



The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION | TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2017

The brutality of detention inside China

Steven Lee Myers

NEWS ANALYSIS

Authoritarian regimes shroud their darkest features in euphemism. So it is with China's "residential surveillance at a designated location." It sounds like a kind of house arrest, a milder form of detention for those under investigation, perhaps, or awaiting trial. It is not.

It is in fact the codification in law of a widespread practice of whisking people into secret detention — "disappearing" them into a labyrinth where China's stunted legal protections can do little to prevent abuse. The practice violates not only human rights but also international law, according to Michael Caster of Safeguard Defenders, a group founded in August to protect those in Asia who fight for human rights, women's rights and civil society.

Article 73 of China's Criminal Procedure Law was amended in 2012 to

A new book provides first-person accounts of rights activists and political dissidents held in secret prisons.

allow the authorities to detain people for reasons of "state security" or "terrorism." Detainees can be held for as long as six months in "designated locations" — secret prisons. China has shown that it can define those reasons so broadly that it sweeps up anyone viewed as a political threat to the supremacy of the Communist Party: dissidents, lawyers, activists and outspoken Tibetans and Uighurs. Among those who have been held under a form of "residential surveillance" are the artist Ai Weiwei and Liu Xiaobo, the poet and Nobel Peace Prize laureate who died in the state's custody in July.

Mr. Caster's group has compiled 12 accounts by those who have descended into this Orwellian legal abyss. They appear in a book, "The People's Republic of the Disappeared," that was published in English this month and is scheduled to come out in Chinese on Friday. These accounts — two of them anonymous, some written by those safely outside China, some by brave souls still inside — represent the experiences of hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have been deprived of the legal rights the country's Constitution ostensibly allows them.

The narrators tell of physical and psychological abuse, beatings and isolation and threats to relatives. The nature of Article 73 fosters such abuse, its critics assert. In regular detention centers, institutional norms like the MYERS, PAGE 15



Both Vicky Delgadillo and Carlos Saldaña lost daughters to Mexico's drug war, two among the more than 30,000 people who the government acknowledges have "disappeared."

Chasing ghosts in Mexico

XALAPA, MEXICO

Families take up search for those who disappear in the country's drug war

BY AZAM AHMED

At 5 a.m., the couple stirred to the buzz of a cellphone alarm. They had hardly slept — Carlos Saldaña had been in the hospital the night before, betrayed by his fragile stomach.

He had prayed that the pain would subside, that God would give him strength. Today was the raid, the culmination of years of tracking the cartels, of lonely reconnaissance missions to find where they had discarded his daughter.

For so long, he had begged officials to do something, anything. Now, he wondered if he could even walk.

"Why tonight, God?" he had murmured in the hospital, doubled over. "I've been waiting so many years for this."

He had spent the last six years searching for his daughter Karla, charging through every obstacle with an obsession that bordered on lunacy — car-

tel threats, government indifference, declining health, even his other children, who feared that his reckless hunt had put them in danger.

Vicky Delgadillo watched as he eased out of bed and grabbed a cane. She had a missing girl as well, Yunery, whom Mr. Saldaña now thought of as his own. For the last two years, the couple had shared a home, a life and a love born of loss. She understood the raw fixation that defined his life. It defined hers too.

Before dawn, their prayers were answered. If not fully recovered, Mr. Saldaña was at least well enough to get to his feet. Sheer will and adrenaline would do the rest, allowing him to go on the raid at the ranch where he knew, deep down, both girls were buried — two bodies among the thousands lost in the state of Veracruz, among the tens of thousands nationwide.

The couple moved in silence, checking and rechecking their bags. Ms. Delgadillo packed a lunch — apples, carrots and a stew made of vegetables to avoid upsetting his stomach.

She heated water for instant coffee and made toast as Mr. Saldaña searched for his essentials: binoculars, gloves, boots and a battery charger.

Mrs. Delgadillo's grandchildren — Yunery's little girls — slept in the second



A mass burial site near the city of Veracruz, Mexico, where 47 skulls were found this year. "The entire state is a mass grave," said the attorney general of Veracruz State.

bedroom. After making breakfast, she applied mascara in front of a mirror on the living room wall as Mr. Saldaña finished packing.

"I don't think we will need this today," he said, grabbing a long metal spike

from behind their vinyl sofa, a crude tool they often used to find mass graves. "I think others will bring theirs for the search."

They left before sunrise that humid DISAPPEARED, PAGE 6

If good artists are bad men, must we shun their work?

NEWS ANALYSIS

Where to draw the line when shows are caught up in harassment scandals

BY SARAH LYALL AND DAVE ITZKOFF

The responses have been breathtaking in their speed and decisiveness. Another powerful man in media or entertainment is accused of being a sexual predator. He admits it, or not. He comes under investigation, or quits, or is fired. And all at once, his work — no matter how much people liked it before — turns radioactive.

Last week in the United States, the "Charlie Rose" show, long patronized by the public-television-watching cognoscenti, was shelved after allegations that its urbane host was a chronic ha-

asser of young women. The program joins a long list of projects — the Kevin Spacey series "House of Cards," the film and television work of Louis C.K., and the groundbreaking Amazon show "Transparent," among others — that have been canceled outright, removed from circulation or thrown into disarray by accusations against the men most associated with their success.

But as more and more once-important figures are banished from sight, at least for the time being, what should become of their work?

"Yes, the art suffers," said the actor Colman Domingo. Last year his movie "The Birth of a Nation" collapsed at the box office after revelations that its writer-director, Nate Parker, had been accused of raping a woman nearly 20 years earlier. (Mr. Parker was acquitted; the woman later killed herself.) Mr. Domingo has also worked — very happily, he said — with Louis C.K. When it ARTISTS, PAGE 2



Selling via Amazon Lengths of fabric after being dyed for use as bedsheets that will be marketed by The Boho Street, an Indian label, through Amazon. Thousands of sellers in India use Amazon to sell in America. PAGE 8



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Issue Number
No. 41,900

The New York Times

The Daily

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PAGE TWO

PROFILE
LONDON

Subtly, Labour’s point man on Brexit has shifted party strategy on leaving E.U.

BY STEPHEN CASTLE

The question, from a student in a university lecture hall, is one that Keir Starmer hears virtually every day about Britain’s decision to withdraw from the European Union, or Brexit.

“I feel, like many others of the 48 per cent, abandoned and leaderless,” said the questioner, referring to those who voted to remain in the bloc in last year’s divisive Brexit referendum.

For Mr. Starmer, who speaks for the opposition Labour Party on Brexit, replying means walking a familiar tightrope. With Labour having consented to the plebiscite, he says, it would be intellectually dishonest to say, “Now it’s gone the way I don’t want, so I’m not going to accept the result.”

Then comes the counterpunch: “I don’t give up on any of the values that made me want to remain,” he tells the 40 or so students sitting in a semicircle around him, calling for a relationship with the bloc “based on a progressive partnership.”

In recent months, Mr. Starmer has navigated deftly around deep divisions on Brexit while giving hope not just to those who want Britain to remain close to the European Union, but also to those who want Britons, to use the catchphrase, to exit from Brexit.

Mr. Starmer has not gone that far, but in August he persuaded the somewhat euroskeptical Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and others to soften Labour’s policy and call for a standstill period of transition after withdrawal, scheduled for March 2019, to protect the economy.

Within weeks, Prime Minister Theresa May had done the same. Meanwhile, Labour is harrying Mrs. May’s fragile government in Parliament, trying to build a cross-party alliance of lawmakers to amend Brexit legislation to ward off any prospect of a “cliff edge” or “no deal Brexit,” where Britain crashes out without a trade agreement.

Articulate, personable, yet serious and intense, Mr. Starmer, 55, a former human rights lawyer, has held one of Britain’s top legal jobs and been knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. (He prefers not to use the title “sir.”)

Allies portray him as approachable, hard-working and a devoted fan of the Arsenal soccer team.

“Do we discuss Marcel Proust? No,” said his friend and fellow lawyer, Philippe Sands. “Do we occasionally go to



Keir Starmer, left, and another Labour candidate, Nia Griffith, campaigning in Pembrokeshire, Wales, in May. Some believe Mr. Starmer is a future Labour Party leader.

Keir Starmer is giving hope to those who want Britons, to use the catchphrase, to exit from Brexit.

Arsenal together? Yes.”

“If you go to the pub with him you will see him in his element: down to earth, grounded, connected to those around him,” Mr. Sands added.

That is not the view of the right-leaning and stridently pro-Brexit Daily Mail, which described Mr. Starmer as “suave” and “uber-ambitious,” while deriding more favorable news coverage.

“Simpering media reports highlighted his smart suits, floppy hair and chiseled good looks,” it wrote. “Indeed, actor Colin Firth was said to have based his performance as Mark Darcy (the hu-

man rights lawyer character in the Bridget Jones films) on Starmer.”

According to Mr. Firth, that is incorrect. But, while Mr. Starmer was the director of public prosecutions — effectively the country’s chief prosecutor — his persona was once borrowed by a con man to impress female victims.

The real Mr. Starmer is in fact extremely courteous even — according to Mr. Sands — at 7 a.m. meetings.

“He will seek out a decent position to take that those with a range of different positions can be associated with, even where there are extreme polarities of view,” Mr. Sands said.

Such attributes have been vital since the referendum, which tore Labour in opposite directions. While younger, metropolitan supporters generally opted to stay in the European Union, many traditional working-class voters were at-

tracted by the Brexit campaign’s focus on curbing immigration.

Labour lawmakers overwhelmingly wanted to remain, but Mr. Corbyn and John McDonnell, the party’s spokesman on financial affairs, worried that the European Union’s rules might obstruct some of their interventionist economic policies.

Mr. Starmer seems to have won the point by persuading them that a rupture with the European Union would wreak enough havoc to render their economic priorities moot.

“In the end, if you want to implement a progressive set of policies, then you need a strong economy in order to do so,” Mr. Starmer said.

That sort of quiet, behind-the-scenes persuasion comes naturally to Mr. Starmer, whose father was a toolmaker and mother a nurse, and who became

the first university graduate in his family.

His was a left-wing household, and Mr. Starmer was named after Keir Hardie, who rose from humble origins to become the first leader of the Labour Party. Mr. Starmer recalls wishing as a teenager that he had been called Dave or Pete instead.

“The last thing you want is to be different to everybody else,” he said. “Now it’s fantastic that people just say ‘Keir’ and most people know who they are talking about.”

Some believe Mr. Starmer might become the second Labour leader named Keir, though even fans admit that, with his legalistic delivery, he is not a rousing orator — like “watching the audience at a literary festival listen to a reading of T.S. Eliot,” one wit remarked after a recent parliamentary appearance.

After studying law at Leeds and Oxford Universities, Mr. Starmer became a lawyer specializing in human rights. He fought several high-profile cases, and subsequently rose to become director of public prosecutions.

Elected to Parliament in 2015, he found himself in a party led by Mr. Corbyn, Labour’s most left-wing leader in decades. Mr. Starmer promptly joined a rebellion and resigned his post. But he was soon brought back, this time in charge of Brexit policy.

Since then, he has helped shepherd the party through a June election, when Labour outperformed expectations and weakened Mrs. May, who lost her parliamentary majority and with it her ability to impose her will on a divided cabinet at war over Europe.

Then, during the summer, Mr. Starmer engineered the decisive softening of Labour’s Brexit policy, calling for a transition for “as short as possible, but as long as is necessary” after Britain quits the bloc in March 2019, during which Britain remains aligned with the bloc’s single market.

For the longer term, he is open to membership in a customs union, though he is fuzzier about the single market. He argues that full membership would be impossible under current rules, but suggests that Labour could get a much closer alignment than the Conservatives because it believes in regulating labor and other standards and would not aim to undercut the European Union economically.

But some have speculated that he is playing a long game, expecting the transition period to be extended (as trade negotiations drag on) long enough for the public to turn against Brexit, particularly if the economy should go into a prolonged slump. Were that to happen, remaining part of the single market, at the very minimum, might seem attractive.

But pro-Europe critics predict that once Britain leaves the bloc, it would be too late to reverse Brexit.

“I think he is trying to be a bridge between essentially irreconcilable positions,” said Tom Baldwin, who was senior adviser to the previous Labour leader, Ed Miliband.

“Labour’s position is ducking, diving and triangulation,” Mr. Baldwin said, adding that Mr. Starmer’s idea for transition amounted only to “a cliff edge with a longer diving board than the Tory one.”

Mr. Starmer denies harboring a strategy for reversing Brexit, saying only that he is content to go on reconciling the Leavers and the Remainers in his party.

