting her to public mockery. “It’s just a man in a dress, isn’t it?” he said.

The last stop on his tour, on February 1, 2017, was U.C. Berkeley, the nation’s preëminent public university, in one of its most proudly left-leaning cities. A week before Yiannopoulos’s arrival, the U.C. system had reaffirmed its promise to protect undocumented students from arrest and deportation. In response, Yiannopoulos called for Berkeley’s administrators to be criminally prosecuted. There were rumors that he planned to name undocumented students from the stage, alerting Immigration and Customs Enforcement to their presence. There was little that administrators could do. At a public institution, cancelling a speech because of what the speaker might say is called prior restraint, and the courts have

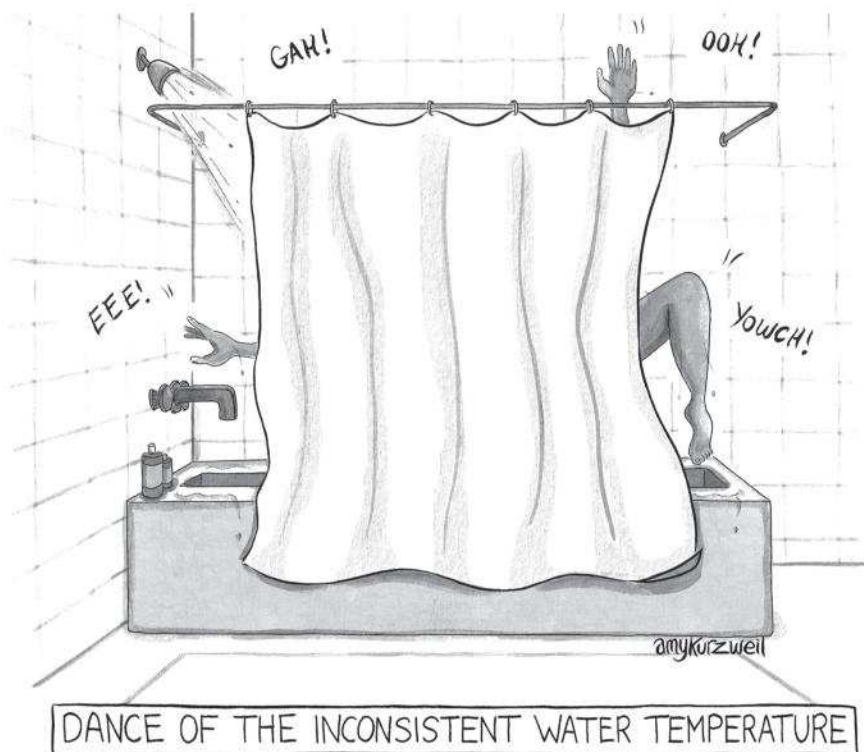
generally deemed it unconstitutional.

On the afternoon of the event, fifteen hundred protesters amassed on Sproul Plaza. Some called themselves Antifa, for “anti-Fascist,” a loose collective of far-left vigilantes who draw inspiration from the European anarchist tradition. A few protesters, wearing black clothing and bandannas or masks over their faces, hurled metal police barricades through a plate-glass window of Berkeley’s student center; someone set fire to a lighting rig, and flames leaped several stories into the air. A Berkeley student, wearing a red hat that said “Make Bitcoin Great Again,” was interviewed by a local news crew as the mayhem escalated behind her. “I’m looking to just make a statement by being here, and I think the protesters are doing the same,” she said. “And props to them, for the ones who are doing it nonviolently.” Moments later, a masked protester ran up and pepper-sprayed her in the face.

Police evacuated Yiannopoulos from campus before he could speak. The next morning, the riot was the lead story on “Fox & Friends.” The show’s most prominent fan, Donald Trump, who had been President for less than two weeks, tweeted, “If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view - NO FEDERAL FUNDS?” The whole spectacle was such a boon to Yiannopoulos’s brand that some left-wing conspiracy theorists wondered whether he had hired the masked protesters himself.

Spring came, and then summer. The annual Berkeley Kite Festival took place at the marina. Biologists from Berkeley published a paper in *Science* explaining how chickens grow feathers. Yiannopoulos wrote a book that included some of the zingers he’d trotted out at his college talks, and it reached No. 2 on the *Times* nonfiction best-seller list.

Carol Christ, a scholar of Victorian literature and a former president of Smith College, took office as Berkeley’s new chancellor. She had been a Berkeley professor for many years, beginning in 1970—close enough to the Free Speech Movement to be touched by its spirit. A few days into the fall semester, she announced that a student group had invited Yiannopoulos back to Berkeley, and that she intended to let him speak. Citing the Bill of Rights and John Stuart Mill’s “On





Liberty,” she declared that her first academic year as chancellor would be “a free speech year.” “We would be providing students with a less valuable education,” Christ wrote, “if we tried to shelter them from ideas that many find wrong, even dangerous.” The homage was surely unintentional, but “Dangerous” happened to be the title of Yiannopoulos’s book.

Whether a sophist like Milo Yiannopoulos may speak at a public university like Berkeley is less a question of what the law is than of what the law should be. The Supreme Court has been consistent, during the past half century or so, in its broad interpretation of the First Amendment. “Speech can’t be prevented simply because it’s offensive, even if it’s very deeply offensive,” Erwin Chemerinsky, the dean of the U.C. Berkeley School of Law and the co-author of a book called “Free Speech on Campus,” told me one morning in his office. He grimaced sympathetically as he talked, like a doctor delivering bad news. “I would argue that it’s generally a good idea to protect speech we don’t like, even when we’re not legally obligated to do so, but in this case we are.”

Voltaire, anti-Semite and sage of the Enlightenment, is credited with the aphorism “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Chemerinsky, arguably the foremost First Amendment scholar in the country, believes, in the Voltairean tradition, that free speech is the bedrock of a free society. I asked him about the Antifa activists who had vowed to shut down Yiannopoulos’s events by any means necessary. “Violence is never protected by the Constitution,” he said. “And preventing the speech of others, even by using one’s own speech, is called the heckler’s veto, and it is not protected, either.”

On talk radio and social media, many free-speech advocates lack Chemerinsky’s judiciousness. Some answer every challenge with a recitation of the First Amendment, as if its forty-five words were a magic spell that could settle any debate. Free-speech skeptics on the left can be equally predisposed to bad-faith arguments—misreading or ignoring the Constitution, dismissing the concept of free speech as inherently racist, or simply bypassing discourse and setting public property on fire.

There are better arguments. “No one is disputing how the courts have ruled on this,” John A. Powell, a Berkeley law professor with joint appointments in the departments of African-American Studies and Ethnic Studies, told me. “What I’m saying is that courts are often wrong.” Powell is tall, with a relaxed sartorial style, and his manner of speaking is soft and serenely confident. Before he became an academic, he was the national legal director of the A.C.L.U. “I represented the Ku Klux Klan when I was in that job,” he said. “My family was not pleased with me, but I said, ‘Look, they have First Amendment rights, too.’ So it’s not that I don’t understand or care deeply about free speech. But what would it look like if we cared just as deeply about equality? What if we weighed the two as conflicting values, instead of this false formalism where the right to speech is recognized but the harm caused by that speech is not?”

Yiannopoulos and many of his defenders like to call themselves free-speech absolutists, but this is hyperbole. No one actually believes that all forms of expression are protected by the First Amendment. False advertising, child pornography, blackmail—all are speech, all are illegal. You’re not allowed to shout “Fire!” in a crowded theatre, make a “true threat,” or incite imminent violence. These are all exceptions to the First Amendment that the Supreme Court has made—made up, really—over time. The boundaries can and do shift. In 1940, a New Hampshire man was jailed for calling a city marshal “a damned Fascist.” The Supreme Court upheld the conviction, ruling that the words were not protected by the First Amendment, because they were “fighting words,” which “by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace.”

Are some of Yiannopoulos’s antics—say, his attempts to intimidate undocumented and transgender students—closer to fighting words than to intellectual discourse? Maybe. But the fighting-words doctrine has fallen out of favor with the courts. In 2006, the Westboro Baptist Church picketed a soldier’s funeral, carrying signs that read “Thank God for dead soldiers” and “You’re going to Hell.” Even factoring in almost seven decades of epithet inflation, this would seem more injurious than “damned Fascist.” And yet

the Supreme Court ruled that the signs were protected by the First Amendment.

In the nineteen-seventies, when women entered the workplace in large numbers, some male bosses made salacious comments, or hung pornographic images on the walls. “These days, we’d say, ‘That’s a hostile workplace, that’s sexual harassment,’” Powell said. “But those weren’t recognized legal concepts yet. So the courts’ response was ‘Sorry, nothing we can do. Pornographic posters are speech. If women don’t like it, they can put up their own posters.’” He drew an analogy to today’s trolls and white supremacists. “The knee-jerk response is ‘Nothing we can do, it’s speech.’ ‘Well, hold on, what about the harm they’re causing?’ ‘What harm? It’s just words.’ That might sound intuitive to us now. But, if you know the history, you can imagine how our intuitions might look foolish, even immoral, a generation later.”

In the media, and on his Facebook and Instagram feeds, Yiannopoulos tirelessly promoted his return to Berkeley. Instead of a mere lecture, he envisioned “a huge, multi-day event” called Milo’s Free Speech Week. A video had recently come to light in which he’d made some deeply ill-advised comments about pederasty. Afterward, he’d been widely condemned on both the left and the right. He seemed to hope that his Berkeley appearance would restore him to mainstream relevance, and perhaps marketability.

He posted a schedule, at FreeSpeechWeek.com, that culminated in the presentation of the first annual Mario Savio Award for Free Speech. (Savio died in 1996; his son Daniel told the *Guardian* that Yiannopoulos’s appropriation of his father’s legacy was “some kind of sick joke.”) When Yiannopoulos spoke privately to his influential friends on the far right, he often said, “This will be our Woodstock.” He released a list of more than twenty speakers, which included many of the usual free-speech warriors and also some surprising names, such as the secretive military-security magnate Erik Prince. In addition to Yiannopoulos, the four headliners would be Ann Coulter; Pamela Geller, a virulently Islamophobic blogger from Long Island; Mike Cernovich, a conspiracy theorist and vigilante journalist; and Steve

Bannon, newly fired from his job as Trump's chief strategist. To build anticipation, Yiannopoulos's team made promotional videos about each headliner, in the style of an action-movie trailer. "Bannon Infiltrates Berkeley," less than thirty seconds long, has been viewed more than thirty thousand times.

Mindful of the potential for violence, some students requested a robust police presence; others suggested that more police on campus would make them feel less safe, not more; still others demanded that the university cancel Free Speech Week. More than a hundred and fifty Berkeley faculty members and graduate students signed an open letter calling for a campus-wide boycott. Christ told me that she never considered cancelling the event. "The reputational cost would simply be too high," she said. Reputational cost is impossible to quantify, but the literal cost to U.C. Berkeley, in security fees alone, was likely to exceed a million dollars. The university had a budget deficit of more than a hundred million dollars, with less funding coming from the state in recent years. "Would I rather devote our precious resources to more class sections, overdue building repairs, or many other things we badly need?" Christ continued. "Absolutely. But we have to make this work." Others on campus speculated that Yiannopoulos's real goal was to force a government-subsidized institution to expend as many resources as possible. On FreeSpeechWeek.com, there were T-shirts for sale reading "Defund Berkeley."

Traditionally, outside speakers don't have unilateral power to schedule their own events on college campuses—like vampires, they have to be invited in—and Yiannopoulos was the guest of a conservative student organization called the Berkeley Patriot. "We don't want to seem like we support someone like Milo, because we don't," Pranav Jandhyala, one of the Patriot students, told the *Daily Cal*, the campus newspaper. "We're simply inviting him because free speech is protected." As the ostensible organizers of the event, the students had to sign contracts and waivers, assuming significant legal risk. At the time, the Berkeley Patriot had existed for only a few months. It had between five and twenty active members, depending on the definition of "active." For a while, the administration and the Patriot students worked

## GOSPEL OF THE MISUNDERSTOOD

I want to be the blade striking  
 knotted brown, to kiss the nape of any hunger;  
 American beautyberry or rutted cane, warm branch  
 of man pinning me here in mute study. To be an ache  
 in the breast of a burst jelly is what I wanted, vine-slick  
 and torrid in summer's greed, pressing my fears against  
 the light of the lonely. Nameless, I haunt for god and love  
 in extinct places, curve myself inside desire's eye and drink.  
 All peeled vermillion, all caught promise. Again all-seeing, and finally.  
 To be seen. Is what I wanted. To trawl the sleep of his body.  
 To make a burning room of this mouth. Skinned eager  
 with spiderbite and holy. Split-pink, drunken. Choked quiet,  
 as life unfolds its sticky wings in me. Snuffing me sweetly.

Isn't this love? To walk hand in hand toward the humid dark,  
 enter the ghost web of the hungry, to consider some wants  
 were not meant to be understood. Some women.  
 The way my brother prays I'll still find a man to divine me,  
 and my father tells me lazy women will never be loved.  
 Like today's new trumpet pushing its bright flower  
 in my slutty way. The slow voice of its angel hissing breathless:  
*No. He is not here. He is not here. He is nowhere.*

—Safiya Sinclair

well together. "We're treating them the way we'd treat any other students who are taking on something difficult and need our support," Dan Mogulof, the assistant vice-chancellor for public affairs, told me. "We want to be sure that they don't feel unsafe or marginalized."

Then things began to fall apart. The university set several deadlines, and, amid negotiations over contracts, the Patriot students missed them all. It also became clear that Yiannopoulos's lineup was not a list of confirmed speakers but a wish list. "Contrary to news reports, I have not been contacted about participating in Free Speech Week," Heather Mac Donald tweeted. Erik Prince told *The Atlantic* that his presence on the list was "a typo." Bannon said nothing publicly, but several people told me that he was scheduled to be in China that week. "I would never under any circumstances appear at an event that included Milo Yiannopoulos," Charles Murray told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Asked why, Murray responded, "Because he is a despicable asshole."

Carol Christ told me, "The metaphor I've been thinking about a lot is that of an object and its shadow. At first, I was

imagining a conventional lecture: the lecture is the object; the digital recording is its shadow." We were sitting in her office, which she hadn't had time to finish unpacking. Several copies of the Norton Critical Edition of "The Mill on the Floss," which she had edited, remained in a cardboard box on the floor. "By contrast," she continued, "when I consider Milo's—I'll use the word 'event,' although I'm not sure that that's exactly the right word—it's becoming clearer that he's actually trying to plant a narrative, a trail of impressions and images, that lives primarily in the digital world, and that we, this physical campus, are merely the shadow."

Yiannopoulos is not the only orator who has figured out that a speaking gig at a public university, especially in the face of fierce ideological opposition, is an easy way to attract an audience. "My college tour began after the victory by Donald Trump," Richard Spencer, a proponent of "peaceful ethnic cleansing," said in a recent YouTube video. "I loved it. I thought it was a great success, and so did most everyone else." Such speakers often portray themselves as soldiers for free



speech, but more often they use the First Amendment as a convenient shield.

One fall afternoon at Berkeley, outside the Free Speech Movement Café, several undergraduates gathered in a semicircle around an oversized poster, Sharpies in hand, doing what their liberal-arts curriculum had trained them to do: dissecting a text. “This is so full of fallacies, I just assumed it was by a student,” one of them said. In fact, it was a transcription of a lecture that the conservative pundit Ben Shapiro had delivered on campus the previous week. A former Breitbart editor, he now runs a site called the Daily Wire and hosts “The Ben Shapiro Show,” the most popular right-wing podcast in the country. A first-year student with pink highlights in her hair pointed to one sentence: “The Constitution was not written by a bunch of people who speak Korean.” It was one step in Shapiro’s argument that there was no systemic racism in the United States. “As an Asian-American, I feel personally attacked,” she said, adding, “I’m, like, half joking.” Another sentence on the poster read, “Income inequality is not the big problem; nobody rich is making you poor.” Above the latter clause, a student had written, in blue, “False premise, no one suggests that.” Another student wrote, in red, “Read Marx plz.”

Shapiro tries to appeal to both the pro-Trump and the anti-Trump factions of the Republican base, spitting out indignant syllogisms in a rapid nasal delivery that sounds like a podcast played at double speed. He had reserved a lecture hall on Sproul Plaza, and a thousand protesters showed up outside the venue. Compared with Yiannopoulos’s appearance, there were far more police, and they were far more aggressive. They arrested nine protesters and confiscated a few sticks and other potential weapons. There was no violence—at least, not of the physical variety. “Speech is violent, we will not be silent!” a group of students, standing outside the Martin Luther King Jr. Student Union, chanted. Later, I asked Viana Roland, a political-science student who had joined the chant, what she’d meant. Roland is from Santa Maria, a farm town several hours south of Berkeley. “Folks in my family pick strawberries, and some of them are undocumented,” she said. “Shapiro says that systemic racism is a myth. That is

an apologetics for white supremacy, an ideology with a long legacy of violence.” Because she was an Afro-Latina, she said, “that violence might be an abstraction to some people, but it’s not abstract to me.”

I asked John Powell what he thought about the rhetorical tactic of conflating speech with bodily harm. “Consider the classic liberal justification for free speech,” he said. “‘Your right to throw punches ends at the tip of my nose.’ This is taken to mean that speech can never cause any kind of injury. But we have learned a lot about the brain that John Stuart Mill didn’t know. So these students are asking, ‘Given what we now know about stereotype threat and trauma and P.T.S.D., where is the tip of our nose, exactly?’”

Adam Jadhav, a Ph.D. student in Berkeley’s geography department, has little patience for the classic liberal approach. While lecturing in a course called Global Environmental Politics, he projected a slide arguing that Yiannopoulos’s event was “not about robust exchange of ideas” but “about a shadowy political element weaponizing a narrow interpretation of the First Amendment.” A conservative student took a photo, in which Jadhav is clearly identifiable; someone sent it to Yiannopoulos, who shared it on Instagram.

“Idiots in the comments were calling me a fat slob because I didn’t tuck in my shirt,” Jadhav told me at a taquería a couple of blocks from campus. “I was, like, dude, come on, it’s a kurta.” Jadhav has thick-framed glasses, a small hoop earring, and a tattoo of a parrot on his forearm. The parrot, in a speech bubble, quotes Marx: “The point, however, is to change it!” “It” refers to the world. Marx was expressing his exasperation with armchair philosophers who are all talk and no action.

“I consider myself an activist, not just an academic,” Jadhav continued, ordering a beer. “I align myself with Antifa, although that term is sometimes misunderstood. I’m not Black Bloc”—the masked, black-clad contingent that uses violence. “Most of us, percentage-wise, are not Black Bloc. I do, however, think it’s important to stand up against hypernationalism and Fascism in all its forms. That might entail breaking unjust laws, but that’s how progress has always been made.”

After Jadhav’s picture circulated on-

line, Christ wrote him a warm e-mail expressing her sympathy. He thanked her, but urged her to “control the narrative” when it came to Yiannopoulos. “What I meant was: Let’s not get played,” Jadhav said. “He’s coming here to make people afraid, and to milk us for attention.” There were real victims of government overreach—dozens of protesters rounded up in mass arrests at Trump’s Inauguration; Desiree Fairouz, an activist who was arrested for laughing during the confirmation hearing of Attorney General Jeff Sessions—but Yiannopoulos, who has never been jailed or injured at his speeches, wasn’t one of them.

Recently, on Fox News, Ben Shapiro said, “Everything has been deemed hate speech on campus. . . . There is a big part of the left—and it’s growing—that says that it is incumbent to protect the campus from ideas that are dissenting.” This premise has become commonplace, even among liberals, but the evidence is mixed. One study, from 2015, did find that forty per cent of millennials, a greater proportion than in any other age group, would want the government to be able to censor speech that is “offensive to minority groups.” But another study, conducted the following year, found that only twenty-two per cent of college students wanted universities to ban offensive speech—a lower proportion than in the rest of the American adult population. In March, a political scientist named Jeffrey Sachs analyzed the most recent data, broken down by age. In conclusion, he tweeted, “There is no campus free speech crisis, the kids are all right, those that say otherwise have lost all perspective, and the real crisis may be elsewhere.”