“Everybody has been urging me to jump one way or the other,” he said, “and I have refused, at every twist and turn.”



Jeffrey Tambor and Alexandra Billings in the groundbreaking Amazon show “Transparent,” canceled after Mr. Tambor was accused of sexual harassment.



Kevin Spacey in “House of Cards.” Netflix suspended the show’s final season after an accusation against him surfaced, but it continues to offer old episodes.



Louis C.K. and Pamela Adlon in “Lucky Louie.” HBO has removed Louis C.K.’s past work from its website, saying it too closely resembled his off-screen behavior.

If good artists are bad men, must we shun their work?

ARTISTS, FROM PAGE 1

comes to canceling or removing projects, he said, “I have no idea yet if this is the appropriate response.”

“These are very sensitive situations that reflect what has been building up in our industry for years,” Mr. Domingo said. “I think it’s important for us to take a breath, assess and not respond impulsively.”

Weighing the worth of an accused perpetrator’s film, television show or news program is nearly impossible in the context of victims’ distress. It’s like comparing apples with unicorns. And so it’s not surprising that emotions are running high.

On Tuesday, for instance, Dylan Byers, a senior reporter for media and politics at CNN, waded into a roiling sea of outrage in the usual way people do these days, on Twitter. “Beyond the pain/humiliation women have endured (which is of course the paramount issue), it’s worth taking stock of the incredible drain of talent from media/entertainment taking place right now. Never has so much talent left the industry all at once,” he wrote.

The reaction was immediate and angry. “What Dylan Byers meant to say” is that he was disappointed “that sexual

predators are finally getting punished for their actions because he really enjoys binge-watching ‘House of Cards’ and ‘Charlie Rose’ reruns,” one woman wrote on Twitter.

Mr. Byers hastily retreated. “I’ve deleted my previous tweet. It was poorly worded and didn’t properly convey my intended observation,” he tweeted.

Wrestling with what to do with the product of tainted executives, artists or news figures is not that far from the eternal issue of how (or even whether) to separate our views of art from our views of the artists. Wagner was blatantly anti-Semitic. Alfred Hitchcock abused actresses who worked for him, so openly that you can see his dysfunctional psychosexual power dynamics right onscreen. Roman Polanski was convicted of having sex with a 13-year-old, but does that mean “Rosemary’s Baby” should have been pulled from circulation?

Those were generally seen as rare cases that (perhaps) could be overlooked because of the men’s particular genius, or because times were different then. What has changed now is the unveiling of evidence that sexually predatory behavior is pervasive and that it has flourished in hierarchical, male-

dominated industries that have at best ignored, and at worst enabled, such behavior by powerful and once-untouchable men.

In the current period of reckoning, some are arguing that a wholesale expunging or erasure of work by sexual harassers is a small price to pay if it results in a thorough rethinking in creative industries, where the use of sex and power are particularly ill-defined and open to abuse.

“We all have an instinct to instantly try to figure out how to redeem all these people and still be able to enjoy all this work, and it’s a very selfish instinct,” the producer and director Judd Apatow said. In his view, what happens to their work is “the least important question” on the table.

“All our energy should be with the victims,” he said. “What happened to them?” How did people handle this? What could we do going forward to support them in a productive way?”

The moves to yank television shows, to cancel future projects or — in the case of “House of Cards” and “Transparent” — to consider envisioning popular series without actors who are central to the works’ success, are hardly just a matter of simple morality. In the case of

those two programs, there’s also the question of whether audiences would even want to watch them without Mr. Spacey and Jeffrey Tambor, their stars.

And it’s difficult to discern to what extent these decisions are being based on matters of principle, or economics, or publicity, or audience interests. Many companies contacted for this article, including Sony and Netflix, refused to comment. And though Netflix continues to show old episodes of “House of Cards” as well as stand-up specials by Louis C.K., another network, HBO, not only eliminated Louis C.K. from its “Night of Too Many Stars” comedy benefit on Nov. 18 but also removed his past work from its website.

In a statement, the network explained that his comedic material too closely resembled his non-comedic actions. “In looking at previous HBO shows, we also made the decision to no longer make them available as material in them skirted uncomfortably close to his own admittedly repugnant behavior,” the statement said.

Some people, like the feminist scholar Camille Paglia, argue that art — no matter who created it — should be beyond the scope of punishment.

“The artist as a person should cer-

tainly be subject to rebuke, censure, or penalty for unacceptable actions in the social realm,” Ms. Paglia said via email. “But art, even when it addresses political issues, occupies an abstract realm beyond society.”

But there’s a vast middle ground, and many people pondering the issue now fall within it. Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University and the author of “Unwanted Advances: Sexual

Some argue that wholesale expunging is a small price to pay.

Paranoia Comes to Campus,” cautioned against applying a one-size-fits-all punishment to offenses that are so varied.

“In situations where you get these serial cases with Weinstein or Wieseltier, we’re on safe ground to say, yes, we feel comfortable making the guilty charge and acting accordingly,” said Ms. Kipnis, speaking of the producer Harvey Weinstein and the literary critic Leon Wieseltier, who both face multiple accusations from young women they worked with. She compared their cases to the smaller number of allegations against Mr. Tambor, the “Transparent” star who

has vehemently denied any wrongdoing.

“In cases where standards have changed because we’re sensitive to things at the moment where we weren’t 20 years ago, or you just have one or two accusations, you want to act carefully,” Ms. Kipnis said.

“Where I would draw the line might be someplace different from where someone else draws the line,” she added. “If someone’s an adulterer, do we pull their work? Are you going to take all of Hitchcock’s films out of circulation, and those of every other person who’s been accused of being a sleaze?”

It’s been less than two months since the cascade of harassment scandals began, and when (and if) some of the men caught up in them will ever work again is anybody’s guess.

But that might not even be the most pertinent question,” said Ben Travers, the television critic at IndieWire. “A lot of people are hoping this is more of a turning point, that the work that’s being lost won’t be missed because the work that’s being gained will be better,” he said. “The people who were silenced and thrown out and kept from working by these predators will be able to go forward and thrive.”



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OYSTER PERPETUAL 39



World

The wife slaps back, and theatergoers cheer

KABUL JOURNAL
KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

Female filmmaker makes movie about women’s struggles in Afghanistan

BY MUJIB MASHAL

He raised his hand, ready to assert what he considered his right in a male-dominated society where the husband’s word is final.

She was an accomplished police detective feared by the city’s criminals, and also a wife and mother of two. Her duties clashed with the expectations at home, despite all her efforts to balance them.

There on the movie screen, he slapped her — and she slapped back. Harder. The audience, about 60 people in a smoke-filled Kabul theater, erupted in applause.

“People love that slap,” said Roya Sadat, the director of the 85-minute film, “A Letter to the President,” now Afghanistan’s submission for best foreign language film at the Academy Awards next year. “It’s not easy for the people to accept a woman slapping a man. But the film affects them. The slap is a really enjoyable slap — in fact, it’s a slap to the face of all the injustice women face here.”

Ms. Sadat and her crew say that just the fact of having made “A Letter to the President” — a feature film made to high standards under difficult circumstances — feels like a victory. But the real payoff is the reaction to the slap, and the idea that they are succeeding in getting a male-dominated society to empathize with a working woman.

“We have always had an oppressor, and an oppressed, but we have had little discussion of the environment in which the accused lives in,” Ms. Sadat said.

By the accused, she means her protagonist — Suraya, the senior police detective, who ends up accidentally killing her husband while defending herself from another violent outburst. The letter to the president of the movie’s title is hers; she is writing from prison, where she has landed on death row.

Suraya’s once-happy marriage grew sour when the demands of her work in a conservative society started raising her husband’s suspicions at home. Her father-in-law, whose shady business partners feel the pressure of Suraya’s investigations, kept appealing to his son’s honor to restrict her movements and keep her at home.

From the time she conceived the story in 2010, it took Ms. Sadat about seven hard years to complete the film. More frustrating were the bureaucratic hurdles afterward, as she tried to meet simple criteria for Oscar selection.

Organizing screenings at commercial cinemas was a difficult task because there are just a couple of government cinemas, and they usually show only old Indian movies. If a director wants to screen her own film, she has to rent the cinema and then go through a lengthy process of her film’s content being



Roya Sadat with her son at her film company’s offices in Kabul. Her latest film, “A Letter to the President,” is Afghanistan’s submission for best foreign language film at the Oscars.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM HUYLEBROEK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



A private screening of “A Letter to The President” in Kabul. From the time she conceived the story in 2010, it took Ms. Sadat about seven years to complete the film.

checked. Officials at the country’s highest cinematic institution, Afghan Film, also dragged their feet in signing a letter she needed as part of her submission, Ms. Sadat said.

She began making movies as a high

school student in the western city of Herat. “Three Dots,” her first film, about a young woman forced to smuggle drugs, was made more than a decade ago with simple gear in a secluded village that now is under Taliban control. But back



Ms. Sadat and crew members at a test shoot for a TV drama she is directing. Ms. Sadat met her husband and filmmaking partner, Aziz Dildar, during one such TV project.

in the early 2000s it felt like the Wild West, she said.

One night during the weeklong shoot, Ms. Sadat said, the women in one of the village houses started cheering and celebrating. When she asked what the oc-

casion was, they said their husbands, who lived as bandits, had captured another vehicle passing through.

“Three Dots” caught the eye of Afghanistan’s largest media conglomerate, the Moby Group. Moby invited her

to direct two television dramas. She directed 50 episodes of one, and three seasons of another. During one of those projects she met her husband, Aziz Dildar, a young university lecturer in theater who was quickly rushed in as a replacement when one of the main actors, much to Ms. Sadat’s frustration, had shown up with a shaved head.

They became an artistic power couple, complementing and supporting each other. The offices of their company, Roya Film House, are below their apartment, in the basement. Ms. Sadat says she feels lucky to be married to an artist who is as passionate about film as she is. Mr. Dildar writes the screenplays for their projects, and when she gets into the intense shooting period, he steps in to help. During the 40 days of shooting “A Letter to the President,” Ms. Sadat’s youngest child was barely a year old. Mr. Dildar would oversee the work on the set while she would disappear for brief periods to feed their child. “If it had

“The slap is a really enjoyable slap — in fact, it’s a slap to the face of all the injustice women face here.”

been someone other than Aziz, I don’t think they would have understood me as much.” Ms. Sadat said. “Because when I am working, I forget the mundane. I am up till 2 or 3 in the morning.”

Ms. Sadat tried for years to find a producer for her latest film, but no one was willing to take it on because of the uncertain security environment. So she and Mr. Dildar produced it themselves. They sold one of their two vehicles, an apartment Ms. Sadat had bought with past directorial fees and her wedding jewelry.

She also relied on friends. The Moby Group provided security and technical staff. Friends offered their houses as sets. Leena Alam, the actress playing Suraya, agreed to take the role for a small sum — which she has yet to be paid.

Because Afghanistan lacks established film studios, each set needed to be created from scratch. And location scouting was a feat in itself, not just because of Ms. Sadat’s exacting eye, but also because of safety considerations.

The scenes in the villages required particularly creative maneuvering, where the crew had to quickly wrap up before word got out that a movie was being shot.

For a prison scene, for example, Ms. Sadat and her crew chose a school. She mixed several shades of paint to find the right color for the walls, and the crew got busy painting. Allergies forced her to go to a hospital that night, but she was back on the set early the next morning.

Mamnoon Maqsoodi, the veteran Afghan actor who plays the president in the film, called its success a remarkable testament to Ms. Sadat’s passion and attention to detail.

“I am touched by her work,” Mr. Maqsoodi said.

Fahim Abed contributed reporting.

Diplomats sound the alarm as they’re pushed out in droves

WASHINGTON

BY GARDINER HARRIS

Of all the State Department employees who might have been vulnerable in the staff reductions that Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson has initiated as he reshapes the department, the one person who seemed least likely to be a target was the chief of security, Bill A. Miller.

Republicans pilloried Hillary Clinton for what they claimed was her inadequate attention to security as secretary of state in the months before the deadly 2012 attacks in Benghazi, Libya. Congress even passed legislation mandating that the department’s top security official have unrestricted access to the secretary of state.

But in his first nine months in office, Mr. Tillerson turned down repeated and sometimes urgent requests from the department’s security staff to brief him, according to several former top officials in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. Finally, Mr. Miller, the acting assistant secretary for diplomatic security, was forced to cite the law’s requirement that he be allowed to speak to Mr. Tillerson.

Mr. Miller got just five minutes with the secretary of state, the former officials said. Afterward, Mr. Miller, a career Foreign Service officer, was pushed out, joining a parade of dismissals and early retirements that has decimated the State Department’s senior ranks. Mr. Miller declined to comment.

The departures are a new stage in the broken and increasingly contentious relationship between Mr. Tillerson and much of his department’s work force. By last spring, interviews at the time suggested, the guarded optimism that had greeted his arrival had given way to concern among diplomats about his aloofness and lack of communication. By the summer, the secretary’s focus on efficiency and reorganization over policy provoked off-the-record anger.



Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson leads a State Department that has lost more than 100 senior diplomats since January.

TOM BRENNER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Now the estrangement is in the open, as diplomats going out the door make their feelings known and members of Congress raise questions about the impact of their leaving.

In a letter to Mr. Tillerson earlier this month, Democratic members of the House Foreign Relations Committee, citing what they said was “the exodus of more than 100 senior Foreign Service officers from the State Department since January,” expressed concern about “what appears to be the intentional hollowing-out of our senior diplomatic ranks.”

Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, and Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, sent a similar letter, telling Mr. Tillerson that “America’s diplomatic power is being weakened internally as complex global crises are growing externally.”

Mr. Tillerson, a former chief executive of Exxon Mobil, has made no secret of his belief that the State Department is a

bloated bureaucracy and that he regards much of the day-to-day diplomacy that lower-level officials conduct as unproductive. Even before Mr. Tillerson was confirmed, his staff fired six of the State Department’s top career diplomats, including Patrick Kennedy, who had been appointed to his position by President George W. Bush. Kristie Kenney, the department’s counselor and one of just five career ambassadors, was summarily fired a few weeks later.

None were given any reason for their dismissals, although Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Kenney had been reprimanded by Trump transition officials for answering basic logistical questions from Nikki R. Haley, President Trump’s pick as United Nations ambassador. Mr. Tillerson is widely believed to dislike Ms. Haley, who has been seen as a possible successor if Mr. Tillerson steps down.

In the following months, Mr. Tillerson began a reorganization that he has said will be the most important thing he will

do, and he has hired two consulting companies to lead the effort. Since he decided before even arriving at the State Department to slash its budget by 31 percent, many in the department have always seen the reorganization as a smoke screen for drastic cuts.

Mr. Tillerson has frozen most hiring and recently offered a \$25,000 buyout in hopes of pushing nearly 2,000 career diplomats and civil servants to leave by October 2018.

His aides have fired some diplomats and gotten others to resign by refusing them the assignments they wanted or taking away their duties altogether. Among those fired or sidelined were most of the top African-American and Latino diplomats, as well as many women, difficult losses in a department that has struggled with diversity.

One of them was Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a career Foreign Service officer who served as ambassador to Liberia under Mr. Bush and as director general of the Foreign Service and assistant secretary for African affairs during the Obama administration. Ms. Thomas-Greenfield was among those asked to leave by Mr. Tillerson’s staff, but she appealed and remained until her retirement in September.

“I don’t feel targeted as an African-American,” she said. “I feel targeted as a professional.”

For those who have not been dismissed, retirement has become a preferred alternative when, like Mr. Miller, they find no demand for their expertise. A retirement class that concludes this month has 26 senior employees, including two acting assistant secretaries in their early 50s.

The number of those with the department’s top two ranks of career ambassador and career minister — equivalent to four- and three-star generals — will have been cut in half by Dec. 1, from 39 to 19. And of the 431 minister-counselors, who have two-star-equivalent ranks, 369 remain and another 14 have indi-

“The United States is at the center of every crisis around the world, and you simply cannot be effective if you don’t have” ambassadors in place.

cated that they will leave soon — an 18 percent drop — according to an accounting provided by the American Foreign Service Association.

The political appointees who normally join the department after a change in administration have not made up for those departures. So far, just 10 of the top 44 political positions in the department have been filled, and for most of the vacancies, Mr. Tillerson has not nominated anyone.

“Leadership matters,” said Nancy McDoldowney, a former ambassador who retired in June after a 30-year career as a Foreign Service officer. “There’s a vacuum throughout the State Department, and the junior people now working in these top jobs lack the confidence and credibility that comes from a presidential nomination and Senate confirmation.”

Even more departures are expected as a result of an intense campaign that Mr. Tillerson has ordered to reduce the department’s longtime backlog of Freedom of Information Act requests. CNN reported that the task had resulted from Mr. Trump’s desire to accelerate the release of Mrs. Clinton’s remaining emails.

Every bureau in the department has been asked to contribute to the effort. That has left midlevel employees and diplomats — including some just returning from high-level or difficult overseas assignments — to spend months performing mind-numbing clerical functions beside unpaid interns.

Mr. Tillerson’s spokesman, R. C. Hammond, dismissed any suggestion that the departures had had a negative effect.

“There are qualified people who are delivering on America’s diplomatic mission,” Mr. Hammond said. “It’s insulting to them every time someone comes up to them and says that the State Department is being gutted.”

Former State Department officials disagree.

“The United States is at the center of every crisis around the world, and you simply cannot be effective if you don’t have assistant secretaries and ambassadors in place,” said R. Nicholas Burns, a retired career diplomat who was an under secretary of state for President George W. Bush. “It shows a disdain for diplomacy.”

One result is that there is no one in place with responsibilities for some key trouble spots.

Although the North Korean nuclear crisis is the Trump administration’s top priority, the administration has yet to nominate an assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs or ambassadors to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt or Qatar.

And as Zimbabwe confronts the future after the departure of Robert Mugabe, the department is lacking a confirmed assistant secretary for African affairs or an ambassador to neighboring South Africa.

For many at the State Department, their experience under Mr. Tillerson has been a particular shock because their hopes for him were initially high.

Mrs. Clinton and John Kerry, her successor, were both seen as focused on their own priorities and were not particularly popular within the department. The model secretaries in recent history have been Colin Powell, James A. Baker III and George P. Shultz, Republicans who cared about management.



COLLECTION

Fifty Fathoms



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1735
BLANCPAIN
MANUFACTURE DE HAUTE HORLOGERIE

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WORLD



Women whose children are missing look for remains by hammering metal crosses into the ground, wrenching them out and sniffing for the smell of decay. With Veracruz State halting new searches for graves, this is how the poor search for their dead.

Not dead. Not alive. Just gone.

DISAPPEARED, FROM PAGE 1
June morning, carrying four bags and a familiar ambivalence, hopeful and afraid of what they might find.

NO ONE KNOWS HOW MANY
Officially, the Mexican government acknowledges the disappearances of more than 30,000 people — men, women and children trapped in a liminal abyss — neither dead nor alive, silent victims of the drug war.
But the truth is no one knows how many people are missing in Mexico.
Not the government, which does not have a national registry of the missing. Not the families caught in emotional purgatory. Not the authorities in states like Veracruz, where both Karla and Yunery disappeared in a single 24-hour stretch.
When the new governor of Veracruz began his term last December, the state’s official figure for the number of missing was in the low hundreds. Upon the most basic review, the governor revised it — to nearly 2,600.
In the last year alone, the remains of nearly 300 bodies have been unearthed from clandestine graves in Veracruz, unidentified fragments that only begin to tell the story of what has transpired in the state, and more broadly the nation, over the last decade.
“There are an infinite number of people who are too scared to even say anything, whose cases we know nothing about,” said the state’s attorney general, Jorge Winckler.
Not that the state could handle many more. In March, Veracruz announced that it didn’t have money to do DNA tests on the remains that had already been found, leaving parents like Mr. Saldaña to panhandle in the street to raise it themselves.
Overwhelmed, the state also decided to temporarily halt all new searches for clandestine graves. There was simply nowhere else to put the bodies.
“The entire state is a mass grave,” the attorney general said.
For more than a decade, cartels across Mexico have taken out their rivals with utter impunity, tossing their remains into unmarked graves across the country. Soldiers and law enforcement officers often adopt the same approach, leaving many families too terrified to ask for help from a government they see as complicit.
It is both highly efficient and cruel: Without a body, there can be no case. And the disappearances inflict a lasting torture on enemies — robbing them of even the finality of death.
“The cruelest thing about a disappearance is that it leaves you with this desperate hope that your child might actually still be alive somewhere,” said Daniel Wilkinson, a managing director at Human Rights Watch. “You’re

trapped in this horrific limbo where you can’t mourn or move on because that feels like betrayal, like you’re killing off your own child.”

LOSS, AND THEN LOVE
In the summer of 2013, Mr. Saldaña’s love life was falling apart, which was hardly new for him. Only, he wasn’t recklessly careering from woman to woman, as he did when he was a younger man.
This time, his marriage was being torn apart by loss.
In the two years since Karla’s disappearance, he had become a man consumed by rage, impotence — and purpose. He spent every day planning his next search for his daughter, his next interview with her friends, his next stake-out of the men he thought responsible.
His wife at the time, who was not Karla’s mother, couldn’t take it. His single-mindedness was creating another hole in their home. After more than a decade together, they split.
On the walls of his new apartment, he taped up pictures of his daughter, a shrine of sorts. He loved her deeply, but theirs had been a troubled relationship, volatile. Karla viewed him as a part-time father, an accusation that stung all the more because it was true.
In a life ruled by urges, he had fathered nine children, with multiple women. He was short, with a heavy paunch and a square mustache, and he pursued women like some people devour food, to the point of addiction. To support his families, he gave up any chance of going to college and became a driver, leaving a trail of bitterness.
Finding Karla, in some way, would be his redemption.
She had disappeared with one of his estranged children, Jesus. The half brother and sister were close, though Mr. Saldaña rarely saw him, thanks to an ugly separation with his mother.
Jesus and Karla had gone out together that night, Nov. 28, 2011, to a party. They enjoyed the night life, though the clubs and bars were often populated with members of organized crime. The two had last been seen in her car. It was recovered two days later in the possession of an off-duty policeman.
Mr. Saldaña wonders whether some cartel member hit on Karla at a bar that night, or whether she and Jesus witnessed something they weren’t supposed to. But as with so many other cases, the circumstances of their disappearance are unknown.
From that moment, Mr. Saldaña’s life was re-centered on a single mission — finding Karla and, with her, Jesus. He joined a collective of families and began attending meetings.
To search for a missing loved one in Mexico is to inhabit a life of desperate entrepreneurialism.
Families, resigned to looking on their



Vicky Delgadillo after looking through an album of her missing daughter, Yunery, at the home she shares with Carlos Saldaña in Xalapa. Below, a shrine to the memory of Mr. Saldaña’s and Ms. Delgadillo’s missing children sits on a dresser in their home.



own, build coalitions, pressure and cajole officials, and cling to every shred of hope.
Mr. Saldaña threw himself into it, combing areas where criminals may have murdered people, organizing free DNA tests and raising money to pay for it all.
He and others scouted out suspicious plots of land, looking for signs of slightly upturned earth. When they found one,

meeting, every fund-raiser and every media campaign, denouncing the government for its inaction or inefficiency. She was warm, too, bringing a calming presence to a group often seized with rage.
She and Mr. Saldaña had an especially haunting bond. Their children had disappeared less than a day apart — abducted, they believed, by the same group of criminals. To them, it seemed inevitable that their children would be buried in the same place.
Mr. Saldaña had scoured Veracruz for details of the criminal operation: where it conducted business, where it buried its enemies. A friend of Karla’s told him of a ranch where cartel members were believed to dissolve their victims in acid. He felt, somehow, that this was where their children had been taken.
He shared his suspicions, the fruit of his one-man investigation, with Ms. Delgadillo. They folded their individual searches into one, meeting over coffee to compare notes, and sometimes just to be in each other’s company. Slowly, the friendship became something more, a love wrought from the inescapable forces shaping their lives.
“We were friends and companions in this fight,” Mr. Saldaña said. “But we decided to spend our lives together and live this struggle united.”
On his birthday — May 24, 2015 — he

moved in with her, shifting his modest belongings into the two-bedroom cinder block flat where she lived with Yunery’s two children.
Their life moves to the same rhythm these days, an odd cadence that is both comforting and isolating. Their friends, even their other children, are afraid of the course they have taken — the endless chase, the constant pressure on state authorities, the media campaigns.
They don’t tell people anymore when they find threatening letters on the windshield of their Volkswagen. Or when strangers call their phones with cryptic, menacing messages, ordering them to stop their crusade. The traumas have drawn them closer as a couple, but farther from their families.
“It just leaves you with so little time to raise and be a parent to the rest of your kids,” said Ms. Delgadillo, whose contact with her two other children tapered off in recent years.
Mr. Saldaña nodded. “One of my daughters called me up recently and said she wanted to chat. We went to a coffee shop and she told me: ‘Dad, please, I want to ask you to stop doing what you are doing. I am scared, scared for you, scared for me and for all of us. Please, just stop.’”
“I told her: ‘How could I stop looking for her? She is my daughter, she is your sister,’” he said. “I will never ever stop looking for her.”
He wiped away a stray tear and cleared his throat.
“It’s like you lose your other children as well,” he said.