It was a bright Friday morning, and Dan Mogulof, the Berkeley public-affairs administrator, was speed-walking to California Hall, a Beaux-Arts building where the chancellor and other top administrators have their offices. In theory, Free Speech Week was to begin in forty-eight hours. But, Mogulof had told me, “No speakers have been confirmed, no venues have been confirmed, no one on Milo’s team will answer simple questions.” Margo Bennett, the chief of campus police, said that “pretty much everything we know about Milo’s plans, at this point, we’re getting from his Instagram.”

At the entrance to California Hall,

Mogulof took a call on his cell phone. His eyebrows shot up, and he pumped his fist like a golfer sinking a long putt. Then he hung up and paced the corridors, popping in through various doors and interrupting meetings. "Sorry, friends, but it's rare that I get to bring good news," he said to a roomful of deans and assistant chancellors. "I'm just now—as in, right now—learning that a Berkeley Patriot student is telling local media that the event is off."

College administrators across the country were watching Free Speech Week closely. Richard Spencer was scheduled to speak soon at the University of Florida, and Charles Murray had been invited to the University of Colorado in Boulder. Officials from both schools were embedded with Berkeley's administrators, Mogulof said, "to observe—see what works, see what doesn't—and apply those lessons when it's their turn in the hot seat."

Mogulof hurried to Sproul Plaza, where he had called a press conference for print and TV reporters, both local and national. "I just texted someone from the Patriot," one reporter said to another. "I asked if Free Speech Week was cancelled, and the response was 'LOL, unclear.' So that's my headline, I guess: 'LOL, Unclear.'"

As Mogulof spoke to the reporters, an undergraduate sociology student walked by, holding an iced coffee and a Rice Krispies Treats wrapper. She shouted a question at Mogulof: "Students have a right to go to their classes and feel safe in their classrooms, and you're ready to compromise that for, like, the First Amendment that you're trying to uplift?"

"Your concerns are right on the money," Mogulof said. The student was not satisfied. She continued to ask questions, using her phone to film the interaction. As she talked, a few of the TV cameras swung toward her. "Please do not take video of me!" she said, holding up her phone like a talisman.

"Um, it's a press conference," one of the camera operators said.

A newspaper reporter said, "How's that for free speech?"

That night, I called Yiannopoulos and asked him where he was. "I've landed in San Francisco, but my specific location is top secret, I'm afraid," he said. "I'm not even telling dear friends,

much less the press. For security reasons. I'm sure you understand."

It took me twenty minutes to discover his secret location, and another forty-five minutes to get there by BART. It was a chain hotel situated between a strip mall and an eight-lane highway, in the commuter suburb of Walnut Creek. I found Yiannopoulos and his entourage in a "Grill & Lounge" area decorated in at least five clashing shades of taupe. Yiannopoulos greeted me with a kiss on the cheek, as though he had no memory of our earlier conversation. "Normally, we stay at places that are far, *far* posher than this," he said. "If you follow my Instagram, you know that already. But I'm afraid this trip had to be thrown together at the last minute. For security reasons, you understand."

Ann Coulter and Steve Bannon were no-shows. Joining Yiannopoulos were a few of his employees and the two remaining headliners, Pamela Geller and Mike Cernovich. "I'll do anything for Milo," Geller said, sipping a cocktail. "He and I are the same piece of kishke, as my grandmother used to say." Her persona is reminiscent of late-career Joan Rivers, but with more splenetic bigotry and fewer punch lines. "If Milo doesn't have freedom of speech, nobody does," she went on. "Besides, his company's publishing my next book, so it's good cross-promotion."

"Milo, what's the deal tomorrow, man?" Cernovich said. "Are we speaking on campus? Off campus? What the fuck is going on?"

"O.K., so this hasn't been announced yet, but we're giving a big press conference on Treasure Island," Yiannopoulos said. "I'm going to make my entrance by speedboat, with a camera trailing me on a drone, and we're going to be live-streaming it all on Facebook."

"I don't do boats," Geller said. "I projectile-vomit. But I love it for you, Milo, it's a fabulous idea. I predict two hundred and fifty thousand viewers watching that live stream, at least."

"I'll be wearing this gorgeous Balmain overcoat—I'll show you—with this huge fur collar," Yiannopoulos said.

Geller and Cernovich changed the subject to Internet censorship. "They kicked me off Google AdSense," Geller said. "I was making six figures a year from that. You can't even share my links

on Pinterest now! I'm 'inappropriate content.'"

Yiannopoulos looked bored. "You guys are so selfish," he said. "We used to be talking about me." He turned to his stylist, a glassy-eyed, wisp-thin man, and whispered, "Go get the coat."

They continued hashing out plans. "So we'll walk in with you, through the streets of downtown Berkeley," Cernovich said. "If there's a screaming Antifa crowd, and if I maybe have to street-fight my way in and break a few noses in self-defense, that's all good optics for me."

"Maybe we should line up on the Sproul steps," Yiannopoulos said, "surrounded by Berkeley students wearing 'Defund Berkeley' T-shirts."

"Why don't we march in with our arms linked together, like the Martin Luther King people, singing 'We Shall Overcome?'" Cernovich said.

"We'll do our thing, and then at some point the protests will turn violent," Yiannopoulos said. "That will become the focus, and then we can just get ourselves out of there." He reclined in his chair and smiled. "It's all coming together," he said.

The stylist came back with the coat, and Yiannopoulos squealed. "Pamela, is this coat to die for or what?" he said.

"Oh, my God, Milo, I'm dying," Geller said. "It's sick."

He put the coat on and turned around, again and again, examining his reflection in the darkened glass of a window.

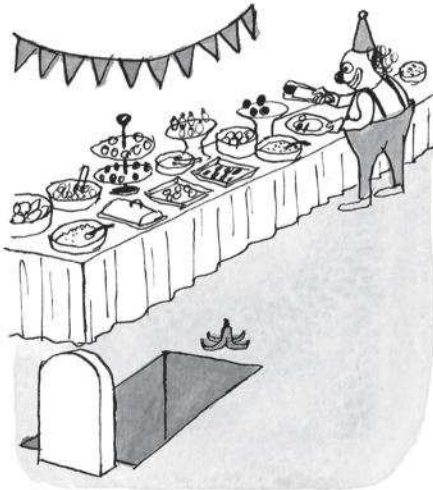
"It's fabulous," Geller said. "It's sick. I hate you."

There was no speedboat, no drone footage, no press conference on Treasure Island. Yiannopoulos, live-streaming on Facebook from his hotel room, delivered what he called a press conference, although the only questions came from online commenters. He invited Christ "to participate in a debate with me." Later, when I asked her whether she would consider accepting his offer, she laughed.

The next day, police escorted Yiannopoulos, Geller, and Cernovich onto Sproul Plaza through a back entrance. The plaza was ringed by police in riot gear; helicopters thumped overhead; snipers were visible on the rooftops. A



AGES 2-5 COMING SOON TO ALL GOOD BOOKSHOPS  
**PHILOSOPHY ILLUSTRATED** A PICTURE BOOK OF PHILOSOPHICAL TERMS



*Free Will*



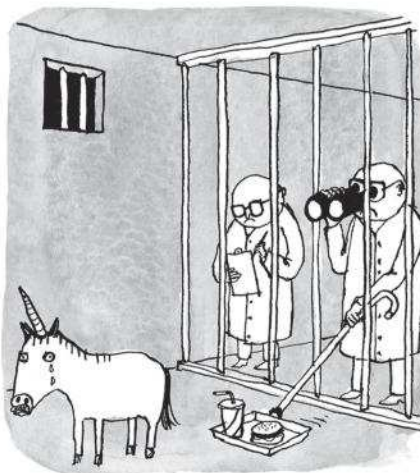
*Anarchy*



*Democracy*



*Logic*



*Empiricism*



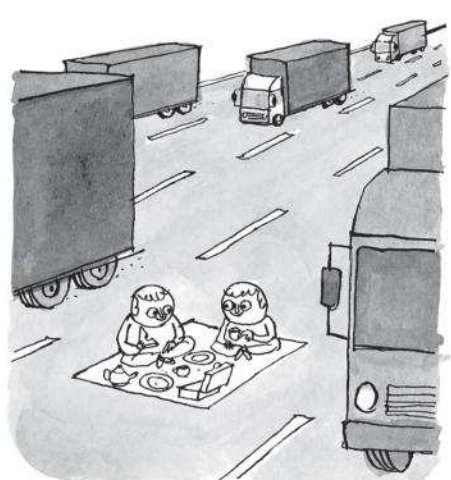
*Eroticism*



*Atheism*



*Agnosticism*



*Love*



*"Let's make a pact—I won't tell you about my day  
if you won't tell me about yours."*

crowd of supporters and protesters gathered outside the barricades, waiting to be let in. Yiannopoulos was not allowed onto the Sproul Hall steps. Instead, he stood on a concrete landing nearby, facing about thirty people. "I am here, in the name of Mario Savio, to make you stop!" one protester shouted.

Yiannopoulos addressed his audience. "I invite you to join me for a moment, on your knees, to pray," he said. "Pray for each other, for the fortitude and strength to carry on, to fight for free speech in the face of overwhelming odds." He knelt and clasped his hands. Few joined him. Geller tried to lead the crowd in a rendition of "We Shall Overcome," but, beyond those three words, nobody could remember the rest of the song. After about fifteen minutes, Yiannopoulos took a couple of selfies and left. No arrests were made, and no violence was reported. "I don't even know if this is gonna make it to air tonight," a local TV reporter said.

As his caravan left town, Yiannopoulos live-streamed from the back seat of an S.U.V. "We don't care if the police are throttling access to make sure there's only thirty people there," Yiannopoulos said. "None of that stuff is gonna deter us, because we don't crave accep-

tance and publicity the way liberals do. We just want to be left alone." I watched the stream with Mogulof, who was eating a York Peppermint Patty. "So I guess that was the most expensive photo op in Berkeley's history, huh?" he said.

The day after his fifteen-minute Free Speech Week, Yiannopoulos left for Hawaii, and Berkeley tried, warily, to return to normal. In a classroom at the law school, John Powell was teaching a seminar on civil rights. One student asked whether something like the intentional infliction of emotional distress, a concept from tort law, might be extended to free-speech cases. "It's an interesting question," Powell said. "Why do we think, for example, that burning a cross is injurious? It's just a symbol. And yet even Clarence Thomas, who is rarely sympathetic to such arguments, recognizes that the symbol itself is emotionally injurious."

They discussed *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case upholding a Louisiana law that segregated railcars by race. "The petitioner argued that segregation 'stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority,'" Powell said. "But the Court rejected that and said, in effect, 'If you feel stigmatized, it's just

in your mind.'" That changed in 1954, when the Court issued its unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. "They finally found that segregation was, in fact, inherently harmful," Powell said. "And what was the harm? The Court was very explicit: it's psychological harm." He paused, arching an eyebrow slightly. "This means that there is precedent for weighing psychological injury as a real concern."

Later that fall, Judith Butler, the cultural theorist and Berkeley professor, spoke at a forum sponsored by the Berkeley Academic Senate. "If free speech does take precedence over every other constitutional principle and every other community principle, then perhaps we should no longer claim to be weighing or balancing competing principles or values," Butler said. "We should perhaps frankly admit that we have agreed in advance to have our community sun-dered, racial and sexual minorities demeaned, the dignity of trans people denied, that we are, in effect, willing to be wrecked by this principle of free speech."

Butler's partner, the political philosopher and Berkeley professor Wendy Brown, was teaching a course called Introduction to Political Theory. "It was an amazing experience to be discussing Mill while all this stuff was blowing up around us," she said. "It's one thing for a student to feel that, through the free exchange of ideas, 'the truth will out.' It's another thing to defend that position while Milo is staging his political theatre outside your window."

Shortly before winter break, Carol Christ recorded a YouTube video. "In many ways, it was a classic Berkeley semester," she said, "as we dealt with complex, controversial issues that played out across the campus and the country." A Berkeley student recorded a parody, holding a mug of tea and wearing a Carol Christ costume consisting of a gray wig and a sweater cape. In a chipper voice, she spoke of "a classic Berkeley semester" in which "Nazis frolicked across the campus"—a result, the Christ impersonator said, "of my neoliberal, Fascist-aligned white feminism." She topped off her tea with a generous pour of whiskey.

Some speakers began to lose their taste for on-campus provocation. In March, Richard Spencer appeared at



Michigan State University. Two dozen protesters and counterprotesters were arrested outside the venue—the Pavilion for Agriculture and Livestock Education—and Spencer ended up speaking to a near-empty hall. Afterward, he posted a video. “I really hate to say this, and I definitely hesitate to say this,” he said, “but Antifa is winning.”

The last time I checked, the only content on FreeSpeechWeek.com was a photo of Yiannopoulos and the words “MILO WILL RETURN TO BERKELEY IN SPRING 2018.” I texted Yiannopoulos, who had recently been shilling dietary supplements from the InfoWars studio, in Texas, to ask whether this was true. “Yes I am going back to Berkeley,” he responded. “Working it out with the students now.” No one at U.C. Berkeley had heard about any such plans.

Still, conservative speech at Berkeley continued in Yiannopoulos’s absence. In April, Charlie Kirk, the executive director of the national conservative student group Turning Point U.S.A. and a friend of Donald Trump, Jr., announced that he would give a talk at Berkeley. He tweeted:

My message will be quite clear:  
Open borders are inhumane  
We must build a militarized wall  
There are only 2 genders  
Berkeley should be defunded.

Speaking alongside Kirk was Turning Point’s communications director, Candace Owens, a vitriolic young conservative with a knack for creating viral moments. Before she went by her own name, Owens was a YouTuber who called herself Red Pill Black, a reference to the fact that she was an African-American who had “escaped the Democrat plantation.” Near the beginning of the talk, two hecklers stood up, and one of them shouted, “These aren’t ideas, this is Fascism.” They were ejected, and the audience cheered. “Antifa, if you really take a look at their platform . . . they seem to be the ones that are the white supremacists,” Owens said. “They feel like their ideas are so supreme to everybody else’s that they have the right to boycott, to be violent.”

Four days after the panel, Kanye West tweeted, “I love the way Candace Owens thinks,” followed by several tweets in which he expressed his “love”

for Donald Trump. Despite widespread bewilderment and outrage, West refused to back down, insisting that his views were not about politics per se but about the higher principle of untrammelled expression. “Love who you want to love,” West tweeted. “That’s free thought.”

In late May, Congress held a hearing on “Challenges to the Freedom of Speech on College Campuses.” One of the witnesses was Bret Weinstein, a biologist who, until recently, taught at Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Washington. Last year, after he wrote a controversial e-mail, students protested and demanded that he be fired. Amid growing unrest on campus, a group of students posted a photo of themselves wielding baseball bats. Weinstein sued the college, alleging that it had failed to protect him from “threats of physical violence,” and left his teaching job. The college admitted no wrongdoing, but settled for half a million dollars. At the congressional hearing, Weinstein was introduced with the title Professor-in-Exile. “The First Amendment is simply not sufficient to protect the free exchange of ideas,” he said.

Near the end of the school year, I met Erwin Chemerinsky, the law-school dean, at a coffee shop in downtown Berkeley. “There is no guarantee that the marketplace of ideas will lead to truth, and that’s obviously a big problem,” he said. He is a Voltairean, not a



Panglossian. Nonetheless, he continued, “My distrust of government is so great that I can’t think of a way to address that problem without making it worse.” Later, I talked to John Powell. “There are any number of areas—gay rights, animal rights, housing—where legal reformers have set out to change the law,” he said. “If our speech laws looked more like Canada’s, would that be the end of democracy as we know it?”

Classes were over. The year of free speech, for all practical purposes, had come to a close. Outside California Hall, next to the Free Speech Bikeway, a grounds crew was spreading cedar mulch on the flower beds. The plate-glass window on Sproul Plaza had been replaced; nearby, seniors were putting on their caps and gowns and posing for photos. A shin-high self-driving robot scooted across the plaza with a sticker on its flank (“How’s my programming?”).

In 2014, at a teach-in commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Free Speech Movement, Wendy Brown spoke against trigger warnings and in favor of exposing students to new ideas. “When we demand, from the right or the left, that universities be cleansed of what’s disturbing,” she said, “we are complicit with the neoliberal destruction of the university.” Back then, Milo Yiannopoulos was still an obscure opinion journalist, and Donald Trump was still a reality-show magnate. “I haven’t radically shifted my position, but it’s fair to say that I’ve shifted my emphasis,” Brown told me. “I’ve become newly attuned to how free speech can be used as cover for larger political projects that have little to do with airing ideas.”

Carol Christ told me that the events of the past academic year hadn’t changed her faith in the First Amendment, but that they had made her wonder how an eighteenth-century text should be interpreted in the twenty-first century. “Speech is fundamentally different in the digital context,” she said. “I don’t think the law, or the country, has even started to catch up with that yet.” The University of California had done everything within its legal power to let Yiannopoulos speak without allowing him to hijack Berkeley’s campus. It was a qualified success that came at a steep price, in marred campus morale and in dollars—nearly three million, all told. “These aren’t easy problems,” Brown told me. “But I don’t think it’s beyond us to say, on the one hand, that everyone has a right to express their views, and, on the other hand, that a political provocateur may not use a university campus as his personal playground, especially if it bankrupts the university. At some point, when some enormous amount of money has been spent, it has to be possible to say, O.K. Enough.” ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

# PAPER TIGER

*Could a global icon of extinction still be alive?*

BY BROOKE JARVIS

Andrew Orchard lives near the northeastern coast of Tasmania, in the same ramshackle farmhouse that his great-grandparents, the first generation of his English family to be born on the Australian island, built in 1906. When I visited Orchard there, in March, he led me past stacks of cardboard boxes filled with bones, skulls, and scat, and then rooted around for a photo album, the kind you'd expect to hold family snapshots. Instead, it contained pictures of the bloody carcasses of Tasmania's native animals: a wombat with its intestines pulled out, a kangaroo missing its face. "A tiger will

always eat the jowls and eyes," Orchard explained. "All the good organs." The photos were part of Orchard's arsenal of evidence against a skeptical world—proof of his fervent belief, shared with many in Tasmania, that the island's apex predator, an animal most famous for being extinct, is still alive.

The Tasmanian tiger, known to science as the thylacine, was the only member of its genus of marsupial carnivores to live to modern times. It could grow to six feet long, if you counted its tail, which was stiff and thick at the base, a bit like a kangaroo's, and it raised its young in a pouch. When Orchard was

growing up, his father would tell him stories of having snared one, on his property, many years after the last confirmed animal died, in the nineteen-thirties. Orchard says that he saw his first tiger when he was eighteen, while duck hunting, and since then so many that he's lost count. Long before the invention of digital trail cameras, Orchard was out in the bush rigging film cameras to motion sensors, hoping to get a picture of a tiger. He showed me some of the most striking images he'd collected over the decades, sometimes describing teeth and tails and stripes while pointing at what, to my



*Like the dodo and the great auk, the Tasmanian tiger is more renowned for the tragedy of its death than for its life, about which*



eye, could very well have been shadows or stems. (Another thylacine searcher told me that finding tigers hidden in the grass in camera-trap photos is “a bit like seeing the Virgin Mary in burnt toast.”) Orchard estimates that he spends five thousand dollars a year just on batteries for his trail cams. The larger costs of his fascination are harder to calculate. “That’s why my wife left me,” he offered at one point, while discussing the habitats tigers like best.

Tasmania, which is sometimes said to hang beneath Australia like a green jewel, shares the country’s colonial history. The first English settlers arrived in 1803 and soon began spreading across the island, whose human and animal inhabitants had lived in isolation for more than ten thousand years. Conflict was almost immediate. The year that the Orchard farmhouse was built, the Tasmanian government paid out fifty-eight bounties to trappers and hunters who presented the bodies of thylacines, which were wanted for preying on the

settlers’ sheep. By then, the number of dead tigers, like the number of live ones, was steeply declining. In 1907, the state treasury paid out for forty-two carcasses. In 1908, it paid for seventeen. The following year, there were two, and then none the year after, or the year after that, or ever again.