THE DIRTY WAR THEN — AND NOW
To disappear has a particular meaning in Latin America, a vocabulary shared by nations that have suffered its tragic distinction. It is not simply to vanish, but to be vanished: forcibly abducted and, often, never seen again.
In the 20th century, the authoritarian governments of Argentina and Chile disappeared thousands of supposed opposition members, robbing spouses, parents and children of closure. Guatemala and El Salvador razed communities of accused sympathizers, both before and during their ultraviolent civil wars.
Mexico took part in the campaign, amassing some 1,200 disappearances during the 1960s and 1970s at the hands of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ruled for nearly 70 years and governs again today. Historians call this period of disappearances the dirty war.
But unlike Argentina, Chile or Uruguay, Mexico never really investigated its atrocities. While truth commissions and exhumations of mass graves sought to exorcise the sins of past regimes elsewhere in the region, government responsibility in Mexico largely stayed buried. Attempts in the early 2000s fell apart, leading to few arrests.

As the nation wrestled with that mysterious chapter of Mexican history, another was already starting.

The disappearances continued, in a new form. The numbers were small, the cases isolated and the purpose distinct from earlier iterations. It was not political but criminal.

This time, the disappearances were carried out by organized crime as it battled for territory in the lucrative drug trade. Along the border with Texas, the numbers slowly ticked higher. The government eventually launched a war against organized crime in 2006. And as the violence mounted, so did the disappearances.

The cartels are not the only ones responsible. In hundreds of cases, the military and the police have been accused of disappearing individuals across Mexico's coasts, deserts and mountains.

The families of victims in Baja California have meticulously documented 95 cases involving the authorities and delivered them to the International Criminal Court with a plea to investigate. Five hundred cases have been recorded in Coahuila and sent to the court as well. Similar disappearances in Chihuahua and Guerrero have also been brought to the attention of international bodies.

Until recently, the disappearances were largely ignored by a government neither willing nor capable of effectively confronting the atrocities. But as families have become more organized, their plight has become harder to ignore.

In 2012, leaked documents showed that the government believed there to be a total of 25,000 people missing across the country, perhaps the first time any official recognition of the problem surfaced. This year, the tally climbed to nearly 33,000.

THE SEARCH AT THE RANCH

The convoy left at 6:30 a.m. sharp, a procession of camouflage trucks bearing marines, police officers and officials. Mr. Saldaña and Ms. Delgadillo trailed in a small van transporting the families.

After countless phone calls beseeching the government for help, hundreds of hours chasing down leads, years of rallying other families and stalking officials with a megaphone of grief, Mr. Saldaña and Ms. Delgadillo were getting a shot. Maybe their only shot.

They drove for nearly an hour, slowing in the town of Cosautlán de Carvajal, the last population center before the ranch Mr. Saldaña had heard about. Like many places taken over by organized crime in rural Mexico, the property was scarcely discussed in town. Locals knew not to ask what the armed men were doing up there. They began to whisper as the convoy passed through the narrow streets, wondering what was happening.

Past a creek flowing over an unpaved road, the vehicles came to an entrance. The marines got out and began a clearing operation that lasted three hours.

The ranch, meandering over expansive terrain, had been abandoned. But only recently. The team — a mix of foren-

The disappearances inflict a lasting torture on survivors — robbing them even of the finality of death.

sic scientists, police officers and investigators — discovered healthy horses, cattle and well-tended sheep roaming around when they arrived.

The couple wandered the grounds in a dream state, led more by instinct than clues. They stumbled on a large metal bin filled with dirt and random pieces of clothing, perhaps, they thought, the belongings of captives.

Having been the engine behind the entire raid, Mr. Saldaña tried to take control, barking orders.

The officials grew weary of his commands. He was pointing to undisturbed earth, where the police dogs caught no scent.

"I'm not simply looking for the remains," he shouted. "I know you want to find body parts, but I have information that our kids were probably dissolved in acid or burned."

"I'm looking for buried clothing," he said, "and ashes."

A woman from the federal prosecutor's office intervened.

"All authorities are here to listen to the requests of these two," she instructed the others.

The next day, they continued searching but came away with more questions than answers. A cinder block room contained a soiled mattress and chains — some grisly torture chamber, the couple imagined. Nearby, a stack of women's undergarments — bras and panties — tied together.

What other use could this room have had than torturing and imprisoning people, Mr. Saldaña wondered. "No one would even hear if someone was screaming at the top of their lungs from here," he said.

He and Ms. Delgadillo continued down the hill for another kilometer. He carried a metal stick with a hook fixed on its end, to pry loose items from the soft earth. His hook snagged a piece of clothing, and then another, and another. He laid them in a pile at his feet and called for help.

The forensic specialists took over, drawing a circle around the spot. They dug. An hour later, a pile of 500 items sat before them: baby outfits, women's blouses, worn-out jeans and shoes.

A profound sadness settled over Mr. Saldaña. He took no comfort in finding the clothes that he had chastised officials to look for, no comfort in being right. It only reminded him how far they were from finding Karla, Jesus and Yunery.

"I wonder if this clothing might be as close as we ever get to our children," he said to Ms. Delgadillo. "That its very existence means we may never reach them."

The authorities gave the families one more day to search the property, a stretch of land that would take 10 times that many people a week to cover.

They found nothing else.

'A BODY, ANY BODY'

In Veracruz, the missing are not only buried in secret graves. They are also recorded in small black books, where their names and details are lost to the modern age.

The state's forensic laboratory chief, Rita Adriana Licea Cadena, pulled out a ledger. In it, she said, were the names of thousands of individuals who had turned over their DNA in the hope that it might match some of the remains disinterred from mass graves across the state.

But no one had been able to computerize the records, which were drawn from 2010 to 2013, some of the most violent years in the state. In notebook form like this, the data was virtually useless. No one could realistically search the DNA samples to find a match.

"We just don't have enough people to do the work," she said this March.

Outside her offices, a family sat quietly in the lobby, hoping for some news. The families come often, asking questions no one can answer.

"One woman came into my office crying, asking me to give her a body, any body, so she could bury it as her son," said Mario Valencia, the official in charge of all forensics in the state. "I told her I could not: 'How can I take someone else's child to satisfy your grief? What about their grief?' "

The cause of the disappeared was often a forgotten one — until 43 college students vanished at once on Sept. 26, 2014, forcing a national reckoning in Mexico.

The students, who were preparing to become teachers, were heading to a protest in Mexico City. They had commandeered a fleet of buses to get there, a practice more or less accepted over the years.

But that night, the police opened fire, creating a panic that left at least six people dead. The remaining 43 students, frozen in fear, were rounded up by the police and turned over to a criminal gang that the officers were working for.

The motive for the attack has never been fully explained, and after more than three years, only one of the student's remains has been positively identified.

After the mass abduction, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans poured into the streets in protest. The entire world was shocked. Mexican officials had not only failed to find the students. Some were clearly complicit in the crime.

Scenes of relatives hunting in the forested mountains of Guerrero for mass graves, equipped with little more than picks, shovels and blind resolve, reinforced the extent of the phenomenon.

The public pressure helped lead to a new law, enacted this month, to combat disappearances. Its passage has given some hope that the proper resources and attention might be paid to an issue long bled of both.

"It will not solve the problem, but it's a start," said Juan Pedro Schaerer, the director of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Mexico, who helped shape the legislation. "The challenge will be implementing the law."

On paper, the Law Against Forced Disappearances creates a national registry of the missing, something that is currently maintained piecemeal across multiple lists, by multiple agencies. It should also bring more resources, for forensic investigations and the management of precious DNA information.

"Attending to the disappeared is my main priority, both as a public official and as a human," said Roberto Campa, the subsecretary for human rights in the country's interior ministry.

But in Mexico, laws are seldom the issue; on paper, they are often perfect. Rather, change hinges on the will and capacity to enforce them. On this score, advocates for the disappeared have tempered their hopes.

A highly touted legal overhaul, completed last year to replace an antiquated system, is facing an attack from the government that put it into practice. Amid new laws to protect the nation's media, more journalists have been killed this year than in any other in recent history. Meanwhile, anticorruption efforts passed with great fanfare this year have been met with scandal after scandal and a refusal to investigate.

RAISED HOPES, AND DASHED ONES

The couple's next target — another ranch, this one tucked into the verdant hillsides of central Veracruz — was abandoned when they arrived in late September.

A local lawyer from the prosecutor's office had agreed to join the pair, out of a sense of solidarity. As they climbed a hill, Mr. Saldaña looked over at the young prosecutor and asked him where his gun was.

The man pulled a Bible out of his pocket and said it was all the protection he needed.

Mr. Saldaña told him he was stupid. Locals living nearby had whispered to Mr. Saldaña that the suspects in his daughter's disappearance were using the place a few times a month, to conduct business and throw parties.

Mr. Saldaña had decided to take a look. But he agonized over whether to tell Ms. Delgadillo. Even as he packed his bags, walking stick and binoculars, he had still not made up his mind. Feeling guilty, he gave in.



Clockwise from top: The cartel ranch near Xalapa where Ms. Delgadillo and Mr. Saldaña searched with the police; Mr. Saldaña traveling home after a meeting in Mexico City; the relatives of missing persons gathering to give DNA samples at a church in the city of Veracruz; and Ms. Delgadillo's grandchildren playing at her daughter's house in Xalapa.



As he had suspected, she immediately began packing her things, waving away his protests. They both knew he couldn't deny her, not after the last few months she had endured.

In April, the couple had been scouring the state, as usual, asking to review case files, poring over the descriptions and pictures of missing persons. Suddenly, they got a hit.

The girl was short, with the same hair color and complexion as Yunery. Ms. Delgadillo could barely breathe. She begged the authorities to exhume the body for a DNA test.

"It wasn't my daughter," she said, sobbing lightly. "But still I feel a sense of peace, that another family has their daughter back, that they can stop looking."

After that, Mr. Saldaña knew he couldn't tell Ms. Delgadillo to stay home while he went out on his missions. With the prosecutor in tow, the couple searched the ranch for three hours that fall day, making their way through heavy brush before coming across a set of stables. The entrance was locked. Mr. Saldaña scaled the wall and jumped inside. A flock of bats stirred.

Once again, scattered throughout, were clothes belonging to a mishmash of ages and sexes. Some had been burned, and others were puzzling — like the stack of heavy coats in a state where the temperatures range from hot to infernal.

Farther on they found what looked like tombs.

"It could be something," Mr. Saldaña said, beaming.

They didn't have the tools needed to open the covers, so they moved on. Later, they heard the sound of all-terrain vehicles, a favorite mode of transport for cartel lookouts.

The three fled, racing down the hill and back to the car.

DREAMS OF THE DEAD

A crowd of portraits lined the esplanade, taped down against the fierce harbor wind. A woman paused to study them, as if to remember every detail.

But most bore only two: the names of missing people and the dates they disappeared, simple facts anchored in mystery.

"I loved you before I knew you, and I will love you to the end of my days," read one poster with the faces of more than a dozen missing children, arrayed along the branches of a tree.

Mr. Saldaña, watching from the shade, sheepishly approached the woman to ask for help. His daughter was among those faces, he explained, pointing to a portrait of Karla.

"The government is out of money to buy the materials for DNA testing," he told the stranger, lifting a straw hat from his head and mopping his brow. "So we are raising the money ourselves to pay for it."

Dozens of other relatives of Mexico's missing had joined him in the port city of Veracruz that bright Saturday in October, all to raise money for a government that, in their eyes, seemed incapable of helping them — or unwilling to. When told of their campaign, the federal government denied that it was necessary,

saying it provides all the resources needed for DNA testing.

"My brother disappeared, too," the woman told Mr. Saldaña, nodding tightly. A year of searching had produced no leads, she said, not in a state bankrupted by its previous governor, who has been charged with stealing millions of dollars.

"This is our government," the woman concluded, fishing a small bill from her pocket and putting it into a slotted tin. "They took it all for themselves."

The sun cast an acid wash over the port as Mr. Saldaña returned to the shade. Cargo vessels trudged in and out of the channels. Shipping cranes lined the sky like origami birds.

The other families waded into the blistering heat to approach passers-by, or to give chase when the breeze blew away the portraits of their children.

Everyone except for Ms. Delgadillo, who remained in the sun for most of the day, tending to all the portraits as if each one were her child.

It was humbling work. Most pedestrians slid past without a word. A few even picked up the pace when they saw a parent approaching.

"You sometimes wonder how it is that someone can't even give one dollar," Mr. Saldaña said, after being blown off by a Frenchman on holiday. "I guess they just don't know what we are living."

Kindness surfaced in unexpected places.

Christian Carrillo Rios, an employee at the state victim's assistance program, arrived with the parents shortly after 9 a.m., wearing a collared shirt and

starched jeans in the stifling heat.

He crawled on the ground to tape down the portraits and chased spare change as if he, too, had lost someone. Ashamed that his office had refused to pay for refreshments for the families, he bought water and snacks on his own dime.

"I've always cared about this issue, but when I had a son last year it all changed," he said, his voice breaking. He cleared his throat and shook his head. "If someone were to take my child from me, I don't know how I could go on living."

Two young brothers were so moved by the stories of loss that they raced home to retrieve the contents of their piggy bank. They returned with a bag full of change covered in bits of smashed clay.

A father who heard about the campaign on the radio took his entire family. He listened to a mother talk about her lost son while holding the hand of his own, weeping. Before he left, he emptied his wallet into the collection box.

"Most of the time we feel impotent and powerless, but when you see the goodness of people it gives you strength," Mr. Saldaña said.

The families stood outside for 10 hours that day, until sunset, earning a little less than \$600 — the equivalent of three DNA tests.

As a couple, Mr. Saldaña and Ms. Delgadillo have decided to adopt a new approach to mourning. Instead of learning to live without their children, they are trying to live with them. To celebrate them every day.

This October, the couple decided to throw their daughters a joint birthday party, with cake, candles and balloons. The girls' birthdays were only days apart.

Mr. Saldaña and Ms. Delgadillo wanted to invite their extended family — the other parents, husbands and wives who had lost someone.

"We wanted to do something happy with them," Mr. Saldaña explained.

"This way, until we find them, we will keep them present in our lives," Ms. Delgadillo added.

But their plans soon gave way to reality, and there was no party. Between the trips up and down the state and basic necessities, they had no money for it.

Despite everything, Mr. Saldaña said he was filled with more hope these days than ever. He dreamed about Karla, felt her close to him, as if the end was near. In a recent dream, he confronted the men responsible for Karla's abduction. With an arsenal of automatic weapons, he fought them like an action hero, leaving no survivors.

In the dream, he said, it was up to him and no one else. No failing system, numb to his pleas. No crooked cops or courts that so often failed to reach convictions in Mexico. Only justice.

"If you kill them," he said, "at least it's over."

Business

Small corporation at Facebook’s mercy

Greeting card company quickly reached millions; then giant made a change

BY JOHN LELAND

Two friends started a greeting card company on the internet. It was cheap to start and it instantly reached millions. Then one day without warning, Facebook changed the way it did business.

This is a story about survival in the age of Facebook, when a privately held algorithm can turn a beloved product into a hobby with no monetary value. Subplots include forays into alcohol, cheap laughs and low-paid freelancers.

Duncan Mitchell was a creative director at an ad agency in 2005 when his friend Brook Lundy, who worked at another agency, approached him with the idea to create online greeting cards. The ones available at the time seemed staid or unfunny. More salient, an e-card company, Blue Mountain, had recently been bought for stock and cash worth up to \$1 billion.

“In the back of your head, especially back then, you’re like, Is this the next million dollar idea?” Mr. Mitchell, 48, said.

Mr. Mitchell was a graphic designer; Mr. Lundy had a way with words. At the very least, they thought, they could create cards for their friends.

“And at the very best we could leave our advertising jobs,” Mr. Lundy, 46, said. “That was the ambitious side of us, that we could figure out this business that we knew nothing about.” Their product, they thought, was tailor-made for the social network of Facebook: fast, funny and intensely shareable.

What happened next, as the cards thrived and then suddenly withered on Facebook, illustrates the mercurial power of a new near-monopoly, with implications for all sorts of publishers and businesses, said Jonathan Zittrain, director of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University.

“Facebook has grown at a pace and had an impact that it’s really hard to say anybody planned,” he said. “It isn’t just a mere commercial platform. It’s a place that people are turning to to get their sense of what’s going on in the world.

“That’s a combination that should be carefully navigated,” Mr. Zittrain said. “It would be awfully strange, back in the day, if the Yellow Pages rearranged themselves every other day.”

On a recent morning in Lower Manhattan, Mr. Lundy and five staff members gathered to discuss the state of traffic on Someecards.com. The offices were a kooky corporate WeWork space near

Wall Street; the staff members were mostly standup comedians and joke writers, mostly in their 30s.

“There’s good news,” said May Wilkerson, an editor on the site. “We’re at 18 million sessions for the month so far, up from 16.7 million at this point last month.”

What was drawing those users, though, was not e-cards but a stream of articles about things that were popular on the internet at that moment, including a celebrity’s new “boob tattoo” and a dermatologist who called herself Dr. Pimple Popper, with a 15-minute video of a “never ending” cyst doing — well, you can imagine what it was doing.

More than half a million people watched the video.

“Old reliable,” said Orli Matlow, one of the writers, noting that this was not the first time the company had posted videos from Dr. Pimple Popper.

Two writers in the room said they were physically repelled by the video. All agreed this was a good thing.

These hourly blog posts have replaced e-cards as the company’s main source of revenue. How long that will last before the company has to reinvent itself again is anyone’s guess.

For a humor company, the office was short on banter. The staff communicated mainly through Slack, the messaging app. WeWork, with its cold brew iced coffee on tap, supplied a fun-ish workplace with no personal design touches, and Slack enabled camaraderie without actual discussions.

When the two friends started the company in 2007, with \$350,000 in seed money, their plan was to produce e-cards, build a following and possibly sell to a larger company.

The first two steps came quickly. Using stock line drawings found on the internet, they wrote wry texts — an early favorite was, “When work feels overwhelming, remember that you’re going to die” — and posted them on Facebook. When people clicked on a card, it sent them to the company website, which contained paid advertising. Within a year, the site was drawing 1.5 million visitors a month. The founders hired more writers. Traffic to the site reached 5 million visitors a month.

Then four years ago, something changed. Cards that might once have reached 200,000 people were suddenly reaching only a few hundred, Mr. Mitchell said.

By then, Facebook had become the equivalent of television in the 1960s, said Nicole Ames, who runs a digital marketing firm called Twist IMC. “It’s the biggest dog on the porch,” she said. But for the companies that grew there, she said, it was impossible to know what formula

FACEBOOK, PAGE 12



AMY LOMBARD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Brook Lundy, left, and Duncan Mitchell, founded Someecards in 2006 and found quick success. But a change in Facebook’s algorithm forced them to change direction.



PORAS CHAUDHARY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Laborers with loads destined for market in Delhi. Below, a worker wrapping mugs at The Boho Street office in Jaipur to be shipped to Amazon warehouses in America.

Amazon seeks India base

MUMBAI, INDIA

Thousands of sellers ship to retailer as it looks for room to grow in Asia

BY VINDU GOEL

Americans shopping on Amazon.com this holiday season may find that the best deals for popular gifts like leather shoes and luxury bedding are coming from an unexpected source: Indian merchants.

Amazon, always on the lookout for ways to lower prices, has been aggressively recruiting Indian vendors to sell their goods directly on the e-commerce giant’s American site. At least 27,000 Indian sellers have signed up since Amazon began the outreach two years ago. They include giants like the Tata Group, a conglomerate that hawks its Titan watch line on the site, and smaller firms like The Boho Street, a peddler of vegan tapestries, incense and handcrafted copper mugs.

The result is lower prices for consumers, because selling foreign goods through the e-commerce giant cuts out some of the usual costs of a traditional importer. But it is also beneficial to Amazon, which gets to add to its enormous product lineup and charge sellers hefty fees.

For Indian merchants like Abhishek Middha, founder of The Boho Street, Amazon provides almost turnkey access to the American market.

“Amazon handles everything in the U.S., from shipping to customer handling, so we can focus on making the best quality products and adding more products to our catalog,” he said.

Although Mr. Middha used to sell on other markets, like Etsy, he switched al-



REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

most entirely to Amazon two years ago because of its vast scale and suite of services. Last year, his sales on Cyber Monday spiked to four times the usual level, helping to propel his annual revenue to \$1.9 million. On Black Friday this year, his sales tripled from the previous day.

“Amazon taught us how to create a brand,” he said.

The growth of Amazon’s Indian global seller program shows how sophisticated the company’s strategy has become. It operates India’s second-largest e-commerce site, Amazon.in, which caters to the country’s growing base of online consumers. But Amazon also sees India as a source of cheap and high-quality products that can be sold on its American site, especially in crucial categories like apparel, to help it take market share from competitors like Walmart.

Abhijit Kamra, who heads Amazon’s global selling program in India, said that Americans already bought many products made in India, such as cotton tow-

els. “What we are trying to do is compress the global supply chain and bring sellers and customers closer,” he said in a phone interview. Some of the 17 million Indian products on the main Amazon.com site, such as saris, tend to attract customers of Indian heritage. But other categories, like jewelry and health products, have wider appeal, Mr. Kamra said.

Amazon has listed many of its Indian products on a special page, Amazon.com/India, to help customers in the United States find them. For the holiday selling season that kicked off with Black Friday, the company spent months helping sellers prepare by stockpiling goods in the United States and programming special “lightning deals” to generate shopper interest. In some cases, the company even lent sellers money for inventory.

The India program is quite lucrative for Amazon. A merchant who chooses the full array of Amazon services, including buying advertising and con-

tracting with the company to store and deliver the products from Amazon’s American warehouses, typically hands over about one-third of the item’s sale price in fees and commissions.

These third-party sellers are crucial to Amazon’s business, said Aaron Cheris, head of the Americas retail practice at Bain, a global management consulting firm. “They make more money on their third-party stuff than on the stuff they sell themselves,” he said in a phone interview. Amazon says that more than half of the units sold on its shopping sites come from such outside sellers.

To attract customers on a crowded site like Amazon.com, it helps to have a niche. For Krishna Murari, the founder of Rajlinen, that niche is luxury cotton bedsheets for the odd-size beds in recreational vehicles.

“I have never seen an R.V.,” said Mr. Murari, a former electronics engineer. But he learned about the specialty sheets from an American company that sells custom mattresses, and then studied images of camper mattresses. Now his factory in Indore, in central India, sells more than 10,000 bed sets designed for recreational vehicles per year in the United States, many of them custom sewn.

Mr. Murari said buyers have little interest in camper sheets until June or July, so for the holidays, he is focusing on high thread-count percale sheets for regular beds. Mr. Murari often imitates designs sold by big American retailers, but tries to undercut them on price, selling his versions for about \$30 a set, slightly below Target’s prices and less than half of the prices at Bed Bath & Beyond for similar items.

At the start of the holiday shopping season, Rajlinen had about 42,000 sheet sets sitting in Amazon warehouses across the United States, waiting for or-

AMAZON, PAGE 12

Virtual currencies alarm ex-regulator

SAN FRANCISCO

Crackdown is sought on what professor calls ‘notorious violation’

BY NATHANIEL POPPER

Members of the Securities and Exchange Commission’s staff have been hearing recently from a former colleague with an urgent question: Why aren’t you cracking down on these initial coin offerings?

Initial coin offerings are a relatively new method that entrepreneurs have used to raise money for start-ups, by selling custom-built virtual currencies. The practice has taken off this year, despite the warnings of regulators and the uncertainty of the rules concerning the fund-raising method.

Joseph Grundfest, who was a commissioner at the S.E.C. in the 1980s and is now a law and business professor at Stanford, said he had been contacting current commission officials and staff members to urge them to bring cases, and fast.

“I.C.O.s represent the most pervasive, open and notorious violation of federal

securities laws since the Code of Hammurabi,” Mr. Grundfest said in an interview.

“It’s more than the extent of the violation,” he said. “It’s the almost comedic quality of the violation.”

A spokeswoman for the S.E.C. did not respond to a request for comment.

Start-ups have raised more than \$3 billion this year from investors through coin offerings. Most start-ups say the coins they are selling will be useful as a method of payment in the online services they are building.

Coin offerings generally happen without the involvement of financial institutions or regulators because investors pay for the coins using Bitcoin and other virtual currencies, which can be sent outside the traditional financial system. Regulators in China and South Korea have recently banned such offerings outright.

In the United States, the S.E.C. has brought one case against a small fraudulent coin offering. The agency has also warned that at least some coins being sold could be considered securities and would be in violation of securities law if not registered with the authorities — and few are.

But Mr. Grundfest, who is also a co-director of the Rock Center for Corporate Governance, said the continuing

flow of new coin offerings showed that the warnings were not nearly enough.