By 1917, when Tasmania put a pair of tigers on its coat of arms, the real thing was rarely seen. By 1930, when a farmer named Wilf Batty shot what was later recognized as the last Tasmanian tiger killed in the wild, it was such a curiosity that people came from all over to look at the body. The last animal in captivity died of exposure in 1936, at a zoo in Hobart, Tasmania’s capital, after being locked out of its shelter on a cold night. The Hobart city council noted the death at a meeting the following week, and authorized thirty pounds to fund the purchase of a replacement. The minutes of the meeting include a postscript to the demise of the species: two months earlier, it had been “added to the list of

wholly protected animals in Tasmania.”

Like the dodo and the great auk, the tiger found a curious immortality as a global icon of extinction, more renowned for the tragedy of its death than for its life, about which little is known. In the words of the Tasmanian novelist Richard Flanagan, it became “a lost object of awe, one more symbol of our feckless ignorance and stupidity.”

But then something unexpected happened. Long after the accepted date of extinction, Tasmanians kept reporting that they’d seen the animal. There were hundreds of officially recorded sightings, plus many more that remained unofficial, spanning decades. Tigers were said to dart across roads, hopping “like a dog with sore feet,” or to follow people walking in the bush, yipping. A hotel housekeeper named Deb Flowers told me that, as a child, in the nineteen-sixties, she spent a day by the Arm River watching a whole den of striped animals with her grandfather, learning only later, in school,



*little is known. Enthusiasts hope it will be a Lazarus species—an animal considered lost but then found.*

ILLUSTRATION BY BENE ROHLMANN



that they were considered extinct. In 1982, an experienced park ranger, doing surveys near the northwest coast, reported seeing a tiger in the beam of his flashlight; he even had time to count the stripes (there were twelve). "10 A.M. in the morning in broad daylight in short grass," a man remembered, describing how he and his brother startled a tiger in the nineteen-eighties while hunting rabbits. "We were just sitting there with our guns down and our mouths open." Once, two separate carloads of people, eight witnesses in all, said that they'd got a close look at a tiger so reluctant to clear the road that they eventually had to drive around it. Another man recalled the time, in 1996, when his wife came home white-faced and wide-eyed. "I've seen something I shouldn't have seen," she said.

"Did you see a murder?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "I've seen a tiger."

As reports accumulated, the state handed out a footprint-identification guide and gave wildlife officials boxes marked "Thylacine Response Kit" to keep in their work vehicles should they need to gather evidence, such as plaster

casts of paw prints. Expeditions to find the rumored survivors were mounted—some by the government, some by private explorers, one by the World Wildlife Fund. They were hindered by the limits of technology, the sheer scale of the Tasmanian wilderness, and the fact that Tasmania's other major carnivore, the devil, is nature's near-perfect destroyer of evidence, known to quickly consume every bit of whatever carcasses it finds, down to the hair and the bones. Undeterred, searchers dragged slabs of ham down game trails and baited camera traps with roadkill or live chickens. They collected footprints, while debating what the footprint of a live tiger would look like, since the only examples they had were impressions made from the desiccated paws of museum specimens. They gathered scat and hair samples. They always came back without a definitive answer.

In 1983, Ted Turner commemorated a yacht race by offering a hundred-thousand-dollar reward for proof of the tiger's existence. In 2005, a magazine offered 1.25 million Australian dollars. "Like many others living in a world

where mystery is an increasingly rare thing," the editor-in-chief said, "we wanted to believe." The rewards went unclaimed, but the tiger's fame grew. Nowadays, you can find the thylacine on beer cans and bottles of sparkling water; one northern town replaced its crosswalks with tiger stripes. Tasmania's standard-issue license plate features an image of a thylacine peeking through grass, above the tagline "Explore the possibilities."

With the advent of DNA testing and Google Earth and cell-phone videos, it became ever more improbable that the Tasmanian tiger was still out there, a large predator somehow surviving just beyond the edge of human knowledge. In Tasmania, the idea gradually turned into a bit of a joke: the island's very own Bigfoot, with its own zany, rivalrous fraternities of seekers and true believers. Still, Tasmanians point out that, unlike Bigfoot, the thylacine *was* a real animal, and it *had* lived, not so very long ago, on their large and rugged and still sparsely populated island. As the decades passed, the number of reports kept going up, not down.



*"All parents fight."*

We are many centuries removed from the cartographers who used the phrase "Hic Svnt Leones" ("Here are lions") to mark where their maps approached the unknowable, or who populated their waters with ichthyocentaurs and sea pigs because it was only sensible that the ocean would hold an aquatic animal to match every terrestrial one. We've learned quite a bit, since then, about where and with whom we live. By certain accounts, however, our planet is still full of unverified animals living in unexpected places. The yeti and the Loch Ness monster are famous; less so are the moose rumored to roam New Zealand and the black panthers that supposedly inhabit the English countryside. (The British Big Cat Society claims that there are a few thousand sightings a year.) Panther reports are also common across southern Australia.

Some of these mystery animals may be part of explicable migrations or relict populations—there are active, if marginal, debates about whether mountain lions have reappeared in Maine, and whether grizzlies have survived their elimination in Colorado—while others



are said to be menagerie escapees. Australian fauna are reported abroad so often that there's a name for the phenomenon: phantom kangaroos, which have been seen from Japan to the U.K. In some places (such as Hawaii, and an island in Loch Lomond), there are actual populations of imported wallabies. Elsewhere, the kangaroo in question was nine metres tall (New Zealand, 1831) or eschewed its usual vegetarian diet to kill and eat at least one German shepherd before disappearing (Tennessee, 1934).

What are we to make of these claims? One possible explanation is that many of us are so alienated from the natural world that we're not well equipped to know what we're seeing. Eric Guiler, a biologist known for his scholarship on thylacine history, was once asked to investigate a "monster" on Tasmania's west coast, only to find a large piece of washed-up whale blubber. Mike Williams, who, with his partner, Rebecca Lang, wrote a book about the Australian big-cat phenomenon, told me that "people's observational skills are fairly low," a diplomatic way of explaining why someone can see a panther while looking at a house cat. In April, the New York Police Department responded to a 911 call about a tiger—presumably the Bengal, not the Tasmanian, kind—roaming the streets of Washington Heights. It turned out to be a large raccoon. Williams, who travels to Tasmania a few times a year to look for thylacines, described the continued sightings as "the most sane fringe phenomena."

Another explanation is that the natural world is large and complicated, and that we're still far from understanding it. (Tasmania got a lesson in this recently, when the government spent fifty million dollars to eradicate invasive foxes, a scourge of the native animals on the mainland, even though foxes were never proven to have made it to the island.) Many scientists believe that even now, in this age of environmental crisis and ever-increasing technological capability, more animals are discovered each year than go extinct, often dying off without us even realizing they lived. We have no way to define extinction—or existence—other than through the limits of our own perception. For many years, an animal was considered extinct a half cen-

tury after the last confirmed sighting. The new standard, adopted in 1994, is that there should be "no reasonable doubt that the last individual has died," leaving us to debate which doubts are reasonable. Because the death of a species is not a simple narrative unfolding conveniently before human eyes, it's likely that at least some thylacines did survive beyond their official end at the Hobart Zoo, perhaps even for generations. A museum exhibit in the city now refers to the species as "functionally extinct"—no longer relevant to the ecosystem, regardless of the status of possible survivors.

Tiger enthusiasts are quick to bring up Lazarus species—animals that were considered lost but then found—which in Australia include the mountain pygmy possum (known from fossils dating from the Pleistocene and long thought to be extinct, it was found in a ski lodge in 1966); the Adelaide pygmy blue-tongue skink (rediscovered in a snake's stomach in 1992); and the bridled nailtail wallaby, which was resurrected in 1973, after a fence-builder read about its extinction in a magazine article and told researchers that he knew where some lived. In 2013, a photographer captured seventeen seconds of footage of the night parrot, whose continued existence had been rumored but unproven for almost a century. Sean Dooley, the editor of the magazine *BirdLife*, called the rediscovery "the bird-watching equivalent of finding Elvis flipping burgers in an outback roadhouse." The parrots have since been found from one side of the continent to the other. Is it more foolish to chase what may be a figment, or to assume that our planet has no secrets left?

Last year, three men calling themselves the Booth Richardson Tiger Team held a press conference on the eve of Threatened Species Day—which Australia commemorates on the day the Hobart Zoo thylacine died—to announce new video footage and images that they said showed the animal. They'd set up cameras after Greg Booth, a woodcutter and a former tiger nonbeliever, said that while walking in the bush two years ear-

lier he had spotted a thylacine only three metres away, close enough to see the pouch. The videos were shot from a distance, and grainy, but right away they prompted headlines, from *National Geographic* to the *New York Post*. By the time I arrived in Tasmania, this spring, the team had gone to ground. When I reached Greg's father by phone, he told me that their lawyer had forbidden them from talking to anyone, because they were seeking a buyer for their recording.

One of Tasmania's most prominent tiger-hunting groups, the Thylacine Research Unit, or T.R.U., looked at the images and pronounced the animal a quoll, a marsupial carnivore that looks vaguely like a weasel. T.R.U., whose logo is a question mark with tiger

stripes, has its own Web series and has been featured on Animal Planet. "Every other group is believers, and we're skeptics, so we're heretics," Bill Flowers, one of the group's three members, told me one day in a café in Devonport, on the northern coast. Since Flowers began investigating thylacine sightings, he has been reading about false memories, false confessions, and the psychology of perception—examples, he told me, of the way "the mind fills in gaps" that reality leaves open. He talked about the unreliability of eyewitness testimony in court cases, and pointed out that many people, after spotting a strange animal, will look it up and retroactively decide that it was a thylacine, creating what he calls a "contaminated memory."

It isn't unusual for an interest in thylacines to lead back to the psychology of the humans who see them. "Your brain will justify your investment by defending it," Nick Mooney, a Tasmanian wildlife expert, told me. I met Mooney, who is sixty-four, in his kitchen, which was filled with drying walnuts and fresh-picked apples. In 1982, he was studying raptors and other predators for the state department of wildlife when a colleague, Hans Naarding, reported that he'd seen a thylacine. The department had just been involved in the World Wildlife Fund search, which had found no hard proof but, as the official report, by the wild-



life scientist Steve Smith, put it, “some cause for hope.” Naarding’s sighting was initially kept secret, a fact that still provides grist for conspiracy theorists. Mooney led the investigation, which took fifteen months; he tried to keep out the nosy public by saying that he was studying eagles.

The search again turned up no concrete evidence, but, from 1982 until 2009, when Mooney retired, he became the point person for tiger sightings. The department developed a special form for recording them, noting the weather, the light source, the distance away, the duration of the sighting, the altitude, and so on. Mooney also recorded his assessment of reliability. Some sightings were obvious hoaxes: a German tourist who took a picture of a historical photo; a man who said that he’d got indisputable proof but, whoops, the camera lurched out of his car and fell into a deep cave (he turned out to be trying to stop a nearby logging project); people who painted stripes on greyhounds. Mooney noticed that people who had repeat sightings also tended to prospect for gold, reflecting an inclination toward optimism that he dubbed Lassester syndrome, for a mythical gold deposit in central Australia. One man gave Mooney a diary in which he had recorded the hundred or so tigers he believed he’d seen over the years. The first sighting was by far the most credible. Eventually, though, the man would “see sightings in piles of wood on the back lawn while everybody else was having a barbecue,” Mooney said. “What we’re talking about here is the path to obsession. I know people who’ve bankrupted themselves and their family . . . wrecked their life almost, chasing this dream.”

But there were always stories that Mooney couldn’t dismiss. The most compelling came from people who had little or no prior knowledge of the thylacine, and yet described, just as old-timers had, an awkward gait and a thick, stiff tail that seemed fused to the spine. There were also the separate groups of people who saw the same thing at the same time. He often had people bring him to the scene, and then would reenact the sighting with a dog, taking his own measurements to test the accuracy of people’s perceptions, their judgment of distance and time.

## AMERICAN PASTIME

When I was a little kid in Chicago  
Jimmy Yancey, the great blues  
and boogie-woogie piano player,  
worked as a groundskeeper  
at Comiskey Park, where the White Sox played—  
Years later, I listened to his records  
and did the best I could to imitate  
his left hand, not knowing he’d played  
baseball for the Chicago All-Americans  
in the Negro Leagues, throwing down  
his best curves and sliders on both  
the black and white keys, remembering  
how he’d appeared as a tap dancer  
and pianist in Europe and at Carnegie Hall,  
then kept his day job working at Comiskey  
for twenty-five years, until he died  
in 1951, sweeping the infield

—Barry Gifford

In the media, Mooney is regularly consulted for his opinion on new sightings or the species’ likelihood of survival. (Extremely low, he says.) But he won’t answer the question everyone wants answered. Flowers told me, “We ponder very often, does Nick believe or does he not?” Mooney’s refusal to be definitive angers those who accuse him of perpetrating a government coverup of a relict population and also those who think he’s encouraging nonsense by refusing to admit a dispiriting but obvious reality. Mooney thinks these views represent a thorough misunderstanding of how much we actually know about our world. “I don’t see the need to see an absolute when I don’t see an absolute,” he told me. “Life is far more complicated than people want it to be.” In his eyes, the ongoing mystery of the thylacine isn’t really about the animal at all. It’s about us.

To the outside world, Tasmania has long been a place of wishful thinking. For centuries, legends circulated of a vast unknown southern continent, Terra Australis Incognita, which was often said to be a land of riches so great that, as one writer put it, “the scraps from this table would be sufficient to maintain the power, dominion, and sovereignty of Britain.”

This is the dream that the explorer

Abel Tasman was chasing when he sailed east from Mauritius on behalf of the Dutch East India Company, in 1642. (Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean, had become a popular stopover for Dutch sailors, who restocked their larders with a large and easily hunted bird that lived there, the dodo.) Almost seven weeks later, his crew sighted land, which they took for part of a continent, never discovering that it was an island. Onshore, they initially met no people, although they heard music in the forest and saw widely spaced notches carved into trees, which led Tasman to speculate, in his published journal, that giants lived there—a notion that may have inspired Jonathan Swift’s *Brodingnagians*. Tasman also wrote that a search party “saw the footing of wild Beasts having Claws like a Tyger.”

A century and a half later, the first shipload of convicts and settlers arrived. They didn’t know what creature—later named for the devil they feared it to be—made the screams they heard in the night. When, a few months after the establishment of a settlement at Hobart, some convicts caught sight of a large striped animal in the forest, it seemed another symbol of this strange and intimidating land. “I make no doubt but here are many wild animals which we have not seen,” a chaplain wrote. They



encountered creatures like the platypus, an animal so bizarre—venomous, duck-billed, beaver-tailed, with the furry body of an otter but egg-laying—that George Shaw, the author of “The Naturalist’s Miscellany,” believed it to be a crude hoax. From the beginning, the thylacine’s common names—zebra wolf, tiger wolf, opossum-hyena, Tasmanian dingo—marked it as another chimera, too incongruous to understand on its own terms.

Three years after the colony’s founding, Tasmania’s surveyor-general wrote a scientific description that was read before the Linnean Society, in London: “Eyes large and full, black, with a nictant membrane, which gives the animal a savage and malicious appearance.” More harsh descriptions followed, from the eighteen-thirties through the nineteen-sixties: “These animals are savage, cowardly, and treacherous”; “badly formed and ungainly and therefore very primitive”; “marsupial quadrupeds are all characterized by a low degree of intelligence”; “belongs to a race of natural born idiots”; “an unproportioned experiment of nature quite unfitted to take its place in competition with the more highly-developed forms of animal life in the world today.” The thylacine was stupid and backward and also, somehow, a terrifying menace to the new society, which blamed it for killing tens of thousands of sheep—an absurd inflation—and sucking its victims’ blood like a vampire.

This abuse was part of a larger prejudice against marsupials that is sometimes called placental chauvinism. The science historian Adrian Desmond wrote that “civilized Europe, for its part, was quite content to view Australia as a faunal backwater, a kind of palaeontological penal colony.” As Europeans spread throughout Australia, killing native animals and displacing them with their preferred species, their assessments of marsupials were as unflattering as their racist dismissals of the people they were also killing and displacing.

Aboriginal Tasmanians, who had lived on the land for roughly thirty-five thousand years, were dying in large numbers, succumbing to new diseases introduced from Europe and attacks by colonists who wanted to raise livestock on the open land where they, and the thylacine, hunted. In 1830, just

twenty-seven years after colonization, Tasmania’s lieutenant-governor called on the military, and every able-bodied male, to join a human chain that would stretch across the settled areas of the island and sweep the native people into exile. The operation, which used up more than half the colony’s annual budget, became known as the Black Line, for the people it targeted. That same year, a wool venture in the northwest offered the first bounties for dead thylacines, and the government of the island began offering them for living Aboriginal people—later to be amended to include the dead as well.

By 1869, it was believed that only two Aboriginal Tasmanians, a man named William Lanne, known as King Billy, and a woman named Truganini, survived. Scientists suddenly became obsessed with these “last” individuals. After Lanne died, a Hobart physician named William Crowther stole his skull and replaced it with one that he took from a white body. Lanne’s feet and hands were also removed; the historian Lyndall Ryan contends that other parts of his body, as well as a tobacco pouch made from his skin, ended up in the possession of other Hobart residents. There was a public outcry at the “unseemly” acts, but Crowther was soon elected to the legislature and later served as Tasmania’s premier.

In 1871, two years after Lanne’s death, the curator of the Australian Museum, in Sydney, wrote to his counterparts in Tasmania with a warning: “Let us therefore advise our friends to gather their specimens in time, or it may come to pass when the last Thylacine dies the scientific men across Bass’s Straits will contest as fiercely for its body as they did for that last aboriginal man not long ago.” Truganini, who died in 1876, professed her fear of a similar fate. Thanks to a guard who kept watch over her body, she was successfully buried. Eventually, however, her bones were exhumed and displayed at the Tasmanian Museum, along with taxidermied thylacines.

In fact, Lanne and Truganini were not the last Aboriginal Tasmanians. Descendants of the island’s first people lived on, mostly on the islands of the northern coast, where Aboriginal women had had children with white sealers; today, though the numbers are contested, some

twenty-three thousand people in Tasmania identify as Aboriginal. For decades, they had to fight against the widespread belief that they no longer existed. “It is still much easier for white Tasmanians to regard Tasmanian Aborigines as a dead people rather than confront the problems of an existing community of Aborigines who are victims of a conscious policy of genocide,” Ryan has written. In 2016, the Tasmanian government, by constitutional amendment, recognized Aboriginal Tasmanians as the original owners of the island and its waters. As of this writing, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* defines them as extinct.

The politics and the emotions may have changed, but the thylacine still serves as a proxy for other debates. In March, in the tiny town of Pipers Brook, a group of Tasmanian landowners gathered over tea and quartered sandwiches to learn about how to support native animals on their properties. During the past two hundred years, more mammals have gone extinct in Australia than anywhere else in the world; Tasmania, once connected to the continent by a land bridge, has served as a last refuge for animals that are already extinct or endangered on the mainland. In Pipers Brook, the group was shown a picture of a thylacine, accompanied by an acknowledgment of grim responsibility. “A lot of what we do has the soul of the thylacine behind it,” David Pemberton, the program manager of the state’s Save the Tasmanian Devil Program, said. The devil, Tasmania’s other iconic species, is suffering from a contagious and fatal facial cancer that essentially clones itself when the devils bite one another’s faces. Pemberton has calculated that the combined weight of the tumors, most of which are genetically a single organism, now exceeds that of a blue whale.

As the group toured an enclosure for a devil-breeding program, a man named John W. Harders told me that the possibility of the thylacine’s survival had become a matter of pure belief, like whether there is life after death. Other participants said that they couldn’t help but feel some optimism, despite their rational doubt. “There’s so much despair in terms of conservation these days,” a botanist named Nicky Meeson said. “It would provide that little bit of

hope that nature is resilient, that it could come back.”