“We’re waiting to see a whole bunch of enforcement actions in this space, and we wonder why they haven’t happened yet,” he said. “I hope what they are doing is planning on a sweep of 50 I.C.O.s.”

Mr. Grundfest is far from the only voice who has criticized the frenzy around coin offerings. Chamath Paliapitiya, a venture capitalist who has

Initial coin offerings are used to raise money for start-ups.

expressed enthusiasm about Bitcoin, has said he thinks that “99 percent of I.C.O.s are a scam,” a sentiment that other leading venture capitalists have echoed.

But Mr. Grundfest’s words could carry more weight, both because he is close to the technology world near Stanford and because he knows what it takes to bring federal securities cases.

He said the most obvious way for regulators to go after initial coin offerings would be to label them as securities and punish them for not registering.

The chairman of the S.E.C., Jay Clayton, said in a talk this month that the agency was planning to crack down on

offerings that violated securities law, including virtual coins that should be categorized as securities but have not been registered with the authorities.

“Where we see fraud, and where we see people engaging in offerings that are not registered, we are going to pursue them because these types of things have a destabilizing effect on the market,” Mr. Clayton said in a meeting at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Mr. Grundfest said that he would welcome this, but that he did not think it should have taken this long. “These are not hard cases,” he said. “You don’t need teams of accountants poring over complex financing documents.”

Many companies offering coins have argued that they are not securities because they will have utility on the networks the companies are building.

But Mr. Grundfest said it was clear that almost everyone buying tokens at this point was buying them with the hope that their value would go up, not because the buyer wanted to use them on some future computer network.

Mr. Grundfest said several teams looking at doing offerings had approached him to ask how to do it right.

“I say, ‘Look, you are at very high risk for violating the securities law,’ and explain why,” he said. “Then they go find another lawyer.”

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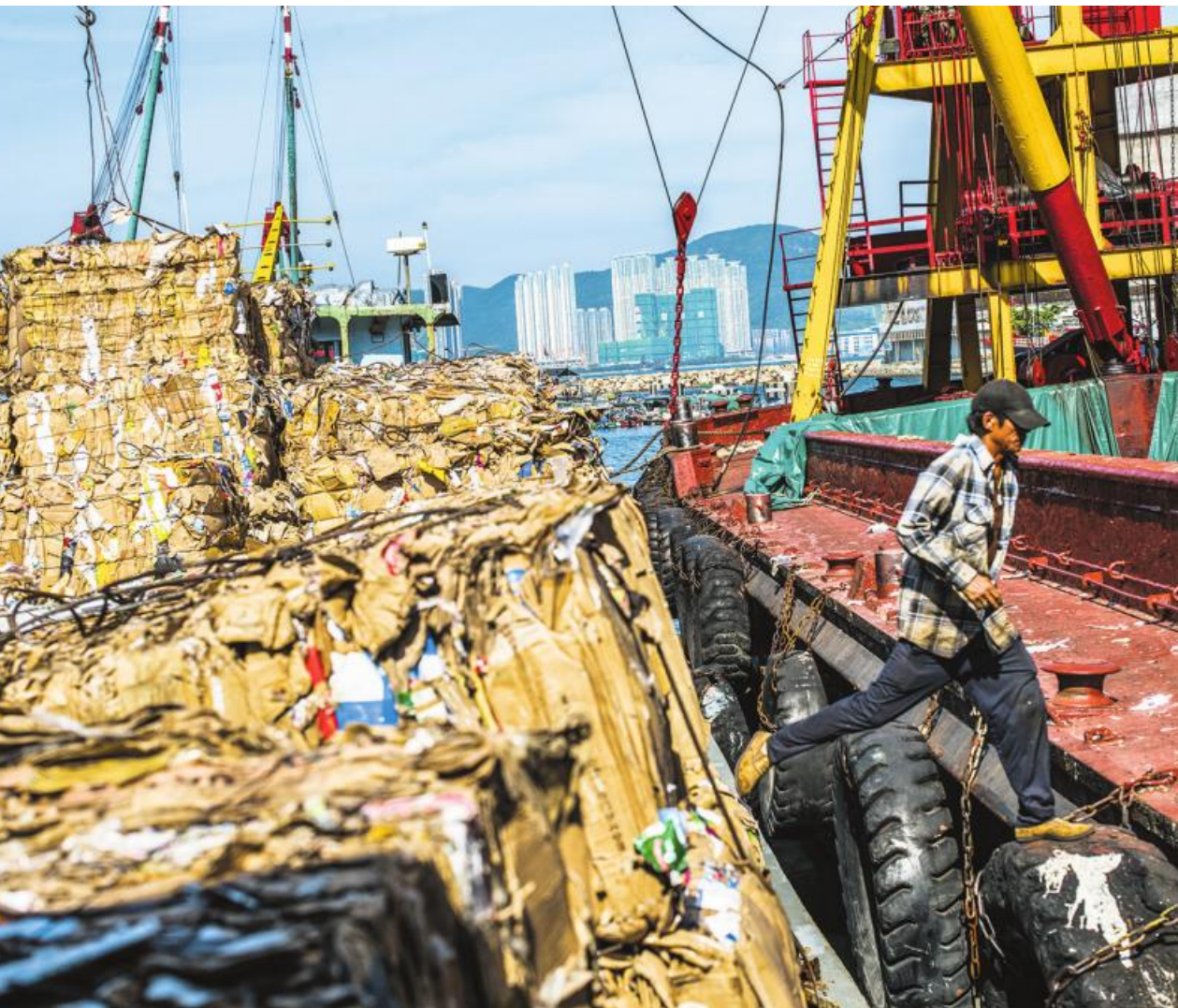
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BUSINESS

No longer willing to take in the world’s trash



DESTINED FOR RECYCLING Cardboard waste being loaded on a vessel in Hong Kong. At right, samples of the plastic waste that passes through the same port.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAM YIK-FEI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

HONG KONG

China’s intense crackdown on imports for recycling breaks a global trade chain

BY MIKE IVES

When the street value of scrap cardboard here fell by nearly a third this summer, Leung Siu-Guen, a scrap collector, started to worry.

“I began skipping dinner so I could work harder,” said Ms. Leung, who was already moonlighting as a dishwasher, sleeping less than five hours a night and making as little as \$500 a month. The drop in price, to the equivalent of about 6 cents a kilogram, would require further sacrifices.

Since the 1990s, the world has shipped its waste paper, discarded plastic and unwanted metals to mainland China for use as raw materials to help power the country’s export-driven manufacturing boom. In 2016, China imported about \$18 billion worth of what the government calls solid waste.

Now China doesn’t want to be the trash can for the rest of the world. Over the summer, regulators in Beijing started an unusually intense crackdown on what they called “foreign garbage,” citing health and environmental concerns.

As with so much else in the global economy, China’s decision is rippling through a vast supply chain that stretches from big waste companies in Texas to the “cardboard grannies” in Hong Kong like Ms. Leung, who pick

through mounds of paper and plastic. Scrap dealers are rushing to find buyers elsewhere in Asia, but the Chinese market is so large that it cannot be easily replaced.

“It’s almost like they turned the spigot off overnight,” said Jim Fish, the president of Waste Management, the largest recycler of residential waste in North America.

As China revved up its manufacturing machine to power growth over the years, officials were willing to tolerate some of the downside of scrap, namely the pollution of local soil and rivers by low-end recycling practices. But China’s economic might means it doesn’t have to make the same environmental sacrifices.

Fears of widespread domestic pollution were amplified by “Plastic China,” a recent documentary film about a bleak town in the eastern province of Shandong where people earn their living by picking through scrap plastics and processing them in machines that belch black smoke. The film went viral in mainland China in January before disappearing from the internet there.

Pollution in the industry is “not only China’s problem,” said Wang Jiuliang, the film’s director.

“It’s the world’s common challenge,” he said.

China’s regulatory fight against garbage began in 2013, when a flurry of port inspections forced overseas recyclers to clean up their operations and invest in new waste-sorting technologies.

In July, China raised the stakes by telling the World Trade Organization that it would ban 24 kinds of imported waste, including some types of paper and plastics, by the end of the year. Chi-



60 YEARS OF ADVENTURE AND DISCOVERY

Mill town in Wisconsin supported Trump, but it’s jittery

WISCONSIN, FROM PAGE 1

rising, White House decisions on trade in the months ahead will reverberate here and in other Midwestern states and may determine whether last year’s political shift becomes more enduring.

Mr. Trump’s attacks on free trade and promises to bring back good-paying jobs from overseas resonated deeply here, even with lifelong Democrats like Mr. Lamia. Those issues, along with a growing disdain for politicians in general and Hillary Clinton in particular, prompted Mr. Lamia to choose Mr. Trump after voting for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

Other foundry workers like Jeff Olejnik, a Democrat who couldn’t bring himself to vote for Mr. Trump in November and reluctantly supported Mrs. Clinton, admits that his message on trade was compelling. “We need to take care of our people here,” he said. “There are at least a dozen paper mills in this area that have closed. You are losing good-paying jobs.”

“People in the Midwest don’t ask for much,” he added. “They want to take a vacation once a year, have decent health care and enough money to pay their bills and save for retirement. That’s our life, but pretty soon there won’t be no middle class.”

For many who have made a life in Neenah, it has been a place where a worker without a college degree can secure the middle-class security and comfort that have slipped out of reach elsewhere.

Mr. Lamia and his wife own a home 10 minutes from the foundry, have three cars between them, and a decade ago they purchased a summer place in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

In many respects, economic data for

the area still paints a sanguine picture. At 2.8 percent, the county’s unemployment rate is more than a full percentage point below the national average. Help-wanted signs hang from local factories, and Neenah Foundry recently raised hourly wages for chippers and grinders, an entry-level job, to about \$12.25 an hour from \$11.25.

But there is a creeping sense of having to work harder just to stay in place, as salaries and lifestyles erode amid pressure from globalization and the unceasing demand for ever-rising profits in corporate America.

“People are working similar jobs to what their parents did but are not able to maintain the same lifestyle,” said Mark Harris, a former mayor of Oshkosh who is now the Winnebago County executive. “That’s causing anxiety.”

And while unemployment may be low now, older residents have seen factories and mills close in town after town, with Wisconsin losing 120,000 factory jobs over all since 2000, including 20,000 in the paper industry alone. Not only has that kept wages in check, but it has also prompted doubts among blue-collar workers about whether they — or their children — have much of an economic future here. “We had eight kids in our family, and my mother didn’t have to work,” Mr. Olejnik said. “Grocery stores weren’t open on Sunday and you spent time with your family. Now, the mall is open on Christmas Eve. We’ve lost a lot.”

‘CHANGE IS HARD FOR PEOPLE’

Families are always rising and falling in America, Nathaniel Hawthorne observed around the time John Bergstrom’s ancestors arrived in Neenah from Norway 150 years ago, and Mr. Bergstrom can vouch for that.



Feeding paper into a giant cutter at the Neenah Paper mill, in Neenah, Wis, a survivor in the region’s declining paper industry.

DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The first Bergstroms made cast-iron stoves and carriages. When new technologies made those businesses obsolete, they turned to what would become the region’s dominant industry by the mid-20th century: paper. They prospered, and the Bergstroms joined the

other paper barons who built mansions along Lake Winnebago. That house is now a museum, and the Bergstroms’ paper business faded as mills closed.

John Bergstrom, now 71, had the foresight to diversify, moving into automobile sales and then real estate. From a

single General Motors dealership that opened in 1982, the Bergstrom family now dominates auto sales throughout the region.

“Change is hard for people,” Mr. Bergstrom said. “So many of the communities in the middle part of America

were based on a particular business or industry, and when that changed, the community didn’t. They lost the ability to continue to be what they once were.”

Indeed, as a developer, he helped Neenah avoid the fate of other Midwestern towns that depended on a single smokestack industry.

In 1993, Mr. Bergstrom and 11 other local businessmen each put in \$100,000 to develop a decrepit site downtown with a new office building. It quickly filled up — and since then Mr. Bergstrom has helped build seven new office buildings, lifting the work force in downtown Neenah from 500 to more than 3,700.

One of those sites was the former Bergstrom paper mill, which the town tore down about a decade ago. It is now home to the headquarters of Plexus, a rapidly growing maker of complex electronic equipment that also has two manufacturing facilities nearby, employing nearly 2,000 people in all.

“When you fly on a 747, there are likely Plexus parts in that plane that were made here,” said Dean Kaufert, the mayor of Neenah.