But some people erupted in frustration at the mention of the tiger. “We killed them off a hundred years ago and now, belatedly, we’re proud of the thylacine!” Anna Povey, who works in land conservation, nearly shouted. She wanted to know why the government fetishizes the tiger’s image when other animals, such as the eastern quoll—cute, fluffy, definitely alive, and definitely endangered—could still make use of the attention. I couldn’t help thinking of all the purported thylacine videos that are dismissed as “just” a quoll. “It does piss us off!” Povey said. “It’s about time to appreciate the things we have, Australia, my God! We still treat this place as if it was the time of the thylacines—as if it was a frontier and we can carry on taking over.”

In the nineteen-seventies, Bob Brown, later a leader of the Australian Greens, a political party, spent two years as a member of a thylacine search team. He told me that although he’d like to think the fascination with thylacines is motivated by remorse and a desire for restitution, people’s guilt doesn’t seem to be reflected in the policies that they actually support. Logging and mining are major industries in Tasmania, and land clearing is rampant; even the forest where Naarding saw his tiger is gone. Throughout Australia, the dire extinction rate is expected to worsen. It is a problem of the human psyche, Brown said, that we seem to get interested in animals only as they slide toward oblivion.

While living Aboriginal Tasmanians were conveniently forgotten, the thylacine underwent an opposite, if equally opportune, transformation. To people convinced of its survival, the animal once derided as clumsy and primitive became almost supernaturally elusive, with heightened senses that allow it to avoid detection. “This is one hell of an animal,” Col Bailey, who is writing his fourth book about the thylacine, and claims to have seen one in 1995, told me. He has a simple explanation for why the tiger hasn’t been found: “Because it doesn’t want to be.”

Last year, the thylacine’s genome was successfully sequenced from a tiny, wrinkled joey, preserved in alcohol for de-

cadec. It was a breakthrough in a long-standing project to revive the species through cloning, an ecological do-over that has been suggested for species from the white rhino to the woolly mammoth. Some critics consider cloning another act of denial in a long line of them—denying even the finality of extinction.

Of all the disagreements among tiger seekers, the most contentious is this: Do they, could they possibly, still live on the Australian mainland? Although thylacines are now synonymous with Tasmania, they lived as far north as New Guinea, and were once found all across Australia. Carbon dating suggests that they have been extinct on the mainland for around three thousand years. That would be a very long time for a large animal to live without leaving definitive traces of its existence. And yet some Aboriginal stories place the tiger closer to the present, and mainland believers contend that there have been many more sightings—by one count, around five thousand—reported on the mainland than in Tasmania.

Thylacine lore in western Australia is so extensive that the animal has its own local name, the Nannup tiger. A point of particular debate is the age of a thylacine carcass found in a cave on the Nullarbor Plain in 1966, so fresh that it still had an intact tongue, eyeball, and striped fur. Carbon dating indicated that it was in the cave for per-



haps four thousand years, essentially mummified by the dry air, but believers argue that the dating was faulty and the animal was only recently dead.

To many Tasmanian enthusiasts, mainland sightings are a frustrating embarrassment that threatens to undermine their credibility; they can be as scathing about mainland theorists as total nonbelievers are about them. “Every time a witness on the mainland says, ‘I found a tiger!,’ it looks like they

filmed it with a potato and it’s a fox or a dog,” Mike Williams, the panther researcher, told me. He pointed out that sarcoptic mange, a skin disease caused by infected mite bites, is widespread in Australian animals, and can make tails look stiff and fur look stripy.

Last year, researchers at James Cook University, in Queensland, announced that they would begin looking for the thylacine in a remote tropical region on Cape York Peninsula and elsewhere in Far North Queensland, at the northeastern tip of Australia, about as far from Tasmania as you can get and still be in the country. The search, using five hundred and eighty cameras capable of taking twenty thousand photos each, was prompted by sightings from two reputable observers, an experienced outdoorsman and a former park ranger, both of whom believed that they had spotted the animal in the nineteen-eighties but had, in the intervening years, been too embarrassed to tell anyone. “It’s important for scientists to have an open mind,” Sandra Abell, the lead researcher at J.C.U., told me as the hunt was beginning. “Anything’s possible.”

In Adelaide, I met up with Neil Waters, a professional horticulturist, who, on Facebook, started the Thylacine Awareness Group, for believers in mainland tigers. Waters, who was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the phrase “May the Stripes Be with You,” told me that he has “a bit more faith in the human condition” than to think that so many people are all deluded or lying. “Narrow-minded approach to life, I call it,” he said. He told me that he also felt a certain ecological responsibility, because his ancestors “were the first white trash to get off a ship, so we’ve been destroying this place for a long time.” His family had been woodcutters, and, for him, becoming a horticulturist was a kind of karmic reparation.

In the dry hills outside the city, we stopped in an area called, appropriately or not, Humbug Scrub, and then picked up Mark Taylor, a musician and a thylacine enthusiast who lived nearby. A few months earlier, Taylor said, his son-in-law and grandson had seen what they described as a dog that hopped like a kangaroo, and Taylor was yearning for a sighting of his own. “It’s becoming one of the bigger things in my life,” he

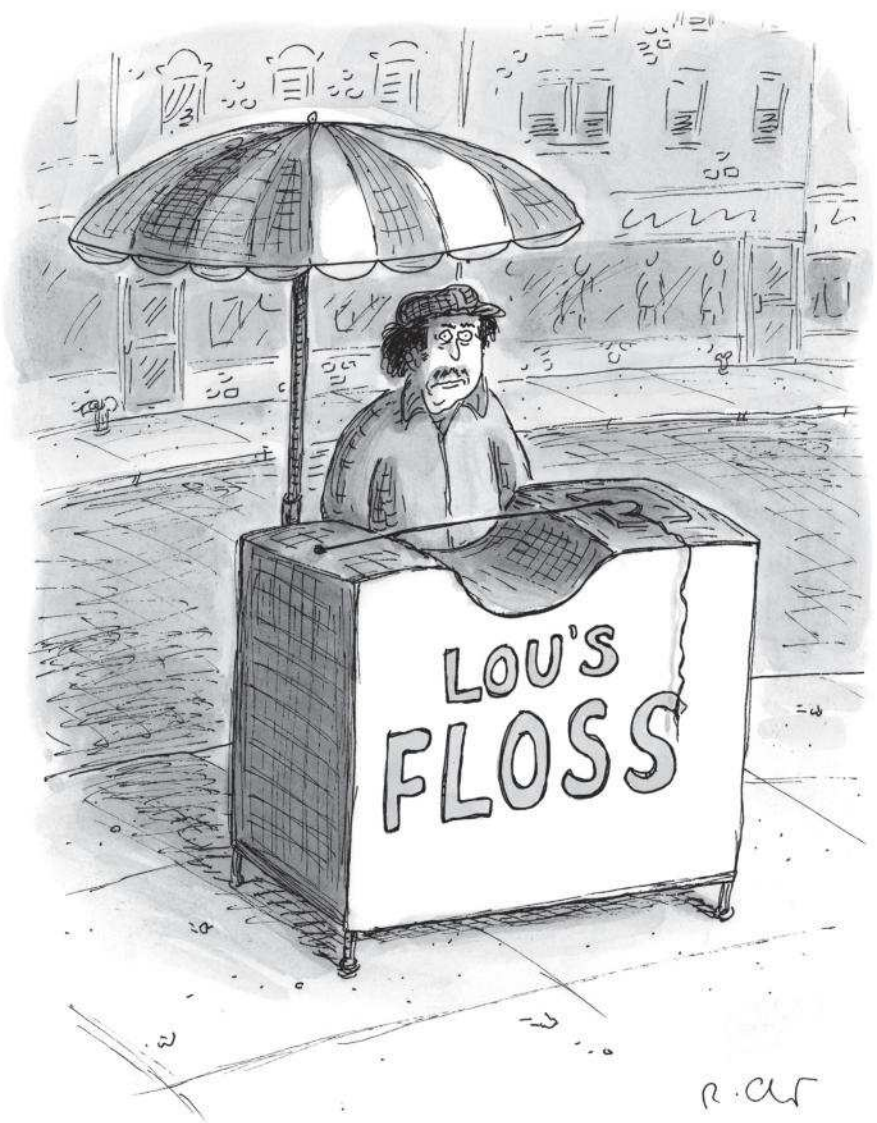


said. Anytime we were near dense brush, he would get animated, saying, "There could be a thylacine in there right now and we'd never know!" Once, just as he said this, there was movement on a distant hillside and he jumped, only to realize that it was a group of kangaroos. The world felt overripe with possibility.

Four weeks earlier, Waters had left a road-killed kangaroo next to a camera in a place where he had found a lot of mysterious scat containing bones. "Shitloads of shit!" he exulted. Now he and Taylor were going to find out what glimpses of the forest's private history the camera had recorded. As they walked, Taylor stopped to gather scat samples for a collection that he keeps in his bait freezer for DNA analysis. "My missus hates it," he said.

The kangaroo was gone, except for some rank fur and a bit of backbone. Waters retrieved the camera from the tree to which he'd strapped it. Taylor was bouncing again. "This is when we hope," he said. Back at the car, we crouched by the open trunk as Waters removed the memory card and inserted it into a laptop. We watched in beautiful clarity as a fox, and then a goshawk, and then a kookaburra fed on the slowly deflating body of the kangaroo. Waters laughed and cursed, but it was clear that no amount of disappointment would dampen his belief. "It's a fucking big country," he said. "There's a lot of needles in that haystack."

I thought of something Bill Flowers, of T.R.U., told me about the first time he set up camera traps in a Tasmanian reserve called Savage River. In terms of the island, where about half the land is protected, the reserve is relatively small. But the forested hills stretched as far as he could see. He began to consider the island not as it appears on maps—small, contained, all explored and charted—but as it would appear to an animal the size of a Labrador, looking for a place to hide. Suddenly, Tasmania seemed big indeed. "You go out and have a look and you start going from skeptic to agnostic very quickly," he said. I heard something similar from many searchers. "It's all very well and good to look at Google Earth and say, la la la, it's not possible for something to be not seen," Chris Tangey, who interviewed two hundred witnesses as part of his own



search, in the late nineteen-seventies, said. "But then you go to those places..." He trailed off, sounding wistful.

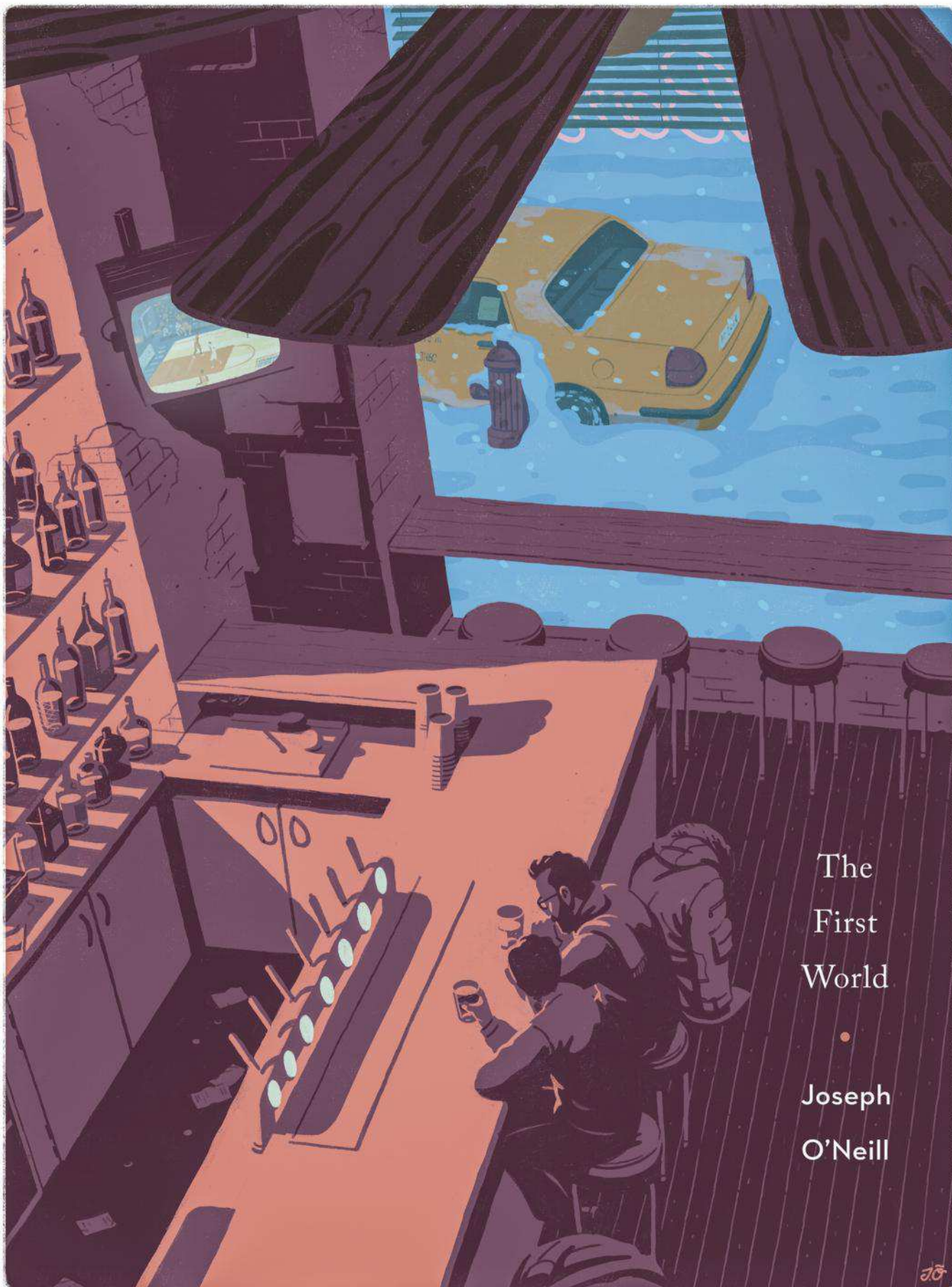
For some people, contemplating the possibility of the thylacine's survival seems to make the world feel bigger and wilder and more unpredictable, and humans smaller and less significant. On a planet reeling from the alarming consequences of human activity, it's comforting to think that our mistakes may not be final, that nature is not wholly stripped of its capacity for surprise. "It puts us in our place a little bit," a mainland searcher named David Dickinson told me. "We're not all-knowing."

After dodos disappeared from Mauritius, in the seventeenth century, naturalists came to believe that the bird had only been a legend. There were drawings and records, sure, but where had it

suddenly *gone*? Extinction was a new and much derided idea. Even Thomas Jefferson refused to believe in it for many years—how could the perfection of nature, of creation, allow such a thing? The evidence of departed species mounted until it was undeniable—dinosaur and mastodon bones were pretty difficult to account for—but it took longer to understand that humans, through their own actions, might be able to overwhelm the abundance of nature and wipe out whole species. That's part of why the Tasmanian tiger became famous in the first place. By the time it disappeared—right on the heels of passenger pigeons, which not long before had blocked out the sun with the immensity of their flocks—we were just beginning to confront the terrible magnitude of our destructive power.

We're still just beginning. ♦





The  
First  
World

•  
Joseph  
O'Neill



My marriage came to an end, with consequences that were almost all beyond my powers of anticipation. One such consequence was that a series of men confided in me about their marriages past or present. These weren't my old buddies—my old buddies suddenly viewed me with a kind of fear. These were guys with whom I'd had friendly but arm's-length dealings: a father at my kids' school; the contractor who was painting my new place; or, to take an astounding case, my dermatologist. Previously his opinions had been restricted to the perils of moles; now he opened up, unprompted, on the pros and cons of monogamy as he'd experienced them. Either these men had heard about my new situation or something about me, some post-apocalyptic air, had led them to sniff it out.

With established friends, my habit was to keep dark marital details to myself. This reticence was intended to protect my reputation, not that of the former spouse. It isn't estimable to air dirty linen. With my newfound brethren, though, I could say what I liked, as could they. Terrible revelations were batted back and forth in a spirit of rueful one-upmanship. I will not forget one fellow, a cheerful and suffering soul who dodged me ever after, making the confession that when his wife got cancer he'd found himself hoping that she would not survive. (She lived. They're still married, as far as I know. By God I wish them well.) Even so, truly intimate disclosures were rare. We dealt in war stories and most of all we dealt in theories—in garrulous, alcoholized attempts to formulate generally applicable propositions about happiness, about mankind versus womankind, about litigation, about anything that might help us understand the world or at least make us feel less flummoxed by it. If I discovered a useful law of living, I can't remember it. The theorists and the warriors vanished forever, save one—Arty. Arty resurfaced.

I was on Ninth Avenue one evening, en route to the subway station. It was late December. Cars bound for the Lincoln Tunnel were backed up and brilliant; a grand artificial star hung over the intersection. A crowd of us was poised to cross the street when

Arty appeared at my side. He said, "Is that who I think it is?"

It was a romantic encounter, you could say, and in the emotion of the moment Arty blurted out, "Let's you and I grab a drink—right now," and I said, "Let's do it." In a significant tone I added, "Let me first get the all-clear."

My wife—we're not married, but that's what I like to call her—was at home with our four-year-old son. I texted her. I showed Arty her response.

"Enjoy!" he read out. With a grave and direct look, he punched me on the shoulder.

Our catastrophic, weirdly euphoric conferences are now almost a decade behind us. It turns out, however, that an advisory ethos still prevails between me and Arty. We've barely taken our seats at the bar when he says, "All is well, my friend, all is well. Life goes on. But there's something I'd like your opinion on."

He has a situation on his hands. It concerns Gladys, the former nanny of his two girls.

I befriended Arty when he was a near-client of the company I used to work for, which dealt in educational software. I got to hear a lot about his kids and his ex. Gladys rings no bells. "Go on," I say.

Gladys looked after Arty's girls from when they were newborns until both were in elementary school. Seven years, in all. Over the course of those years she bottle-fed them, changed their diapers, dressed them, cooked for them, let them eat her lunch, picked them up from preschool and kindergarten, sang to them, reprimanded them, got worn out by them. She gave them love, is what it comes down to, Arty tells me. Then she left. The kids didn't need a nanny anymore. Also, Gladys was pushing sixty and had bad knees: she needed to work with younger, less wayward charges. So she took a job in Chelsea, working for a couple with a baby girl, Billie. It was during the Chelsea job that Arty got divorced and Gladys lost her husband, Roy. Gladys stayed in touch with Arty, dropping by maybe once a year to see Arty's girls when they were over at his place. The girls' mother—

"Paloma, right?"

"Yeah," Arty says, and I can tell, or

maybe I'm imagining, that he's disinclined to repeat the name.

—the girls' mother had cut off contact with Gladys. Gladys's calls and messages to her had gone unanswered.

Arty is expecting me to respond with sympathetic disapproval. I don't respond at all, however. I'm out of practice. Another way to put it might be: I don't want to hear any more stories about rotten behavior or the battle of the sexes or the woe that is marriage. I've moved on. These days I'm all about love's triumph, adversity overcome, the peak scaled, the clarity after the rain.

"Anyway," Arty says. Not long after Arty's divorce, Gladys rang him and asked for a loan—five hundred dollars. "Now, this is a careful, churchgoing woman making twenty bucks an hour, minimum. So I say to her, Gladys, you're short of money? She tells me it's the doctors' bills for Roy. So listen to this: Roy went to the hospital in Brooklyn. He felt sick. They performed some kind of procedure right away and he died under the knife. Sixty-six years of age. A quality guy, by the way. Always had a twinkle in his eye. A carpenter. Then they sent Gladys a bill for a hundred and ten grand."

"Goddam fucking assholes," I say.

"Gladys told me nothing about the bill at the time," Arty says. "Turns out she agreed to a payment plan with the hospital—two hundred and fourteen bucks a month. She tells me she's been paying it for almost two years. I say to her, Gladys, you should have spoken to me about this. This is nuts. This can't go on. They should be paying you for what they did to Roy, not the other way around. But Gladys is waiting for her citizenship application to go through, she's scared of the immigration authorities and she doesn't want to make trouble. So boom—there goes her retirement money."

"Gladys is from where?"