There is still a paper mill downtown as well — Neenah Paper, which traces its roots to the 1870s and was spun off from Kimberly-Clark in 2004. The company has thrived by making high-end stationery, labels and other products requiring production and service know-how not easily replicated overseas.

But the closing of so many other mills has a way of obscuring success stories.

Nearly a decade after the mill closed in Kimberly, Wis., putting 570 employees out of work, the town is still struggling with how to redevelop the 91-acre brownfield site.

Last month, the paper maker Appvion filed for bankruptcy, putting at

nese regulators also began restricting wastepaper imports.

“I was angry, but I knew I was just a small businesswoman,” Ms. Leung, 63, said of the wastepaper restrictions as she picked through cardboard, polystyrene and soda cans.

Ms. Leung and other small-time scrap collectors sell the waste to traders at no-frills collection depots.

In the United States, the new rules mean more waste in the country’s landfills, according to the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, a lobbying group based in Washington.

Recyclers might also have to upgrade their facilities to handle the waste, leading to higher costs for American municipalities and taxpayers, said Adam Minter, a recycling expert and author of “Junkyard Planet: Travels in the Billion-Dollar Trash Trade.”

Workers at Hong Kong’s junkyards and scrap depots said that Beijing’s new and pending restrictions on waste imports were already affecting their bottom lines. At a recycling depot on the city’s outskirts that looks out onto the Chinese mainland, the manager, Ryan Cheung, said local scrap collectors were selling him more plastics than usual, apparently because the new rules were already limiting their options. As a result, chest-high pallets of off-white packaging film were piling up under the depot’s corrugated-metal roof.

“I can’t buy any more,” he said, standing near a heap of dismembered Barbie dolls as garbage trucks lumbered down a nearby road toward a landfill. “I have too much.”

Carolyn Zhang contributed reporting from Shanghai.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAM YIK FEI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

UNCERTAIN DESTINATION Cardboard being retrieved at a Hong Kong market, upper left, and scenes from a Hong Kong scrapyard. Mainland China isn’t welcoming trash any more.



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least 1,000 jobs in the Appleton area in jeopardy. Nearby, at Appleton Coated, 500 workers have been laid off since the summer, with a skeleton crew staying on as the company’s new owner seeks a buyer for the plant.

Passing the ruins of the abandoned plant in downtown Kimberly as he drove to work at Appleton Coated every day, Chris Bogan would have the same thought: His mill could be next.

So when that came to pass this fall, after five years of winding massive paper rolls, Mr. Bogan was scared, but not shocked. “Three days after I was hired at Appleton Coated, we were warned about layoffs, so I worried about it all the time,” he said.

Two other local manufacturers did step up and make offers to Mr. Bogan and other laid-off workers, but the \$14 to \$17 an hour they offered didn’t come close to the \$28.66 he was earning at the paper plant.

And with his wife at home taking care of two toddlers, including a 2-year-old son with cerebral palsy, there was no way to bridge that gap. “If my wife was working, that would be acceptable, but in my situation that won’t work,” he said.

A Marine veteran, Mr. Bogan has enrolled at Fox Valley Technical College, and hopes to receive his commercial trucking certification in a few months.

That could lift his salary back above \$20 an hour, but in the meantime he and his family are without health insurance. His son’s therapy is covered by Medicaid.

“It’s been a little over a month, and people are coming to terms with the fact that we won’t be making the same wages that we were,” he said. Mr. Bogan said his main concern now was making sure his wife would still be able to bring

their son to his occupational, speech and physical-therapy sessions each week.

Downtown Neenah is only a 15-minute drive from his home, but the craft beers on tap there and the farm-to-table restaurants that have opened up might as well be in Madison or Brooklyn.

“The area is changing,” he said. “I grew up on the outskirts of town, and as a local guy, it’s not for me. I’d rather cook a steak at home than go out and pay \$120 for a meal.”

‘GO TO WHERE THE FISH ARE AT’

Watching those changes heightens the anxiety at an old-school manufacturer like Neenah Foundry, but these companies and their workers are adapting. Mr. Lamia, the 57-year-old veteran employee who backed Mr. Trump after decades of always voting a straight Democratic ticket, is a case in point.

Although he complains that “it’s so hard to compete against Mexico,” he has reinvented himself more than once during his career at Neenah Foundry.

After his first job as a laborer was eliminated, he got a commercial driving license and drove trucks there. Looking to rise and avoid another layoff from the foundry, Mr. Lamia then spent one day a week for five years at Fox Valley Technical College and eventually became certified as an electrician. With overtime, he earns roughly \$70,000 a year, a solidly middle-class wage here.

Indeed, for workers with two-year degrees in fields like automation, metal fabrication and advanced manufacturing, employers are offering \$50,000 to \$60,000 to start. “We call them gold-collar workers in the state,” said Susan May, the president of Fox Valley Technical College.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Counterclockwise from top: Participants stood for the national anthem before a charity race to benefit a Neenah food pantry; a worker at Neenah Foundry with molds for manhole-cover frames; finished frames.

But even as salaries for skilled workers like Mr. Lamia have risen, the number of low-paid entry-level laborers at Neenah Foundry is shrinking.

His boss, Tom Riordan, is about to invest \$15 million in robots, automating part of the process in which cast metal

parts are removed from sand molds by unskilled chippers and grinders.

“American manufacturers need to take a tough-love approach,” he said, sitting in Neenah Foundry’s nondescript board room, not far from the noisy factory floor. “Sometimes you just have to

suck it up, adapt, and serve your customers.”

Mr. Lamia favors another sort of tough love: tariffs aimed at the countries he feels are “feeding off the U.S. and don’t play by the same rules.”

To comply with new government regulations, for example, Neenah Foundry will spend more than \$1 million over the next six months to reduce silica particles by half, to 25 parts per billion. In China and India, workers simply make do with masks, and Mr. Lamia doesn’t believe he and his colleagues should be at a disadvantage when environmental standards overseas lag behind those in the United States. “If Neenah Foundry has to pay millions for emissions controls and China doesn’t have to, then they should have to pay more to export to the U.S.,” he said. “It’s got to be a level playing field, and this should have been done a long time ago.”

Mexico is a more complicated case, Mr. Lamia added, especially given the country’s role as a major importer of American grain and other products. “Trump’s got a lot on his plate, but he should impose tariffs on China for sure,” he said.

Appealing as the tough talk on trade might be at times, it wasn’t enough to persuade Mr. Riordan, a self-described moderate Republican, to vote for Mr. Trump. Instead, he cast a write-in ballot for a fellow Wisconsinite, Representative Paul D. Ryan, the House speaker.

Mr. Riordan doesn’t discount the appeal of Mexico to manufacturing executives like himself. But he’s not considering a wholesale move south of the border for Neenah Foundry — instead, he wants to find ways to supply American manufacturers who have relocated there. “A lot of our customers are head-

ing south, and you go where the fish are at,” he said.

As for the Nafta trade deal now being renegotiated, Mr. Riordan favors keeping changes to a minimum, rather than ripping up the 24-year old agreement, as President Trump has threatened to do.

“There isn’t an easy answer, but my personal bias would be against that,” he said. “Let’s put some lipstick on this pig, and not make a whole lot of substantial changes.”

He knows that axles made here will go into vehicles exported to Mexico and other countries that are trade targets of the White House. What’s more, Mexico is a major importer of corn and soybeans from American farmers, who in turn buy tractors and combines from John Deere, a major customer.

“Do we really understand what we’re doing?” Mr. Riordan asked. “We have a big trade surplus with Mexico in terms of grain. If U.S. farmers are suddenly at a disadvantage, who is going to pay the price for that? American agricultural equipment manufacturers, which impacts us.”

As the steward of a manufacturer that has survived world wars, the Great Depression, the Great Recession and a couple of trips to bankruptcy court, Mr. Riordan is much more optimistic about his company’s ability to compete globally than many of his workers.

The same goes for the country’s ability to win in trade with the likes of Mexico or China. “If rational minds prevail in Washington, over time the country will get it right,” Mr. Riordan said. “But Congress and the president need to get it right in the meantime.”

Robert Gebeloff contributed reporting from New York.

BUSINESS

Company finds itself at the mercy of Facebook

FACEBOOK, FROM PAGE 8

it used to determine which posts appeared in users' news feeds. When Facebook cut down on images that directed users to other sites, companies like Someecards were blindsided.

"You spent years building up this organic following, and now your content no longer shows up unless you pay," Ms. Ames said.

Although e-cards remain popular, they now mostly provide an identity for the company, distinguishing it from other internet humor sites, Mr. Mitchell said. But "twelve million people can look at them on Facebook, but we don't make any money from that," Mr. Mitchell said. The company tried to sell the cards for a while, but there was not enough interest.

Instead, the staff uses the Someecards style to create branded advertising for Showtime, Splenda and other clients, relying on Facebook shares.

"If we can make you happy enough to share it with your friends, then your friends will be advertised to, and you'll be advertising," Mr. Mitchell said.

“When they make these changes, you have to be ready.”

"Facebook's algorithm plays to that too. If we post this and people don't like it, it goes away. We need you to share."

Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Lundy are now trying to plan for the next time Facebook changes its rules. One idea rolled out last year was a line of wines called SomeWine, with labels resembling the cards. An inexpensive red blend, for example, is labeled "This wine goes great with more of this wine."

Mr. Lundy said he had given up worrying about the uncertainty, because there was nothing he could do about it. But Mr. Mitchell pointed to a recent experiment in six countries, where Facebook stopped including posts from publishers in users' news feeds, relegating them to a separate feed. Companies lost most of their readership overnight, Mr. Mitchell said.

"Google and Facebook have so much power," Mr. Mitchell said. "When they make these changes you have to be ready and have ideas. There could be a day where we're out of ideas. Hasn't happened yet. So I worry about it. I try to keep that concern in that place that doesn't paralyze you, but keeps you motivated to keep doing new things."

In the meantime, the company survives by Facebook's algorithms and the tastes of the American public, which turns out to favor a vivid dermatology video.

"I've had friends complain," Mr. Mitchell admitted. "And I don't look at Dr. Pimple Popper. But all I can say is, the way Facebook works, if you people out there weren't clicking on Dr. Pimple Popper, it wouldn't be there."

This, he said, is a winning formula, at least for now.

"Somebody is watching that stuff, and a lot of people are watching it," he said. "So that's that."

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REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Amazon looks for growth in India

AMAZON, FROM PAGE 8

ders to come in. Mr. Murari said his profit margin was low and he did not intend to offer big discounts over the weekend or on Cyber Monday, unlike many American retailers. His primary goal was to bring in enough revenue to keep his 115 workers employed.

While Amazon.com has sellers hailing from many countries, Mr. Cheris said that India and China are the two most important places for Amazon to recruit new merchants, since both nations are sources of cheap manufactured goods.

Unlike China, where local companies dominate e-commerce, India is also a huge domestic market for Amazon. Although most of India's commerce is conducted offline, Indians are coming onto the internet at a rapid clip through their smartphones. Amazon's chief executive, Jeff Bezos, views India and its 1.3 billion residents as vital to his company's future, and he has vowed to spend at least \$5 billion building up his India operations.

Flipkart, the top e-commerce site in India by volume, has pushed the central government to pass policies to protect local internet companies from unfair competition by foreign companies willing to lose lots of money. By promoting



NOAH SEELAM/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Silk-printed bedsheets being sorted and stitched at The Boho Street factory, top. Above, left, an Amazon warehouse near Hyderabad; right, packages of bedsheets.



REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Indian exports, a top priority of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amazon is positioning itself as a good corporate citizen.

The Indian merchants selling on Amazon.com find their local site, Amazon.in, to be a less appealing market-

place. With a per-capita income of \$1,600 a year, most Indians are unwilling to pay anything close to the prices that sellers can command in the United States.

Raja Rajan, head of Boston Creative Company in Coimbatore in south India, has done well selling \$13 engraved

spoons and \$60 folded book art on Amazon.com. He recently began selling the spoons on Amazon's Indian site, too. In the first six days, Mr. Rajan said in a phone interview, he did not have a single sale. Perhaps that was because Indians know how cheap such spoons are to

produce. Mr. Rajan said his profit margin is about \$8 a spoon — rich enough to allow him to slash prices on Black Friday and Cyber Monday and see what happens.

"We are going to cut the price in half," he said. "I just want to try it."

Social media may not drown out word of mouth

Brands should take note of online comments but also follow offline chatter

BY JANET MORRISSEY

When President Trump sent an angry tweet in February blasting Nordstrom for dropping his daughter Ivanka's clothing line from its stores, his supporters took to social media to intensify their previous calls to boycott the retailer. Nordstrom had reason to worry: Previous tweets from Mr. Trump calling out other brands, such as Lockheed Martin, had hurt share prices.