"Trinidad," Arty says. "I lend her the five hundred. I'm not going to see it again, but whatever."

I think I can tell where this is going. "She doesn't have children to help her?"

Arty shakes his head. Gladys has a son, Benjamin, who's in his forties but has never had what you'd call a career. His wife is in the military, so they keep being moved between dead-end Army

towns—in Texas, in North Carolina, in New York—and the wife keeps being posted overseas, and basically Benjamin has been the main hands-on parent of their child, a girl. “I went to their wedding,” Arty says. “Out in Flatbush. At this Jamaican church.” Arty says very intently, “I thought Jamaicans were all about carnivals and ganja. I was expecting a party. But this was like a funeral.” He relates that the minister, the proprietor of the church, began the service by criticizing the congregation for being late. “‘Tardiness,’ he called it,” Arty says. “Tardiness this, tardiness that.” The minister lectured on this subject for an amazingly long time and with an amazing anger, scolding and admonishing and tyrannizing everybody. “I’m looking around to catch someone’s eye—you know, maybe raise an eyebrow—but they’re all just looking straight ahead with these blank faces. They’re scared. They’re frozen with fear.”

Here I want to interrupt him. I want to talk about myself. I have a whole little riff ready to go. Speaking of nannies, I’d like to say to Arty, I’m a dad all over again, which means I’m back on the school run—which means that every morning I’m reliving the nightmare of failing to put names to faces, and sometimes even faces to functions. I recognize people but can’t properly identify them, these caregivers, moms, dads, receptionists, teachers, and children who have every right and expectation to be identifiable. They call me by my name and my little boy by his—and I can’t reciprocate, no matter how much I’d like to. If there is one thing that’s held me back in life, I want to suggest to Arty, if I have an Achilles’ heel, if I have a chink in my armor, it’s this inability to hold on to names and even, increasingly, faces. It was a real stroke of luck (I’d keep this to myself, of course) that Arty, let alone Paloma, emerged from the fog, or the deep, or the forest, or wherever it is everybody has gone.

“Money,” I say to Arty. “The minister wasn’t happy with his fee. So everybody being late made him really mad.”

Arty points a finger at me, as if he’s very impressed by what I just said. He continues, “When Christmas came around, I gave Gladys another couple

of hundred bucks. Not the biggest deal, but not nothing, either.”

Then things began to look up for Gladys. Her citizenship came through, and, when her Chelsea job ended, she felt it was time to retire. She’d turned sixty-five and couldn’t take another New York City winter. She decided to go back to Trinidad, where she hadn’t lived for thirty years.

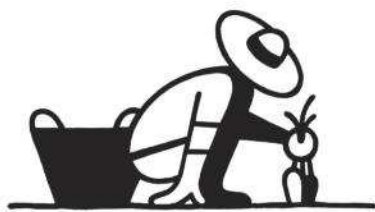
“Trinidad is where, exactly?”

Arty seems not to have heard me. “So this is what I do,” he says. “I’ve got some cash in a savings account from when we sold that shack on the Shore. Eighteen thousand. I give Gladys a retirement gift of two thousand dollars. As a thank-you and a goodbye and a good luck and a have a nice life. She’s got two brothers down there who’re well-to-do, she’s got her Social Security, it is what it is. I’ve done my bit.”

I want to go home. But Arty bought the first round of beers and might feel stiffed if I took off. Two more, I signal to the bartender, and I extract some bills from a buttock pocket.

To repeat: I took the cash from my pocket—I didn’t take it from my wallet. I had lost my wallet.

It happened like this. We were eating out. Our little son fell asleep in the restaurant and it was my job to shoulder him out of there, fast. We had a Via ride arriving, three blocks away, in two minutes. We had to move. That’s when the loss undoubtedly occurred: in



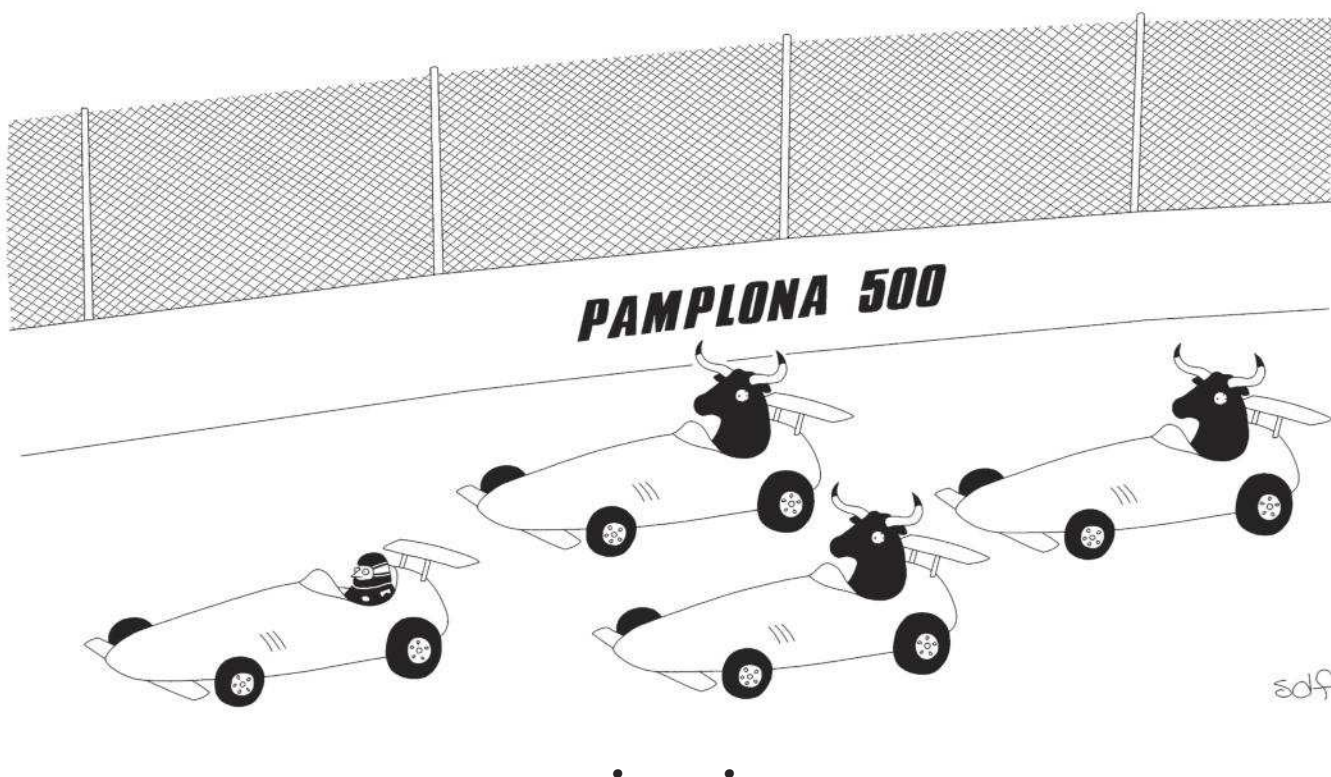
the course of scrambling together our stuff—coats, kids’ books, credit-card receipt, earbuds, scarves, bags, phones, an umbrella—and then hurrying through the rainy and ravening night. The loss did not occur in the restaurant itself—I called them afterward; they’d found nothing—but the conditions of the loss were organized there. Nor did I lose my wallet in the Via. I called the driver the next day and, after the trusty fellow had finally got out of bed in the

late afternoon and gone down to his vehicle and reportedly looked around under the seats, I drew a blank. No—my wallet and I became separated either en route to the Via, in the whistling dark, or during the hike from the Via to our front door, a relatively illuminated undertaking over a single curb and fifteen feet of sidewalk but one nonetheless involving the same chaos of moving items and bodies from A to B and steaming ahead as quickly as possible and getting out of the rain and into our building A.S.A.P. That is what careful reconstruction of the events established.

Part of the problem was my new winter coat. This coat is from Sweden. It is made for the Gulf of Bothnia and the alleyways of Jokkmokk and the lethal zephyrs of Njörðr. Its core purpose is to limit the extreme and dangerous thermal differential between being indoors and being outdoors in a polar climate zone. The coat must be, and is, a kind of wearable house. This presumably explains why it has fifteen pockets. I need only three pockets—four, at most—and I rely precisely on a scarcity of vestimentary storage options to keep track of the three things that I must have on me at all times: wallet, phone, keys. With few pockets, you have almost no option but to repetitively stow your essentials in the same places. The action becomes systematic and dependable. With a surfeit of pockets—of pouches, cavities, and receptacles—you end up stowing things variably and in effect can mislay things on your person; not to mention that it’s harder to find or discern a pocketed article in a coat that has Nordic quantities of stuffing. Patting yourself down to check that you have everything becomes impractical, unless you want to fumble around like an old fool. Basically, if you’re wearing this particular coat and you’re in a rush, you’re in trouble.

Gladys moved to Trinidad, to the town of San Juan. She settled in a two-bedroom, one-story house that had been split in half to accommodate a tenant. Unfortunately for Gladys, the tenant’s rent went to her two brothers in repayment of the expenses they’d incurred in buying and fixing up the





house for Gladys. The brothers ran a construction business and resided as bachelors in a nearby house that had a small swimming pool. There was no prospect of them ever waiving their right to the tenant's rent. For income, Gladys had her Social Security.

About a month after Gladys left for Trinidad, she rang Arty and asked for a loan of two thousand dollars.

Arty didn't ask why she needed the loan. Everybody needs two grand, was his thinking. Why should Gladys be any different? She probably needed fifty grand. Life in Trinidad was expensive. No. 1, it was an island. No. 2, it wasn't the Third World, where ten bucks kept you going for a week. Excluding Mickey Mouse islands, which country had the third-highest G.D.P. per capita in the Americas? Correct: the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Because of oil and gas. At the same time, according to Arty, it wasn't the First World, either. Public transportation, health care, social services—those kinds of things barely existed. Trinidad was wealthy and modern enough to make things expensive but not poor and traditional enough to make things cheap.

Arty in any case didn't like to discuss economics or budgeting with Gladys. If you talked with her long

enough you'd catch glimpses of this conception of God as this King Midas figure who would make you rich if you gave enough of your money to your church. The more you gave away, the richer you'd get. She also had an unrealistic idea, Arty believed, about how much money he had. The person with the big bucks, including a chunk of Arty's money, was Paloma. Paloma was the one with the money-making career and the inherited wealth and the child support. But Gladys perceived Arty in terms of his pre-divorce finances and circumstances, even though she'd visited Arty at his Union City apartment, which had once belonged to his parents; and surely she understood that being a public-school vice-principal wasn't exactly hitting the jackpot.

Anyhow: Arty didn't have another two K to give Gladys. Well, to be accurate, he did—if he'd written the check, the bank would have honored it. But what was he making back then? Ninety-seven? Ninety-eight? Pretty much what he was making today. Now, it was a good living, sure—but it didn't put him in the philanthropist bracket. It didn't exactly put him on easy street. The child support ate up about a third of his income, and then he had to take care of co-op dues, property taxes, com-

muting costs, utilities, car-lease installments, day-to-day parental expenses, and all the other outflows and overheads that never let up and never lessen. That light at the end of the tunnel? That was the approaching express train of college fees for two daughters.

He had an idea. The idea was this: he would put together a consortium of Gladys's old families and get each one to set aside a small, reasonable amount—fifty to a hundred bucks a month, say, whatever they were comfortable with—and pay it into Gladys's retirement fund. It would make no real difference to anyone's life except Gladys's.

Arty was quite excited by this idea. He contacted Gladys's most recent employers, the Chelsea people. They were straightforwardly rich—richer than Arty, that was for sure. He'd heard all about their loft on Fifteenth Street and their place in the Hamptons. The father worked for a bank, the mother for some kind of fashion enterprise; and they had only the one child to provide for, the aforementioned Billie, a photograph of whom Gladys carried in her purse.

He spoke with Billie's mother, Gertie. It was their first conversation since the phone call, six years before, when he'd recommended Gladys to her. Gertie joyfully exclaimed how great it was

Arty next rang the couple that had preceded him and Paloma as Gladys's bosses. He spoke first to the husband, who seemed bewildered. Wait a minute, this guy said to Arty, and the wife took the phone. Arty remembered the wife from her recommendation. On that occasion she'd spoken warmly of Gladys, who not only had worked for the family as a nanny but had lived with them at their Westchester home and done housekeeping work. She had described Gladys as, quote, one of the family, even though—as Arty discovered—she couldn't say which of the is-

The Westchester former employer told Arty right away that they couldn't help Gladys.

Nobody, not even Billie, reached out to Gladys. It fell to Arty to deposit five hundred dollars in her Chase checking account.

Arty had a hard time believing that people could be that compassionless. There had to have been some mistake. He took one last crack at Gertie. This time Gertie responded very coldly. She told Arty that she didn't appreciate being harassed. How she and Gladys managed their affairs was none of his busi-

That was five years ago.

“Whoa,” I say.

I make a show of scratching my face doubtfully.

At last I recall Arty's divorce. Yes—it had involved him being involved with a colleague at the school. It was a love affair. He was very insistent on calling it that—a love affair. That's all I remember about the whole episode.

"O.K.," I say. "Talk to me."

Arty felt manipulated—but so what? Just because Gladys was a little manipulative didn't extinguish the fact that she was a worthy person for whom Arty had a lot of respect and affection. By nature she was a giver, not a taker. She was a provider. That was the injustice of the situation: that his and Gladys's relationship had been contaminated by financial considerations, that Gladys's true nature had been falsified by her material circumstances. This wasn't Gladys's fault. She had done hard, valuable work all her life only to discover that retirement, in the



*"I'll distract him with my complete medical history,  
and then you can make your move."*



advertised sense of putting your feet up and smelling the roses, was beyond her reach. Did Gladys want to be manipulative? Of course not. She wanted to survive.

To boost her income, she took a job in San Juan, as the domestic help for an elderly man, cooking for him and keeping the house straight. For this she got compensation of three U.S. dollars an hour, out of which she had to pay a friend to drive her to work and back. So she was working longer hours than ever for less pay than ever. The old gentleman died after a year or two and that source of income dried up. She was back on Social Security only.

Then her Social Security payments suddenly got smaller—went from six hundred and thirty-seven dollars a month to five hundred and fifteen. Arty looked into it and found that the deduction wasn't an error but a charge for Medicare. A hundred and twenty-two bucks a month might not sound like a fortune, but it was nineteen per cent of Gladys's income. As it was, she incurred significant costs to make use of Medicare: during her yearly trip to the U.S. to visit Benjamin and his family, she had to fit in a detour to New York just to see her doctor.

Before her first such trip, Arty asked Gladys what she was doing about her plane ticket. She told Arty that she knew a guy from church (her new church, in Trinidad) who worked at the airport and that this guy could get her a special deal. How much? Arty asked. Eleven hundred dollars, Gladys said. Arty told her to stand by. He went online and instantly found a round-trip ticket from Port of Spain to New York for three hundred and twenty-seven dollars. He bought Gladys the ticket then and there.

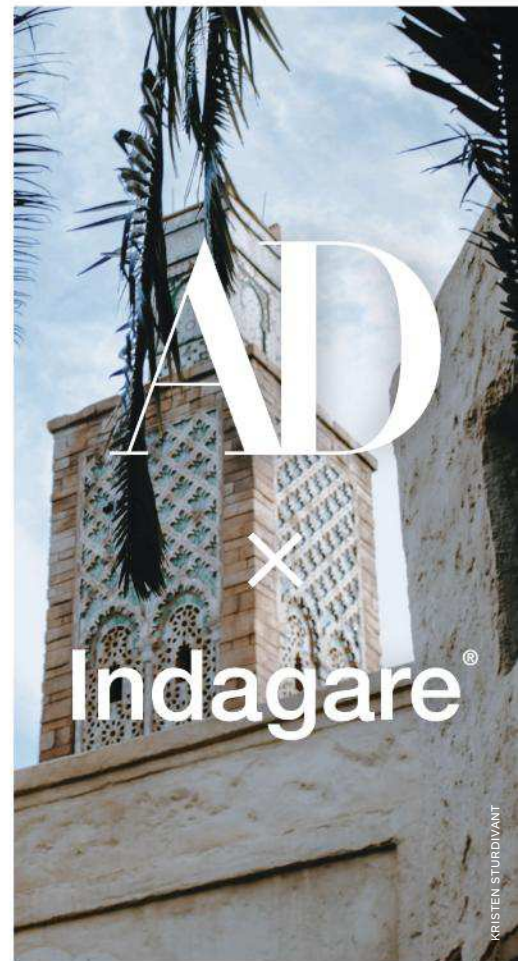
From that moment on, Arty was on the hook for Gladys's plane tickets. It added up. It really did. And it was emotionally trying. The cheap flights that Arty bought usually involved a transfer in Miami or Houston, and Gladys let it be known that she found the stopovers arduous. Because the difference between a non-stop flight and a direct flight could easily be a couple of hundred bucks, Arty had to disappoint her. Likewise, Gladys had preferences about her days of travel, but again Arty could

not always accommodate her, because a Tuesday flight was cheaper than a Sunday one, as was a flight that landed late at night rather than at a reasonable hour. And Gladys, who soon enough became an experienced flier, made it a standard request to ask for a special meal and wheelchair assistance—very doable, yes, but it felt demanding to Arty.

Arty would forward the e-tickets to Gladys's brothers' company, which had an e-mail address. The brothers never thanked Arty, not that Arty was looking for thanks. In all candor, he had a low opinion of the brothers. They lived in comfort right up the hill from Gladys, yet there was no evidence that they took care of their sister, who had spoken very warmly of them when she lived in America but now never mentioned them. The brothers saw themselves as very devout Christians. If there was one thing Arty had learned, it was that faith cannot conceal character. The brothers could go to church as often as they liked, but in Arty's book they just weren't kind people.

Nor was Gladys made to feel especially welcome at Benjamin's home, where the daughter-in-law, the soldier, ruled; and when Gladys came to New York to see her doctor it was always a struggle to find a place to stay. Her church friends had no room at the inn, or, if they did, they would charge Gladys for the use of a bedroom for a few days. In the end, Arty felt he had no option but to host Gladys at his apartment, even though there was only one bathroom and it was chronically occupied by the girls, who were teen-agers now and opposed to Gladys staying with them, as she did, for about a week, during which time Arty would sleep on the sofa and count down the days until he could get a good night's rest and not have to worry about walking around his own home in a state of undress or, horror of horrors, encountering Gladys in a state of undress.

What it came down to, per Arty, was that somehow or other he found himself with another dependent. Gladys was seventy years of age. She was in good health. Not to be morbid about it, but her father had lived to be ninety-nine. Arty was looking at another quarter century of supporting



KRISTEN STURDIVANT

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Gladys. He'd be in his seventies before he got out from under this burden, assuming he lived that long.

What was he to do?

I swallow what's left of my pale ale. It's almost eight o'clock. I really have to be on my way. "You need to go easy on yourself," I tell my former comrade as I get to my feet. "You didn't create this situation. You do what you can for this lady, but that's it. You can't change the facts of life."

With some pleasure, I put on my new coat—my parka, as I should call it. It is so warm and snug that I actually look forward to cold days.

"But the thing is," Arty says, "the thing is, at the end of the day I'm not even talking about the money."

"I know," I tell him.

"Tomorrow I'm going to put a couple of hundred bucks in her bank account," Arty says. "You know what? I'm going to do it with pleasure. It's Christmas, goddammit. But she's going to spend the day alone. She's going to go to church, then go back home, back to her little yard, and watch the TV that's in the yard, and then go inside and watch the TV that's inside. She's going to eat something all by herself. When I call her, she's going to sound in good spirits, but behind it all she'll be suffering. This is a gregarious person. This is a jolly, laughing personality. You'd really warm to her if you met her. And she's going to be all alone for Christmas."

"She's lucky to have you," I say. I'm checking my pockets: my phone is in my zippered left breast pocket and my keys are in my zippered right breast pocket. My wad is in my pants pocket. Do I have my gloves? I do.

"What she really needs, of course, is a companion. I've said to her, straight out, Gladys, can't you find a man to love? But she can't. She misses Roy too much. And, after all that time in America, the local guys aren't to her taste. Too rough, too frivolous, always trying to figure out how much money she has. You could say, Well, maybe she should climb down off her high horse. Maybe she should compromise. But that wouldn't be a fair way to look at it. The thing about Gladys—"

I slap Arty on the shoulder. "I'm hitting the dusty trail."

"Have you heard," Arty says to me, dismounting his barstool, "of the Saharan dust phenomenon? Every spring, these huge clouds of dust from the Sahara blow all the way across the Atlantic to Trinidad. Some years worse than others. I never knew about it until Gladys told me. She has asthma. The dust plays havoc with her breathing. She—"

I hug Arty. "Take care," I say to him, and when I turn away he is still saying stuff. Unless something improbable should happen, these are our adieux.

It was a splendidly chilly evening. All was calm: the cars and buses had returned thousands of workers to homes in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the theatregoers and the diners were contentedly watching shows or eating in restaurants. New York was semi-deserted and suspenseful. I decided to walk the thirty blocks home.

I pulled my fur-lined hood over my head. This parka's cowl is extensive. Through it, one views the world as if from within a cave; and the world is more spectacular and unscientific. So it proved that night—when so many hooded souls walked the streets that one might have thought that an enigmatic, long-hidden order of friars had at last made itself known. At Forty-second Street, snow began to fall in large handsome flakes, each one conveying a small white light to the earth. The falling from the sky of ice crystals is the product of natural rules; but numinous causes and compossibilities now suggested themselves. When the wind forced me to bow my head toward the whitening sidewalk, I fell into an entranced contemplation of the footprints people had trodden into the new snow. I had never been conscious of the remarkable patterns that a shod human makes. I saw that each set of feet left an idiosyncratic, treasurable trace, my own feet included: with every step I took, a boot stamped into snow densely grouped oblongs and polygons, fragments of spirals, and, at the center of all these figures, seemingly exerting an orchestrating or centripetal force, a star. I love our northern snow, and I especially love the brief duration of the soonest, whitest accumulations, when even the frailest branch amasses

a matching white branch and the eye is briefly granted, gratis, an immanent element that is wonderful and, on this particular night, appeared to me as nothing less than a sign from a further and better dimension of being. I ecstatically strode home in the storm. An Amundsen, I was received at the front door with cheers.

I took my son to bed; I read to him from the "Frog and Toad" series; and after lights-out we discussed what was on his mind, which is always filled with beautiful misconceptions. Then he was asleep.

Downstairs, my wife was at the kitchen table, unpacking ordered-in Vietnamese food. As we started eating, I asked her if anything had come for me in the mail. It had not, she said with amusement.

My query was amusing because it related to my wallet. It had been missing for three weeks now. During that time I'd desisted not only from buying a new wallet but even from cancelling or replacing my credit cards and my driver's license and my health-insurance card. My reasoning was that I'd lost a wallet three times previously and twice strangers of good faith had mailed the thing back to me. (The third wallet had disappeared for good, without skulduggery.) As long as nobody was fraudulently using my credit cards—and nobody was—there was a good chance that my wallet and I would be reunited. Obviously, at a certain point that likelihood grew smaller. I'd told my wife I would give it two weeks. That seemed reasonable to me. When two weeks had gone by, I granted the unknown party or parties who might have found my wallet a one-week extension. It was the holiday season, after all. People were unusually busy, and the U.S. Postal Service was busiest of all.

The one-week extension expired that night, as we both knew.

"Well?" she said. "What are you going to do?"

The pho was warm and delicious. I shared this fact with my wife. Regarding the wallet, I told her that I'd wait a little longer. The world would return it. ♦

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Joseph O'Neill on friendships between men.



# THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

## McPOLITICS

*Once, all politics was local. Now all politics is national. Can we survive the shift?*

BY YASCHA MOUNK

Shortly before the 1960 Democratic primary in West Virginia, a close ally of John F. Kennedy's asked Raymond Chafin, the Party chairman in Logan County, how much it would cost to buy his support. "About thirty-five," Chafin said, hoping for a windfall of thirty-five hundred dollars. Meeting Kennedy operatives at a local airstrip,

he was greeted with a nice surprise: thirty-five thousand dollars in cash.

As promised, Chafin used his control over the local Party machine to help deliver the state to the junior senator from Massachusetts. "The Kennedys were well aware of our brand of politics," he said years later. "I guess it was their brand, too."

For much of the twentieth century, the real power in American politics rested not with U.S. representatives or senators but with the governors, mayors, and assemblymen who controlled local purse strings. In many cases, men like Chafin got people elected to Congress in order to reward them for years of loyal service or to rid themselves of

ambitious rivals, but national politics was of comparatively little importance. “The politicians who were crucial to the operation of the organization normally stayed home,” one scholar of the period observed.

At the federal level, the two parties resembled loose associations of disparate interests rather than ideologically cohesive movements. They had few resources and virtually no means of insuring ideological discipline among their members. Many Democrats were more conservative than many Republicans.

All of that had real advantages: Congress was, for much of the past century, a place of remarkable comity, where politicians routinely struck compromises on public spending or judicial appointments. Even as Americans found themselves deeply divided on everything from foreign policy to rock and roll, high politics was relatively free of acrimony.

It was also, however, very difficult for ordinary voters to make their voices heard. West Virginia is sometimes touted as the place where Kennedy overcame the biggest obstacle to his candidacy by proving that religious bigotry was no match for his charm. But only fifteen states and the District of Columbia held primaries in 1960, and their outcome was merely advisory. Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s most serious rival for the Democratic nomination, did not bother entering any of them.

The parties’ lack of ideological definition also made it difficult for citizens to vote their conscience. A liberal who strongly opposed segregation may, for example, have wholeheartedly supported Kennedy. But in voting for him in the general election she would also have voted for a Vice-Presidential nominee, Johnson, who had, as late as 1947, denounced an anti-lynching bill as “a farce and a sham—an effort to set up a police state in the guise of liberty.” (Although Johnson finally backed a civil-rights act in 1957, he allowed amendments that appeased segregationists by rendering it largely unenforceable.) So long as America’s main political parties remained pragmatic associations of local interests, socially progressive Democrats

in the North were yoked to segregationist Democrats in the South. Neither Democrats nor Republicans consistently fought to end Jim Crow. The relative lack of partisanship in postwar politics was purchased at the price of violent exclusion.

Assessing the twin problems of organizational weakness and ideological incoherence, a 1950 report by the American Political Science Association sought to turn the loose political federations into something that more closely resembled today’s unified parties. Democrats and Republicans, some of the nation’s most eminent scholars argued, needed to “provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternatives of action.”

To that end, each party’s candidate was to be determined in a “national presidential primary,” and leaders in Washington were to be given “additional means of dealing with rebellious and disloyal state organizations.” To fix the problems of American government, the scholars believed, politics had to become more national and party platforms more clearly distinguished.

Almost seven decades later, their wish has come true. As Daniel J. Hopkins, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, chronicles in a new book, “The Increasingly United States” (Chicago), American politics has become thoroughly nationalized: voters pay vastly more attention to what is going on in Washington, D.C., than to what’s going on in their own town or state. The Democratic and the Republican Parties have become much more homogeneous, offering largely the same ideological profile in Alabama as they do in Vermont. In each election, Americans now face a choice between two clearly demarcated alternatives of action. The medicine prescribed by the American Political Science Association all those years ago has been taken; the question is whether the patient can survive its side effects.

For the first five days after Kennedy was shot, a mourning nation wondered whether his agenda could possibly outlast him. Even key members of the Cabinet doubted whether Johnson,

hastily sworn in as the thirty-sixth President of the United States aboard the airplane on which his predecessor had landed in Dallas three hours earlier, would follow through on civil-rights legislation. But when Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress on November 27, 1963, he threw down the gauntlet to Southern Democrats. “No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory,” he said, to their horror, “than the earliest possible passage of the civil-rights bill for which he fought so long.”

In the ensuing years, Jim Crow finally came to an end—and so did the highly local party system that had prevailed, in one form or another, since the Civil War. Segregationists in the South no longer saw the Democratic Party as their natural home. In 1968, many of them supported the third-party candidacy of George Wallace, formerly the Democratic governor of Alabama. During the following decades, conservative Democrats slowly gravitated toward the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party, for the first time in its history, became liberal on both social and economic issues: across the nation, Democrats now stood for at least some modicum of wealth redistribution and racial integration.

Republicans underwent a similar transformation, adopting a militant preference for free markets and low taxes while opposing abortion and gay rights. At the same time, they set out to capitalize on the electoral opportunity presented by the schism in the Democratic Party. Starting with Richard Nixon, every Republican candidate who took the White House employed some form of what had been named, in a deceptively genteel turn of phrase, the Southern Strategy.

As the ambitious civil-rights legislation of the nineteen-sixties realigned America’s political parties, a host of deeper structural changes redirected citizens’ attention toward the capital. Thanks to the postwar boom, public jobs came to look less attractive than private ones, weakening the power wielded by local party bosses. More recent changes in the media have also played an important role. Local papers and radio stations, once the country’s dominant sources of information, brought together national, state, and municipal news; as





a result, Americans who were primarily interested in what was going on in Washington still learned a lot about their home towns. Today, voters increasingly get their news from broadcast networks and cable channels, or from social-media sites and online publications, which are less likely to require them to pay attention to their city hall or state capitol.

As early as the nineteen-eighties, political scientists were noting that the nature of American politics was changing in fundamental ways. The power of the Presidency had greatly expanded. The national parties had gained vastly more control over state and local subdivisions. "In the sense that Paris is *the* capital of France," the political scientist William M. Lunch observed in 1987, "Washington is becoming the capital of the United States."

In the decades since, what Lunch dubbed the "nationalization of American politics" has only intensified. As Hopkins shows, voters recognize that state and local politics can have a big impact on their lives, determining, for example, how much property tax they have to pay or how good their children's school is likely to be. And yet they now devote very little attention to politics below the national level.

This transformation can explain many features of contemporary politics that would otherwise be deeply puzzling. How, for instance, could governors in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere refuse to allow the expansion of Medicaid to poor adults in their states, even though the federal government would (at least at first) have footed the entire bill? Hopkins provides an answer that is both simple and convincing: voters, donors, and activists are much more likely to judge elected officials on whether they pass an ideological purity test than on whether they bring tangible benefits to their districts.

In the past few decades, Hopkins shows, Americans have grown less able to name their governor and less likely to vote in local elections. Conversely, they now have much stronger feelings about national figures, like senators or Presidential candidates. If they could choose whether their party got to occupy the White House or the governor's mansion, most would pick the former. Even the attention of the donor class has nationalized. From 1998 to

2012, the amount of money poured into an average Senate race doubled; the cost of governors' races barely budged.

Once upon a time, every community in America had its own store with its own local products. Today, chains like Walmart and Home Depot offer the same wares all over the country. The parties, Hopkins believes, have undergone a similar process of homogenization: "Just as an Egg McMuffin is the same in every McDonald's, America's two major political parties are increasingly perceived to offer the same choices throughout the country."

Americans aren't just less interested in local politics than they once were; their voting behavior is also much less determined by their place of residence or by the attributes of a particular candidate. It's true that a voter's home town or home state can help predict which party she supports. But, as Hopkins explains, party affiliation is influenced more by factors like race and religion than by local interests or political traditions. Once we know a voter's demographic information, finding out where she lives helps little to predict her political behavior. A white, evangelical, middle-aged woman who earns fifty thousand dollars a year and has two children is scarcely more likely to vote Republican today if she lives in Springfield, Missouri, than if she lives in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Hopkins is a sure-footed guide to the twilight of local politics, and he's aware of the risks that these developments may pose. Voters' focus on national issues, he points out, is likely to "crowd out more local concerns." And since most Americans pay little attention to local politics and are likely to vote for just about any candidate who shares their party affiliation, mayors and governors no longer have as much reason to place the needs of their constituents over those of special-interest groups: "Their actions in office might well reflect the wishes of the people most likely to advance their careers, whether they are activists, donors, or fellow partisans from other states."

But Hopkins fails to ponder the most important implications of his own findings. Anybody who has looked on as Donald Trump accused the opposition of "treason" and denigrated the press as "the enemy of the American people" might find the title of Hopkins's book

perplexing. Yet "The Increasingly United States" has surprisingly little to say about the way in which the growing focus on national politics and the deepening partisan divide could undermine the stability of our political system.

When the Founding Fathers set out to design the institutions that still structure our national life, they had every reason to fear that their enterprise would end in failure. By the late eighteenth century, monarchy had conquered most of the Western world. The last republics to survive the early modern era, like the Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia, were engulfed in strife at home and imperilled by powerful competition from abroad. Institutions that aimed at collective self-government had all but vanished. So the drafters of the Constitution, as they set out to defy the odds, naturally asked themselves what went wrong for the many republics that had come—and gone—before them.

The diagnosis they arrived at was simple: those predecessors—Athens and Rome, Florence and Siena—had been undone by "the violence of faction." As James Madison wrote in the *Federalist Papers*:

The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice. . . . The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished.

Madison's solution to the problem of what we might call partisanship fundamentally shaped America. Many polities, he pointed out, had simply tried to remove its cause—either through the destruction of liberty, a remedy he termed "worse than the disease," or through an attempt to give every man the same opinions, an undertaking he thought futile "as long as the reason of man continues fallible." In a piece of madcap logic that has come to set the tone for the country's freewheeling cultural and political life, Madison instead insisted that America should resolve the problem of factions by multiplying their number: the more factions there are, he argued, the less likely that any one of them can attain dominance.

Although Madison failed to anticipate

the rise of modern parties, the country's politics followed something like the model he had envisaged until late into the twentieth century. At the time of Kennedy's election, Southern Democrats intent on perpetuating segregation clashed with Northern Democrats focussed on the economic conditions of the working class, Northern Democrats clashed with country-club Republicans focussed on the interests of business, country-club Republicans clashed with socially conservative Republicans opposed to the evils of modern life, and so on. Even the things that politicians from different parts of the country did have in common—self-interest and a taste for patronage—reliably turned them into competitors on the national scene. (As Lunch put it, “Mayor Daley did not care very much what the president did in foreign policy, but he wanted assurances that when federal funds were divided, Chicago would receive its share.”)

Today, this messy process of brokering flawed compromises among a large number of factions and interest groups has mostly given way to a stark conflict between two opposing camps. According to a recent study by the political scientists Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood, Americans may now be more likely to discriminate on the basis of party than on the basis of race: asked to choose between equally qualified scholarship applicants, Democratic and Republican participants alike heavily favored applicants who were identified as belonging to the same political party they did. White participants in the study were much less likely to penalize an applicant for being black than participants of one party were to penalize applicants of the other.

As Lilliana Mason argues in a sobering new book, “Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity” (Chicago), factors such as class, race, religion, gender, and sexuality used to cut across one another to a significant extent. In an earlier age, a voter might have identified herself as both a conservative and a Presbyterian. Each of these identities predisposed her to have a negative opinion of people who did not belong to the same group. But since there were plenty of non-Presbyterian conservatives, as well as plenty of non-conservative Presbyterians, each of these “cleavages” held the other one in check.

In the past decades, though, “partisan, ideological, religious, and racial identities have . . . moved into strong alignment,” Mason writes. Religious communities, for example, are far less politically diverse than they once were: “A single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference *as well as* his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood and favorite grocery store.” As a result, Mason argues, all those factions have fused into two new mega-identities: Democrat and Republican.

A few months after the American Political Science Association called on Democrats and Republicans to transform themselves into truly national, ideologically cohesive parties, Arthur Schlesinger published an impassioned retort:

Is not the fact that each party has a liberal and conservative wing a genuine source of national strength and cohesion? . . . The result is, of course, that no group can have the desperate feeling that all options are foreclosed, all access to power barred, by the victory of the opposition: there will always be somebody in a Democratic administration on whose shoulders business can weep, and even a Republican administration will have somewhere a refuge for labor. If the party division were strictly ideological, each presidential election would subject national unity to a fearful test. We must remember that the one election when our parties stood irrevocably on questions of principle was the election of 1860.

Schlesinger's words have proved prophetic. The conviction that a victory by Hillary Clinton would permanently bar conservatives from power was a core theme among some of the loudest advocates of the movement's accommodation with Trumpism. Michael Anton, in his *Claremont Review* essay “The Flight 93 Election,” saw “the ceaseless importation of Third World foreigners with no tradition of, taste for, or experience in liberty” as an imminent threat to the survival of the American republic. With his team's total and permanent defeat supposedly on the horizon, Anton advocated the kind of high-stakes gamble taken by passengers on the airliner that crashed into a field in Stonycreek Township, Pennsylvania, on 9/11:

Charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway. You—or the leader of your party—may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees. Except one: if you don't try, death is certain.

Liberals, though appalled by Anton's race-tinged rhetoric, often share his assessment of the situation: they, too, believe that democracy's fate now hinges on the next election. This is worrying: you can reject the idea that Democrats and Republicans are equally to blame for the breakdown of civility in American politics—or that Hillary Clinton posed as much of a threat to the rules and norms of liberal democracy as Donald Trump does—and still recognize that a situation in which partisans on both sides think that they face existential stakes every four years is not sustainable for very long.

As Robert A. Dahl argued, developing democracies in their early years often avoid ferocious factionalism by restricting participation in their political institutions to a comparatively small set of people. But, over time, one excluded group after another can win inclusion in those same institutions—like poor white men, former slaves, and women, in the United States. Not for the first time, that greater inclusion, personified by President Barack Obama, has now bred a potent backlash.

It is tempting to take this as evidence in support of a deeply pessimistic interpretation of the country's past and its likely future: any robust attempt to remedy social injustice will inevitably lead those who have immense privileges to reverse the tide of progress or even to jettison their commitment to shared political institutions. But past periods of majoritarian backlash haven't fully turned back the clock. The resistance to Reconstruction gave this country the intolerable reality of segregation—but it did not reintroduce chattel slavery. The resistance to the civil-rights agenda of the nineteen-sixties perpetuated forms of both economic and political discrimination—but it did not reestablish segregation. In the same way, resistance to the full participation of women, immigrants, sexual minorities, and African-Americans in the nation's public life may have helped give rise to Trump—but it is very unlikely to undo the vast changes of the past fifty years.

As politics has become more national, it has overcome many of the problems that political scientists bemoaned in the early nineteen-fifties. People now cast their votes to advance

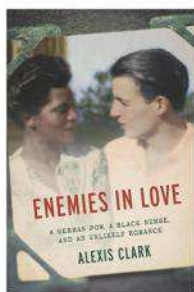


their political ideology, not to get a public job. They can rest assured that their support for a liberal Presidential candidate will not elect a conservative Vice-President (or vice versa). But so long as all politics was local, as Tip O'Neill famously insisted, it also performed an important service to the republic. Fights over property taxes and subway lines gave rise to competing interests and idiosyncratic alliances, helping to turn Madison's logic of defeating factionalism through the proliferation of factions into daily political reality. The true danger of Americans' fading interest in local politics is not, as Hopkins would have it, that weighty matters like roads or schools will go ignored. It is that a politics in which all Americans fancy themselves bit actors in the same great drama of state, cheering or jeering an identical cast of heroes and villains, is much more likely to split the country into two mutually hostile tribes.

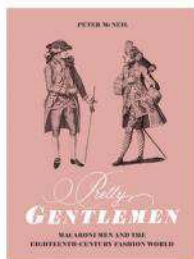
The nationalization of American politics has led to the rise of two political mega-identities. But it does not foreordain that they will be incapable of finding common ground, or that the current period of intense partisanship will go on forever. In the past, times of heightened animosity have often been followed by periods of unexpected calm. Ordinary citizens are less polarized in their opinions than the political parties in Washington; many long for moderation. And, despite the central role that attacks on minorities played in Trump's campaign, most Americans have grown more, not less, tolerant of compatriots who do not share their ethnicity, their religion, or their sexual orientation.

In ways that Schlesinger anticipated, the deep divide between supporters and opponents of President Trump is subjecting national unity to a fearful test. The danger that a highly nationalized and deeply partisan politics poses to American institutions is undoubtedly real. But, just as it would be naïve to pretend that a happy ending is assured because our political institutions have managed to incorporate new groups in the past, so, too, would it be cynical to conclude that America is too riven with conflict—or too rotten with injustice—to be redeemed. ♦

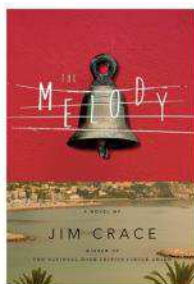
## BRIEFLY NOTED



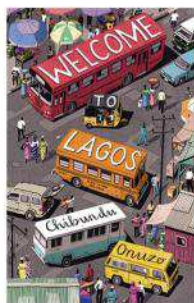
**Enemies in Love**, by Alexis Clark (*New Press*). When Elinor Powell and Frederick Albert fell in love, in 1944, it was under less than ordinary circumstances. She was an African-American nurse, working at a segregated U.S. Army base in Arizona; he was a German P.O.W. whose only encounter with black America was through jazz recordings. Frederick saw the statuesque Elinor in the dining hall and said, "I'm the man who is going to marry you." Working from official records and family reminiscences, Clark recounts this improbable romance and the hurdles the couple overcame within a larger, more sobering story of sexism and racism in postwar America and Germany. Intensely guarded, the couple prohibited any discussion of racial identity at home; Clark describes the effect of this erasure on their children.



**Pretty Gentlemen**, by Peter McNeil (*Yale*). In the latter half of the eighteenth century, a new subculture emerged in England: the outlandishly dressed "macaroni men," who flaunted a proto-dandy brand of masculinity that was often mocked as effeminate. Using sources such as caricature and poetry, this history examines the trend's social, political, gender, and economic implications, and claims for it a role in the construction of English national identity. The macaroni style, brought from Italy and France by men who had made the Grand Tour, proved hard to integrate into English society, which was unused to such frippery. For every aristocratic youth excited to emulate the new fashions radiating from London, there was another whose first reaction was to stuff a mouse into a macaroni's wig bag.



**The Melody**, by Jim Crace (*Nan A. Talese*). Set on the Mediterranean coast, this novel traces the fluctuating emotions of an aging singer, known as Mister Al, after his wife's death. A figure of local distinction, he is shaken by a violent attack at the hands of mendicants, by lust for his stylish sister-in-law, and by the importunities of a nephew who wants to raze his villa and build an apartment complex in its place. The dénouement, which involves a burial offering in a park that was the site of a childhood trauma, hints at a new start, but Crace has drawn a pointillist portrait of a man reckoning with "how old age was blizzardied with all the debris of our days."

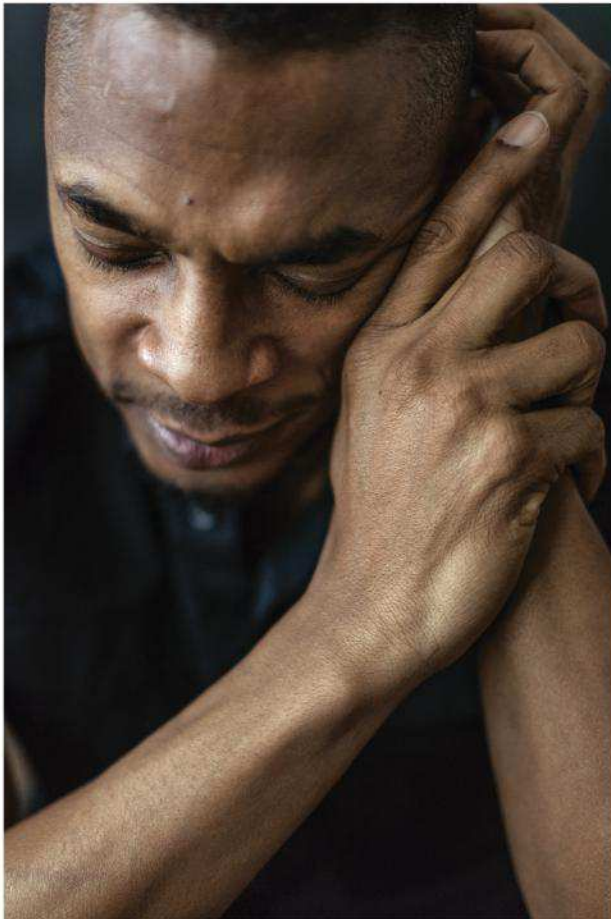


**Welcome to Lagos**, by Chibundu Onuzo (*Catapult*). In this novel, a motley band of provincials, army deserters, and disenchanted elites descend on Nigeria's largest city, and story lines and twists abound. But action is secondary to atmosphere: Onuzo excels at evoking a stratified city, where society weddings feature "ice sculptures as cold as the unmarried belles" and thugs write tidy receipts for kickbacks extorted from homeless travellers. She adeptly captures, too, how a babel of evangelical prayers, muezzins' calls, Yoruba greetings, and pidgin conversations gives way to quiet moments: a lonely newspaperman eats dinner over his kitchen sink, a gentle romance blossoms over Bible study, and homemade rafts navigate the outskirts of the city, their plastic-bag sails hovering—"cloud-lets, above the water."

# SONNETS AND BULLETS

*The politics and play of Terrance Hayes.*

BY DAN CHIASSON



The day after the 2016 Presidential election, Terrance Hayes wrote the first of the seventy sonnets collected in his new book, “American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin.” Time had been altered in some baleful and uncertain way; the sonnet offered an alternative unit of measurement, at once ancient, its basic features unchanged for centuries, and urgent, its fourteen lines passing at a brutal clip. These crisis conditions suit Hayes. A former college basketball star, he treats poetry like a timed game, a theatre for dramatic last-minute outcomes. He freelances inside a form he calls “part music box, part meat grinder,” fashioning a diary

of survival during a period when black men are in constant danger.

Hayes, who is forty-six, won the 2010 National Book Award and is a professor at N.Y.U. In his five books, he has perfected a sort of poem where wild jams carom inside arbitrary formal boundaries. For this latest collection, he made one big choice at the outset: all the sonnets share the same title, “American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin.” This repetition is superstitious, a tribute paid to the imagined assassin, as if the poems can buy back time in fourteen-line reprieves. Like a coin toss that keeps coming up heads, iterated titles suggest an

*Hayes’s poems describe the black body—both fetishized and criminalized.*

occult lucky streak bound to break.

The “assassin” takes many shapes: a stinkbug, the gang that lynched Emmett Till, a bunch of white girls posing for selfies, Donald Trump, and, unsettlingly, Hayes’s own reflection. These adversaries, dreamed up in Hayes’s poems, are also confined there: “I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,/Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.”

The conflict between flight and confinement is built into the form he has chosen. The sonnet, an Italian contrivance adapted by the poets of the English Renaissance, was handed down to twentieth-century writers like Robert Lowell and Gwendolyn Brooks and self-consciously Americanized—its gait loosened, its politics sharpened. Hayes’s direct inspiration is the L.A. poet Wanda Coleman, who died in 2013 and who coined the term “American sonnet.” Coleman adapted the sonnet to the jazz methods of, as she put it, “progression, improvisation, mimicry, etc.” Hayes’s style is warier than Coleman’s. “I’m not sure how to hold my face when I dance,” he writes: “In an expression of determination or euphoria?”

And how should I look at my partner: in  
her eyes  
Or at her body? Should I mirror the rhythm  
of her hips,  
Or should I take the lead? I hear Jimi  
Hendrix  
Was also unsure in dance despite being  
beautiful  
And especially attuned. Most black people  
know this  
About him. He understood the rhythm of  
a delta  
Farmer on guitar in a juke joint circa 1933,  
as well  
As the rhythm of your standard bohemian  
on guitar  
In a New York apartment amid daydreams  
of jumping  
Through windows, ballads of footwork,  
Monk orchestras,  
Miles with strings.

Hendrix, his blues pedigree white-washed by hippie culture, is a powerful figure of passionate ambivalence, “unsure” how to dance in a way that is both black and not black. The “standard bohemian” listeners are like the “angel-headed hipsters” in Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl.” They dream of melodramatic self-destruction—“jumping/Through windows”—while the culture around



them works to extinguish black artistry.

In the lines from “Howl” that, I suspect, Hayes has in mind, you can see how blackness is used as a prop. Ginsberg’s comrades “sang out of their windows in despair,” “jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes,” and “danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records.” The white bohemians have the freedom to go on benders and sprees, while Hayes must wonder how “to hold my face.” He is not afraid of looking goofy; he is afraid of being murdered.

This is one of the deepest accounts I have read in poetry of what it feels like to have one’s body fetishized as an object but criminalized as a force. “There never was a black male hysteria,” a poem about Emmett Till begins, “because a fret of white men drove you crazy/Or a clutch of goons drove you through Money,/ Stole your money, paid you money, stole it again.” In Money, Mississippi, where Till was lynched, Hayes finds in miniature the economic formula that has been scaled up successfully across America: black men are paid with money stolen from their ancestors, only to have it again taken away from them. They must withstand humiliating sexual “reviews” to participate in the economy at all:

There was black male review for ladies night  
At the nightclub. There was black male  
review  
By suits in the offices, the courts &  
waiting rooms.  
There was black male review in the weight  
rooms  
Where coaches licked their whistles.

A white reader of these poems has to think hard about his own commodified analysis of them. This thing I’m writing is, after all, also called a review.

Hayes’s sonnets emerge out of a sense of peril, and the evasiveness and protectiveness it requires. He envies poets who have the luxury of wandering into all corners of American life. “I wish I were as tolerant as Walt Whitman,” Hayes wrote in a poem from an earlier volume, “but I want to be a storm covering a Confederate parade.” Whitman’s freedom to waltz “across the battlefield like a song” does not exist for a black poet in America. The sonnet clips its author’s wings—and yet a wide sam-

ple of appetites and aversions, vices and virtues, sneaks into it. Hayes finds Whitman’s range without his privilege in a mostly alphabetized sonnet full of threats and phobias:

All cancers kill me, car crashes, cavemen,  
chakras,  
Crackers, discord, dissonance, doves, Elvis,  
Ghosts, the grim reaper herself, a heart  
attack  
While making love, hangmen, Hillbillies  
exist,  
Lilies, Martha Stewarts, Mayflower  
maniacs,  
Money grubbers, Gwen Brooks’ “The  
Mother,”  
(My mother’s bipolar as bacon), pancakes  
kill me,  
Phonies, dead roaches, big roaches & smaller  
Roaches, the sheepish, snakes, all seven  
seas,  
Snow avalanches, swansongs, sciatica, Killer  
Wasps, yee-haws, you, now & then,  
disease.

Anybody who has sat down, as I have, to make a list of things that at any given moment could kill him knows that the possibilities are potentially endless, the anxiety correspondingly boundless. The alphabet, like the sonnet, necessitates at least some shaping and pruning. This grim audit is amusing to figure out: the “Z” is hidden in “disease”; the only “X” I can locate is in the word “exist.” Hayes nods to Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “The Mother,” about abortion, and invokes Robert Lowell, the “Mayflower maniac,” whose unrhymed sonnets are a shadow text for this book. The “you, now & then” of the last line is, I take it, the reader and also the assassin. But I hear, too, an affectionate nod to a lover. “You kill me” can be a compliment.

There are formal and rhetorical puzzles in nearly every one of Hayes’s poems. Sometimes he uses sonnets to stump the reader: “This word can be the difference between knowing/ And thinking. It’s the name people of color call/ Themselves on weekends & the name colorful/ People call their enemies & friends.” Or, in the manner of a personals ad, to invite her closer: “A brother versed in spiritual calisthenics/ And cowboy quiet seeks funny, lonesome,/ Speculative or eye-glassed lass.” Alongside these gamelike poems—there is a sonnet about Scrabble—are tributes to Emily Dickinson and Langston

Hughes, an appreciation of James Baldwin’s face, and the first #MeToo-era elegy I’ve ever read, working through the legacy of Derek Walcott. There are beautiful, personal poems about Hayes’s father and the consequences of being abandoned by him.

Trump is a palpable undercurrent throughout the book, and occasionally Hayes addresses the President directly, calling him “Mr. Trumpet”:

... You ain’t allowed to deride  
Women when you’ve never wept in front  
of a woman  
That wasn’t your mother. America’s  
struggle with itself  
Has always had people like me at the heart  
of it. You can’t  
Grasp your own hustle, your blackness, you  
can’t grasp  
Your own pussy, your black pussy dies for  
touch.

The poem breaks down the various oppositions—black and white, men and women—that “Mr. Trumpet” reinforces. It’s powerful because it’s not an invective so much as a diagnosis. The prognosis does not seem promising.

Hayes’s talkative poems are, in fact, a form of thinking, fuelled by opposing impulses and contradictory ideas. These poems all happen in the mind, which has been portioned into zones called “I” and “you.” Both assume countless different roles, but what remains constant is their reliance upon each other and their tendency to flip positions. This makes the work morally ambiguous in ways some readers will resist: I suspect that not everybody will recognize “blackness” as any part, even a rejected part, of Trump, a man whose loathing of black people seems unabashed.

Perhaps easier to fathom is the notion that Hayes has so internalized the threat of execution that he sees his assassin in the mirror. “Assassin, you are a mystery/ To me, I say to my reflection sometimes,” Hayes writes, acknowledging the part anyone plays in his own existential undoing. But Hayes isn’t describing canonical melancholy, the pined-for vision of mortality that poets sometimes indulge in. He fears a more immediate kind of danger, which can’t be aestheticized or glorified in verse. “You are beautiful because of your sadness,” Hayes admits. And yet: “You would be more beautiful without your fear.” ♦

## FROM THE ASHES

*After a winter of wildfires, wild sounds return to the Ojai Festival.*

BY ALEX ROSS

The wildfires that consumed large tracts of Southern California last December came close to ravaging the rustic-bohemian town of Ojai, which has long been the seat of the Ojai Music Festival, America's most vibrant new-music gathering. Advancing from the north, the east, and the south, the fires got within a few miles of the town before a determined fire-fighting effort and a lucky shift in the wind held them back. Today, if you survey the Ojai Valley from an overlook you will see charred mountainsides looming over an island of green. Not surprisingly, the 2018 festival, which took place over four days in early June, felt different from past editions, which have unleashed wild sounds in idyllic surroundings. The idyll remained, but it seemed more fragile this time. The sounds could be heard as flashbacks or as forebodings.

The Moldovan-born violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, this year's music director, had selected her programs long before December, but they spoke with eerie aptness to a town that had faced an apocalypse. The central composer was the twentieth-century Russian ascetic Galina Ustvolskaya, who wrote spiritual music of flagellating force. A world premiere by the Baltimore-based composer Michael Hersch harrowingly evoked the spread of cancer in a body. Works by György Ligeti and György Kurtág mixed bleakness with black humor. The concerts were heavy going at times, but Kopatchinskaja invested them with vital purpose.

Kopatchinskaja, who is forty-one, is a fascinating musician with a fascinating mind. She is the child of two Moldovan folk-music specialists, both of whom joined their daughter at Ojai to play traditional tunes and dances. In 1989, the family emigrated from Moldova to Austria, where Kopatchinskaja studied violin and composition. She



*The violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja has a free-spirited style.*

has become known for her free-spirited performing style—she sways about, roams the stage, and sometimes goes barefoot—and for her provocative takes on the classics. Her account of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto follows the score but has the feel of an improvisation. She has developed semi-theatrical concert programs that weave together works of many periods, and she aggres-

sively campaigns on behalf of her favorite contemporary composers, who seldom fall into the easy-listening category. She is sometimes solemn, sometimes whimsical, sometimes both. She opened the festival with Luigi Nono's 1989 score "La Lontananza Nostalgica Utopica Futura," an avant-garde tour de force for violin and electronics, and she played a section of it while standing atop a picnic table in Ojai's town park.

Not all of Kopatchinskaja's ideas cohered. On the first night of the festival, she presented a program entitled "Bye Bye Beethoven," which protested classical music's excessive dependence on the past—the sense of being "strangled by tradition," as she has said. The Mahler

Chamber Orchestra, a versatile Berlin-based group that was on hand throughout the festival, accompanied Kopatchinskaja in a most unusual performance of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, in which the soloist was ceremonially swaddled in yards of fabric before she played. (Her arms were not constrained, fortunately.) Toward the end, the musicians enacted a rebellion against routine, throwing down their music stands and stalking off-stage while a chaotic electronic collage of Beethoven excerpts swelled on the sound system. Kopatchinskaja battled on alone and then collapsed in defeat, as the back wall parted to reveal replicas of various composers' tombstones.

The theatrics were arresting, but the message felt less than fresh. Just a few weeks earlier, I'd heard Beethoven's "Fidelio" blown up in similar fashion, in an adventurous production by the Heartbeat Opera. As several Ojai regulars pointed out, an anti-canonical message is superfluous at Ojai, which has celebrated the new since Igor Stravinsky and Pierre Boulez were honored guests. What did impress me, though, was Kopatchinskaja's commitment to her role. She conveyed the



agony of a creative artist who is torn between her devotion to new work and the prevailing pressure to stick with familiar fare.

A concert entitled “Dies Irae” was more convincing, albeit mildly terrifying. The old medieval chant, which begins “Day of wrath, that day turns the world to ash,” was framed as a warning of political and environmental catastrophe. The program began with an ingenious intermingling of movements from Heinrich Biber’s 1673 piece “Battalia,” an evocation of the Thirty Years’ War, and George Crumb’s 1970 “Black Angels,” a white-hot response to Vietnam. Portents of doom thundered from a septet of improvising trombones. The centerpiece of the program was Ustvolskaya’s Composition No. 2, “Dies Irae” (1973), which features eight grinding double basses, a hyper-dissonant piano, and a wooden cube being thwacked with two hammers. The percussionist Fiona Digney, pummelling a conspicuously coffin-like apparatus, made a sound to wake the dead. At the conclusion came a portion of Ligeti’s “Poème Symphonique for 100 Metronomes,” in which the instruments expire one by one. At Ojai, musicians held the metronomes while standing in the aisles. The final image was of two children staring out at the audience, one holding the last surviving metronome. The message landed with all the subtlety of Ustvolskaya’s hammer, yet I’ll not soon forget the image.

Hersch’s new piece, a seventy-five-minute vocal cycle entitled “I Hope We Get a Chance to Visit Soon,” caused dissent in the legendarily open-minded Ojai audience: some were deeply moved, others repulsed. Its main text is drawn from e-mails that Hersch received from his friend Mary O’Reilly as she was dying of cancer. One soprano declaims these words while another sings settings of poems by Rebecca Elson, who tells of a similar struggle, in more oblique terms. The unvarnished intimacy of O’Reilly’s language—“I had a rather scary conversation with my oncologist”—made it difficult to find aesthetic distance, though this was perhaps the point: we were being shown the raw material for a work of art alongside its poetic elaboration.

Hersch’s music is harsh, relentless, and often deliberately lacking in contrast, but it is gripping in its dogged progress.

Skilled collaborators joined Kopatchinskaja’s quest. Ah Young Hong and Kiera Duffy were transfixing soloists in the Hersch; Hong also gave a commanding performance of Kurtág’s “Kafka Fragments.” The avant-garde virtuosos of the JACK Quartet were bewitching not only in their usual diet of Morton Feldman and Horațiu Rădulescu but also in several of John Dowland’s “Lachrimae,” masterpieces of Renaissance melancholy. Most stupendous was the pianist Markus Hinterhäuser, who, in his spare time, runs the Salzburg Festival. On a blisteringly hot afternoon at the Libbey Bowl, Ojai’s open-air arena, Hinterhäuser sat for an hour and played Ustvolskaya’s six piano sonatas—as staggering a pianistic feat as I’ve seen in recent years. He brought out their violence: the cluster chords, the pounding of high and low registers, the monomaniacal repetition. He also brought out their tenderness, their shards of song. He has traversed the cycle many times, and will do so again this summer, in Salzburg. Only in Ojai, one guesses, has an elderly audience member come up to him in tears, thanking him for the experience.

The new-music scene in Southern California is sufficiently active that there is no need to import Europeans to tackle demanding fare. At Ojai, members of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra offered a selection of Luciano Berio’s *Sequenzas*—fourteen showpieces for solo performers. These were generally well done, but they lacked the specific fire of a *Sequenzas* concert that I saw last fall at the Los Angeles venue Monk Space, involving local musicians. The diabolically inventive trombonist-composer Matt Barbier, who played “Sequenza V” at that event, participated in the “Dies Irae” clamor in Ojai; Scott Worthington, a double bassist who creates spare, glimmering soundscapes, handled the electronics in the Nono. Ojai could make better use of local talent: Southern California has its own distinctive community of composers and allied artists, who

sway between uproarious and meditative modes.

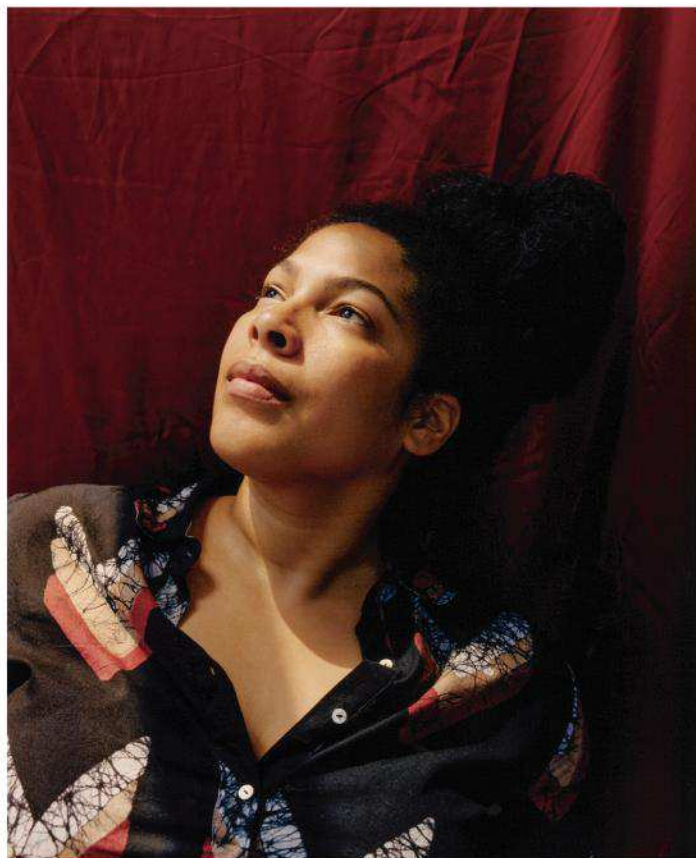
In the same period as Ojai, the fourteenth edition of a festival called the Dog Star Orchestra unfolded at venues in and around L.A. This is the brainchild of the veteran experimental composer Michael Pisaro, who teaches at CalArts, northwest of the city. Pisaro specializes in quiet, spacious music that frequently samples or mimics natural sounds. In August, the Mostly Mozart Festival, at Lincoln Center, will present his work “a wave and waves,” which summons an oceanic murmur from microscopic noises, such as seeds dropping on glass or paper being torn. A Dog Star event at the Coaxial Arts Foundation, in downtown L.A., featured Pisaro’s “Beings, Heat and Cold,” in which performers extract sounds from miscellaneous objects that they have retrieved from streets around the venue. On this occasion, the instrumentation included a traffic cone, a chunk of Styrofoam, a twig, a rock, and a discarded bassinet with a music box attached. Later, the performers elicited daubs of tone from conventional instruments, as if translating those found objects into spectral music.

Another Dog Star event took place in the Mueller Tunnel, a structure on a fire road in the San Gabriel Mountains, northeast of L.A. Several dozen people hiked a mile from the main road to witness a rendition of Heather Lockie’s conceptual piece “Song to Be Performed in a Tunnel in Your Town,” for seven female vocalists. Attired in white dresses, the singers proceeded in shifting formations from one end of the tunnel to the other, emitting ethereal timbres, playing chiming percussion, and scraping rocks against the walls. One vocalist sang Merle Travis’s “Dark as a Dungeon,” a coal miner’s lament. In the final moments, the performers walked into the light at the far end of the tunnel and disappeared around the bend of a mountain path. This felt like an emanation from the California of the nineteen-twenties, when spiritual seekers settled in towns like Ojai and tried to start anew. The cynic in me found the vision hokey; the dreamer in me would have liked to disappear with them. ♦

## THE WAITING ROOM

*Jackie Sibblies Drury breaks the fourth wall in "Fairview."*

BY HILTON ALS



In 1978, the author Janet Malcolm published in this magazine a long and thought-provoking piece about family therapy. Titled “The One-Way Mirror,” Malcolm’s report described how a therapeutic session evolved over a period of time, shedding light on a particular psychosocial dynamic: how families respond to and resist the idea of outside “help.” Malcolm watched the proceedings through a one-way mirror, a device that allows the viewer to see in but keeps the players, so to speak, from seeing out. Theatre works in the same way. Audience members sit behind the invisible fourth wall, eavesdropping on dramas about what humans are capable, or incapable, of. The characters in “Fairview,” Jackie Sibblies Drury’s outstanding, frustrat-

ing, hilarious, and sui generis new play (directed with dynamism by Sarah Benson, at the Soho Rep), perform, for the most part, behind a one-way mirror, but it takes us a little while to understand that, and it takes until the end of the nearly two-hour, intermissionless spectacle for us to find out who has been under surveillance the whole time.

“Fairview” is an ugly show, gorgeously rendered. The set designer Mimi Lien has created a bourgeois nightmare of a living room, complete with a polyester rug and a cute little dinette set. Have peach pastels ever been used so well onstage, or looked so icky? Beverly (Heather Alicia Simms) wants everything she has to be “nice,” including her husband, Dayton (Charles Browning).

Is her home a symbol of achievement? Because the couple is black, we assume that they’ve struggled in some way to get to where they are, but Drury doesn’t say or even imply that that’s the case; why is it that when we see a black family onstage, we immediately think, Uh-oh, another take on black moral uplift? Drury plays into that—at first. When we meet Beverly—the “good,” strong black woman—she’s preparing a birthday dinner for her mother. What could be a more naturalistic setting for a play than a family gathering? And yet, as Edward Albee wrote, “There is no such thing as naturalism in the theatre, merely degrees of stylization.”

“Fairview” takes on the notion of theatrical style and how it can enhance, obscure, or toy with important questions, such as why women onstage are often hysterical, or bitchy, or both, and why that portrayal can be exciting and satisfying. Beverly’s on the verge not of a nervous breakdown, exactly, but of resentment. Why can’t anyone take Mama’s birthday as seriously as she does? Her concern is a form of narcissism, but her sister, Jasmine (Roslyn Ruff, who gives a towering comedic performance), may have her beat in the self-regard department. Dayton doesn’t much care for Jasmine, because, he says, she has an opinion about everything and everyone, mostly negative. (This is true. Jasmine thinks that Dayton doesn’t have what it takes to love her sister right. “You can see it from how he walk,” she says. “Walk around like his balls all heavy.”) Jasmine is alive with discontent and self-love. Approaching the one-way mirror, moistening her lips, she remarks, “I look like a snack.”

To some extent, Jasmine is the sassy black aunt we’ve seen in a million and one sitcoms and is therefore a comfort: she’s not so novel that we have to think about her. But then Drury gives her language that upsets all that. In one scene, the sisters discuss their brother, Tyrone, who may not come to dinner because of a work commitment, and Jasmine proclaims that “every single person in this family is so full of drama.”

BEVERLY: I don’t have drama.

JASMINE: Girl you got drama. I got drama. Tyrone drama, Mama drama, you are all like one of those movies.

BEVERLY: What movies?

*Drury takes on the notion of theatrical style and the questions it raises.*



JASMINE: Like, a family drama.

BEVERLY: What do you mean?

JASMINE: Like a movie.

BEVERLY: What movie?

JASMINE: Come on, girl, you know what I'm saying. You know, one of those movies that's a family drama where somebody dead, and what to do with the children or somebody dead and what to do with the wife or somebody dead and the house ain't paid for, and there's all these people that try to help but she can't take the help and things get worse, and they try to help but she can't take the help and things get worse, until, finally she takes the help that they all have been trying to give her for the whole damn movie, so that she get the kid or get the kid to dance, or get the dog or get the dog to dance, and then they all walk on down to the water, with a new shirt on, and the breeze is blowing, and they all look out at the water, and talk about how they're not better, not yet, but they're starting to be.

This isn't only beautiful writing; it tells us what the thirty-six-year-old Drury thinks of straight narrative—that, even with all the theory invoked in post-modern theatre, folks still need stories.

I've seen two of Drury's other three full-length plays: the memorable "We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915," in 2012, and "Really," in 2016. "We Are Proud" is, in part, about the energy that goes into making a performance; to that, Drury adds race and how it was viewed by turn-of-the-twentieth-century Europeans—race as a construction, as an oppressive fever dream. "Really" explores family and perception, a civilian trying to understand what it is to be an artist. While the plays share a colloquial wit and an interest in silence (like Pinter, Drury loves a pause), I found it hard to predict where Drury would go next, because her mind is so free. Unlike some writers of her generation, she doesn't mine the same arch territory in work after work, dressing it up with video or other Elizabeth LeCompte-style devices. Perhaps her output has been relatively small not because she doesn't want to repeat herself but because she doesn't know how to. Each story represents a fresh challenge of how to say things in a nonempirical way. Drury writes the plays, but she resists the role of "author." ("We Are Proud" ends with the stage direction "The performers say and do whatever is in their minds.")

Drury is so smart and so conflicted

about narrative conventions—catharsis and the like—that her previous plays didn't so much end as trail off, like smoke. She rejected the urge to make character and plot converge and add up. It was as if, in the fashion of other downtown theatre artists, she was embarrassed by the idea of payoff and considered satisfaction cheap. A true child of Brecht, she's militant about pleasure. What she also has in common with a number of her contemporaries is that she doesn't do intimacy. She seems to view that kind of vulnerability onstage as antique—but aren't we all old-fashioned when it comes to watching other humans learn, or fail, to trust?

While Jasmine doesn't have much of a relationship with Beverly, she does like Beverly's teen-age daughter, Keisha (the special MaYaa Boateng). Keisha is athletic and strange. After bathing, she looks into the mirror and sings an odd song—"I'm clean and I'm starving!"—then addresses the audience through the frame. What she says hardly matters; what matters is that she basically ignores the idea of the fourth wall. In this way, she prepares us, without our knowing it, for the bizarre beginning of the second act, in which we see most of the action we've just seen, but now in relative darkness and silence, as we listen to a recording of pundits arguing about race.

As this unfolded, the evening I saw the production, I noticed several audience members wave their hands in frustration. What had happened to all the wonderful jokes and character development that Drury had greeted us with? And what was happening at the end, when Keisha turned her back on the mayhem—which reflected both too much and too little of the kind of choreographed chaos with which the theatre company Elevator Repair Service sometimes ends its pieces? Symbolically breaking through the one-way mirror, she challenged us with some fairly direct shit. From moment to moment, Drury disturbed and frustrated and entertained us and made us wonder what we were all doing in that room, watching black actors perform being human. It wasn't until the show was over that it occurred to me that police stations also have one-way mirrors, behind which people of color are gathered in lineups, mindful and bitter about how they'll be used to serve "justice," and why. ♦

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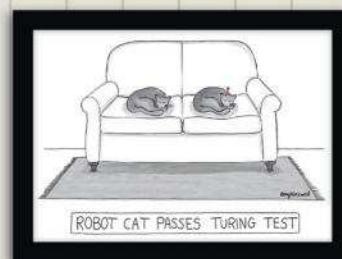
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## LIKE FAMILY

*"Leave No Trace" and "Three Identical Strangers."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

A father and his daughter play hide-and-seek. They are in a forest, on a slope, with a useful layer of ferns in which to lie low. The father, Will (Ben Foster), counts while the daughter, Tom (Thomasin McKenzie), makes herself scarce. The hunt begins, but it doesn't last long. Amid the sea of green, one glimpse of another color is enough.

we see somebody step from a trail and slip, as deftly as a deer, into the welcoming trees. So tightly does Granik enfold us within the attitudes and the anxieties of Will and Tom that, like them, we come to view the undergrowth as a haven and the city as strange and wild; when they make a trip into Portland, we grasp at once how lost and uprooted



*For a father and daughter in Debra Granik's film, a forest is a haven from society.*

"Your socks burned you," Will says. There's no satisfaction in his voice, still less a spark of fun, and what the two of them are doing should not be mistaken for a game. It's a drill. And the forest is not their chosen spot for an adventure holiday. It's home.

Will and Tom are at the heart of "Leave No Trace." The movie, based on Peter Rock's novel "My Abandonment," is directed by Debra Granik, who also wrote the screenplay (with Anne Rosellini), and whose previous feature, "Winter's Bone," was released eight years ago. That was set in the Ozarks of Missouri, whereas the new film unfurls in and around Portland, Oregon—more around than in. The tale starts and ends in woodland, and, as it draws to a close,

they are. Nature is the natural place to be.

So what brought them here? We know that Will's a veteran, though where exactly he served and under what circumstances he left the military are matters left undisclosed. One of the boldest strokes of "Leave No Trace" is how firmly it resists the call for backstories. The stress is on the now; the past is recognized only by the shrapnel, so to speak, that it leaves in the body of the present day. Will goes to the V.A. hospital in Portland to fetch his medication, then sells it to another vet; does he not require it, or does he simply need the money more? As for Tom's mother, we learn nothing about her, save that her favorite color was yellow. Tom, who is thirteen years old, says, "I wish I could

remember her," and that sad vacancy is treated by the movie with respect.

The first act is a master class from Granik and her editor, Jane Rizzo, in how to lay the groundwork of your characters' routines. Much of it, indeed, is conducted at ground level, with Tom grubbing for mushrooms or eating a hard-boiled egg and then strewing the shell fragments around a vegetable patch. Each scene yields a drop more information—how to rig up a tarpaulin, say, head-high, for gathering rainwater—before being smartly cut off, as if the film were of one mind, pragmatic and unsentimental, with the folk it depicts. Will and Tom share a tent, but there isn't a hint of anything untoward in their relationship, and the fact that they inhabit a forest, occasionally breaking camp and swiftly moving on, doesn't make them eco-warriors, fugitives, or radical experimentalists, let alone mystics. Far from having their heads in the clouds, they feel earthed.

Needless to say, they get dug up. A tiny lapse in attention means that they are spotted, sought, discovered, split from each other, and taken away. "It's illegal to live on public land," we hear (so much for the pioneer spirit), yet their existence is more than a crime, because it goes against the grain of our civic faith. A social-services agent named Jean (Dana Millican) says to Tom, "Your dad needs to provide you shelter and a place to live." To which Tom replies, "He did. He does." Will has also schooled her; "You're actually quite a bit ahead of where you need to be," Jean says, in bemusement, after Tom does well on a test. Poor Will, meanwhile, has to answer four hundred and thirty-five questions about his mental well-being, posed aloud by a computer. (It has a robotic tone, and beeps if you hesitate too long: a rare example of Granik's laboring her point and veering into the obvious.) The upshot is that they are rehoused—or, rather, housed—in a small rural community, with a school for Tom and a job, felling Christmas trees, for Will. One of his first deeds is to stash the TV in a closet.

It's on such fierce, decisive gestures that Ben Foster tends to thrive, as fans of "Hell or High Water" (2016) can confirm. He doesn't yet have—and may not crave—the shine of stardom, but



his intensity has a glare of its own. Look at him in the new film, hearing a bark in the distance and instantly raising his head, senses pricked, as if he were another dog. There's something tightened and withheld in Foster, which fed into his portrayal of Lance Armstrong, in "The Program" (2015), and which helps us now to believe in Will as he whittles his subsistence down to basics. The title character of "Jeremiah Johnson" (1972) took similar measures, fleeing into solitude after the Mexican War, but you felt his wary charm and never forgot, for a second, that under the buffer of beard was Robert Redford. Foster, though, disappears into Will much as Will disappears from society.

One day, at first light, he wakes his daughter and tells her, "Pack your things." Off they go again, abandoning their human settlement, with its light and warmth. But something has shifted in Tom. "I liked it there," she says, not raising her voice or whining, but gently stating her case. Jennifer Lawrence first commanded attention in "Winter's Bone," and Thomasin McKenzie, in a milder and more muted performance, slowly becomes the center of gravity in this film, too. Her calmness, poised and untraumatized, is a strength. In less than two hours, we seem to watch Tom grow up, and we realize, as she and Will huddle beneath an igloo built of cedar boughs, one bitter night, that she deserves more than a makeshift life. She has reached the end of her wandering, whereas that of her father will never stop. "The same thing that's wrong with you isn't wrong with me," she says. Even when they happen upon an ideal refuge—a secluded trailer park, inhabited

by veterans and other wounded souls—Will finds no repose.

"Leave No Trace" should, by rights, be dull. There are no villains, no fights, no big showdowns. No squirrels are skinned and grilled, which makes a healthy change from "Winter's Bone." Professional courtesy reigns among the social services, the veterans, and the cops. Yet the movie's patient progress is driven and tensed, and you feel that, at every turn in the path, something *could* go badly astray. The retreat into a green world, for Will, is not an idyll but a compulsion, and you're made to wonder what lies behind his harrowed stare: a history of violence, I would guess, both suffered and meted out. Whatever yoke of pain he bears cannot be unshouldered. The throb of a helicopter makes him flinch. Only after the movie ends do you understand what Debra Granik, with a consummate sleight of hand, has done. Here, among the peaceful trees, without a shot fired in anger, she's made a war film.

Once upon a time, there was a place called Triplets, in SoHo, where you could dine and dance. It was run by a team of indistinguishable brothers: Bobby Shafran, Eddy Galland, and David Kellman. In the public eye, they were the same guy, trebled: same hair, same grin, same plump fingers holding the same brand of cigarette. All for one, and one for all: the Marlboro musketeers.

As we learn from Tim Wardle's new documentary, "Three Identical Strangers," the shock of brotherly recognition had been triggered in 1980, when Bobby arrived at college in upstate New York. Though a freshman, he was greeted like

an old friend. Girls he didn't know came up and kissed him, which was nice but weird. It transpired that Eddy, of whom he was unaware, had studied there the year before. Bobby went to meet him: "As I reach out to knock on the door, it opens, and there I am," he says—a great line, delivered to Wardle's camera by the middle-aged Bobby. The press got wind of the happy event, and it soon got happier still. Enter David, who saw what appeared to be his own face, twice over, gazing out from a newspaper, and got in touch—shades of the moment in "Duck Soup" when Harpo, in Groucho disguise, encounters the real Groucho, only for Chico, *another* Groucho replica, to saunter in. In the words of Eddy's adoptive mother, "Oh, my God, they're coming out of the woodwork!"

The movie has no narrator, relying instead on interviews, archival clips, and dramatic reconstructions—a little clunky, but the tale is too strong to spoil. The twists keep squirming into view: just as you're dealing with the fact that the triplets were separated as infants and assigned by a decorous Jewish adoption agency to three families, each of which knew nothing of the others, you bump into the creepy scientific project behind the entire plan—"like Nazi shit," in Bobby's crisp appraisal. To reveal any more would be unfair, but prepare to be surprised by joy, at the outset, and to wind up baffled and sad. Not that the saga is complete; many of the relevant files, at Yale, will not be unsealed until 2066. Less than fifty years to go. I can't wait. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, July 1st. The finalists in the June 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 23rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“At this rate, mankind will beat us to it.”*  
Cynthia Rangel Mendoza, Los Angeles, Calif.

*“Most of them have candy. This one's filled with nuts.”*  
Jerry Chesterton, Wantagh, N.Y.

*“Are you sure the boss is cool with this?  
It took him six days to make.”*  
Brendan Toohey, Ballarat, Australia

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Well, of course they don't exist. Now.”*  
Francesca Walsh, Bray, Ireland



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A lighthouse with a white upper section and a dark red lower section stands on a grassy cliff. In the foreground, a surfer is captured mid-air, performing a jump over a green, churning wave. The sky is overcast and grey.

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