Instead, Nordstrom's shares rose, and its business outperformed many of its rivals in the troubled retail industry in the months that followed.

It was an example of the "dichotomy" between what people say in the heat of a moment online and how they act offline, said Jay York, a senior digital marketing strategist at EMSI Public Relations. And it showcases the need for companies to monitor both online and offline conversations to get a true picture of how people feel about a brand and any controversies it may find itself embroiled in.

On average, 19 percent of a brand's sales — or between \$7 trillion and \$10 trillion in annual consumer spending in the United States — are driven by social conversations, both online and offline, according to a new study conducted by Engagement Labs, a Canadian company that analyzes conversations around brands.

The study, which looked at 170 brands, found that companies often wrongly saw social media as an accurate and sufficient guide for tracking consumer sentiment. Often, though, that social conversation might be much different from

what people are saying in private conversations with friends and family, the study said.

"The danger is you can make some pretty big mistakes if you assume the conversations happening online are also happening offline," said Brad Fay, chief research officer at Engagement Labs and a co-author of the study. "Very often, they're heading in different directions."

The most negative and most outrageous comments often get the most traction on social media. And sometimes, people post comments about a topic just to get a reaction or to reflect an "image" or appear "cool" to their social media followers, when their actual views may be the opposite.

Social media is a valuable tool for detecting early signs of trouble. "It's a wake-up call, a warning that something is afoot and there is a negative force there," said Elissa Moses, chief executive of Ipsos, a market research company. But a brand then needs to dig deeper to see if offline chatter matches it and if not, why not.

Ms. Moses recalled being angry when Ann Curry was forced off NBC's "Today" five years ago. "I took to social media to voice my outrage, and I vowed to not watch the show anymore," she said. "But after years of watching the 'Today' show and my liking of their format and familiarity, I found myself gradually coming back to be a regular watcher."

With Nordstrom, the social media crusaders were loud, but they couldn't shake the loyalty that shoppers felt toward the brand.

"The Nordstrom customer is rock solid, with a very loyal customer base, and that's more important than any idiot social comment," said Howard Davidowitz, chairman of Davidowitz & Associates, a retail consulting and investment banking services firm.



TED S. WARREN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nordstrom braced for trouble after President Trump criticized the retailer on Twitter. But the posting did not hurt sales, and the retailer's shares rose.

So, how do companies track offline conversations?

Focus groups, online questionnaires, in-store survey cards, home visits and even a chat between a manager and a customer in the store can all track consumer sentiment. Retailers like Bloomingdale's and Saks Fifth Avenue often invite loyal customers to meetings to quiz them on everything from the latest promotional campaign to the store's mannequins.

A facial expression, a tone of voice or even a pause can reveal concerns that a social media post or tweet will not, Ms. Moses said.

Robin Hafitz, the founder and chief executive of Open Mind Strategy, sometimes hooks up focus group participants to diodes and heat sensors to detect emotional reactions.

"While they're saying they don't like this sexy or negative commercial, their galvanic responses may actually indicate they're excited by it or have a positive response," she said.

When Craig Schweizer co-founded the mattress company Nectar, he underestimated initial demand and quickly ran out of inventory when sales began in January. That meant long waits and a mountain of negative complaints on so-

"You can make some pretty big mistakes if you assume the conversations happening online are also happening offline."

cial media. He feared his new business might be finished before it ever really started.

But when he reached out to customers through online and phone surveys, he discovered they had no interest in canceling their orders. The more candid he was about the inventory debacle and shipping delays, the more customers seemed to respond.

"Every time we told them the wait would get longer, our sales would go up," said Mr. Schweizer, whose company has more than \$40 million in sales since January.

When Wendy's started its "fresh, never frozen beef" campaign, it generated positive buzz but failed to stimulate sales. When offline surveys were done, the company found "most people just didn't care because they freeze their own beef," Ms. Hafitz said.

And when Chick-fil-A's chief executive, Dan Cathy, made comments opposing same-sex marriage in 2012, a social media campaign urged a boycott of the fast food chain. Instead, sales surged 12 percent to \$4.6 billion that year.

"The running joke is they'll still eat a Chick-fil-A, even though they feel bad about it," Mr. York said. "Will they post a picture of themselves eating a Chick-fil-A? Probably not."

All of this shows why it's critical that brands track all conversations, online and off.

"It's not an either/or question; it's important to look at both," Mr. Fay said. "Brands need to look at the total picture if they're going to be successful."

Opinion

The fall of Africa’s most hated first lady

African presidential wives are expected to unify their nations and respect their elders. “Gucci Grace” Mugabe did neither.

Sisonke Msimang

I spent a lot of time in Zimbabwe in the mid-2000s, as the head of a human rights organization that worked across Southern Africa. Even at the height of the political turmoil in 2008, when opposition figures were assaulted in the aftermath of a stolen election, I was often struck by how deeply respectful Zimbabweans were of their president. Many people were obviously unhappy with Robert Mugabe's leadership. Still, it was not unusual to hear people reference his role in the independence movement, to point out his clear intellectual gifts and his efforts to advance education.

They had no such respect, however, for his wife. Grace Mugabe did not have a history in the liberation movement. She had done nothing for Zimbabwe under colonialism — she was too young. Ms. Mugabe instead inspired disdain. The narrative, universally accepted across the country, was that the shy young typist had stolen Mr. Mugabe's heart and then corrupted him. Mr. Mugabe was a good man turned bad; Ms. Mugabe was the temptress who led him to his downfall.

And in a way, she ultimately did. In the wake of the military takeover of Zimbabwe's government this month, the announcement that Robert Mugabe is no longer in charge of the country, his subsequent refusal to step down and his ultimate resignation, there is much uncertainty in the country. What is clear is that Ms. Mugabe was at the center of the discontent that sparked the surprise coup; the goal, in removing the 93-year-old Mr. Mugabe, was to ensure that she would not ascend to the presidency after his death.

The vitriol against Ms. Mugabe since the coup has been remarkable: Her whereabouts is unknown — a testament to the fact that it is her physical safety rather than his that is in question in these tense times. Some have gone so far as to suggest that her punishment ought to be worse than her husband's, ignoring the fact that it is Mr. Mugabe who is primarily responsible for the state of the country. There have been calls for her to be expelled from Zimbabwe, even as many people have simply been content to see Mr. Mugabe “retire.”

There is little admirable or democratic about Ms. Mugabe. She is no feminist hero; she has been deeply divisive, and her kleptocracy has been unquestionably bad for the country. And yet the position she finds herself in today speaks to the increasingly complicated role of Africa's post-independence first ladies.

Over the course of the two decades since she entered public life, Ms. Mugabe garnered a well-deserved reputation for combativeness. She publicly humiliated key leaders; she has been embroiled in a range of personal scandals because of her volatile temper. The first lady of Zimbabwe eventually evolved into a figure who was part mother of the nation, part Kris Jenner: a celebrity “momager” who wore designer outfits while she fed the rural masses and didn't hesitate to get into physical altercations with those who crossed her or her children.



ZINYANGE AUNTONY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

In contrast to her husband, however, who has been an anachronism for a long time, Ms. Mugabe cut a distinctly modern figure. She was just 31 when she married Mr. Mugabe in 1996; at 52, she remains relatively youthful.

While her husband gained his power and credibility from his role in the independence fight, Ms. Mugabe built her own base among a set of politicians in the ruling party, ZANU-PF, who comprised the country's business elites, most of whom were too young to have participated in independence. (The people who opposed her most fiercely are veterans of the movement.)

As her husband became more fragile, Ms. Mugabe seemed to grow more politically robust. And yet, she was also growing increasingly vulnerable. She was a woman at the center of her country's politics, one who did not owe her position to having worked her way up through the ranks. (Mr. Mugabe formally declared her head of the women's wing of ZANU-PF in 2014; before that, she had never held a position in politics.) In recent years, she had alienated powerful figures. Had her husband died in office without securing her position, she would have faced an uncertain future — either in

jail or in exile once the inevitable post-Mugabe purge began.

Even without the worst of her behavior — the abuses of power, the extravagance — it is hard to imagine that a figure like Grace Mugabe could have fit comfortably into the role of first lady in a country like Zimbabwe,

where the legacy of the independence movement still looms large. Her willingness to berate senior politicians, her ostentatiousness, her lack of reverence for male members of the ruling party — all of it put her outside the bounds of how

an African first lady is expected to conduct herself.

The nationalist discourse of many independence movements, which still shapes African politics today, has little room for women. It saw those who took up arms during the fight as radical departures from the norm, who could be accepted only under the special circumstances of guerrilla

warfare. After freedom, they were expected to go back to their roles as wives and mothers. First ladies were no exception; they, especially, were expected to embody national unity. Winnie Mandela, who famously refused to play second fiddle to Nelson Mandela, was treated like a pariah during their divorce process in 1996 and vilified afterward; it's only now that South Africa has begun to reckon publicly with whether it did wrong by her as a country.

If the mantle of first lady never quite suited the unapologetically outspoken Winnie Mandela, it may have sat better on Mr. Mandela's third wife, Graca Machel, the widow of President Samora Machel of Mozambique.

And yet despite her many accomplishments — her role in the liberation of Mozambique, the fact that she served as education minister, her groundbreaking work on advocating for child soldiers — when Ms. Machel and Mr. Mandela announced their plans to wed, she was met with suspicion: “What sort of woman marries not one but two heads of state?” people asked.

Grace Mugabe has fared particularly poorly compared with Sally Mugabe, Robert Mugabe's first wife, who

was the quintessential African first lady. Sally Mugabe was well educated. She had strong independence credentials, having been imprisoned for speaking out against the colonial rule of what was then Southern Rhodesia. And when her husband became prime minister in 1980, she quickly stepped into the maternal role: She was known across the country as Amai, or “mother.”

Grace Mugabe is no Winnie Mandela. She does not begin to approximate the integrity of Graca Machel. Still, it is worth noting the dangers faced by women married to prominent men, in Africa and elsewhere: When they don't fit a certain mold, they are often vilified — even those who don't cast nearly as villainous a figure as Grace Mugabe. This week, Mr. Mugabe chose to resign after the country's parliament began impeachment proceedings — a remarkably gentle procedure to remove a notoriously brutal man. Ms. Mugabe, from her unknown location, awaits news of what party officials have promised will be her prosecution.

SISONKE MSIMANG is the author, most recently, of “Always Another Country: A Memoir of Exile and Home.”

Grace Mugabe not long before her 93-year-old husband, Robert Mugabe, pictured on banner in background, was ousted as president of Zimbabwe this month. One impetus for the coup was ensuring that she would not succeed him as president.

Vladimir Putin vs. the token women

The Russian president's opponent of choice is a thirty-something blond feminist. Why?

Amie Ferris-Rotman

MOSCOW In the early 1960s, the Soviet Union decided that the time was ripe to spice up its space program. Sputnik capsules and Vostok spaceships had sent dogs, rabbits and the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into orbit already. The Americans were lagging behind; the Kremlin wanted to stay ahead. Russia had a proposition: It would send a woman into space.

On June 16, 1963, Valentina Tereshkova was jettisoned out of the earth's atmosphere. “If women can be railroad workers in Russia, why can't they fly in space?” she famously said later. Her flight came at the culmination of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's thaw, a series of reforms that relaxed repression, ushered in change and propelled women to new status.

Thus, the Soviet Union gave birth to the token Soviet woman: a convenient, one-size-fits-all woman who ticked the boxes of enlightened gender equality and appeased the Communist ideologists, for whom the abolition of capitalism included ending women's exploitation. “*You think we're not advanced?*” Soviets could say to the West. “*But look how liberated our women are.*”

Can there be such a thing as two token women? In Russia's presidential election next year, President Vladimir Putin is widely expected to run and win, which would extend his 18-year grip over Russia by another six-year term. But contesting him — sort of — is the 36-year-old television person-

ality Ksenia Sobchak, the daughter of Mr. Putin's late mentor, and a member of the opposition. Another familiar face from TV, the 37-year-old journalist and lawyer Yekaterina Gordon declared her candidacy two weeks after Sobchak's mid-October announcement. (A handful of other candidates, too, including the 73-year-old leader of the Communist Party and five-time presidential contender, Gennady Zyuganov, have also announced bids.)

At first glance, Ms. Sobchak and Ms. Gordon appear almost interchangeable; both are persuasive and articulate with wide grins and shoulder-length blond hair. From the start of her campaign, Ms. Gordon has sought to distance herself from her rival, saying that, unlike Ms. Sobchak, she was not “born with a silver spoon in my mouth.” (Ms. Sobchak comes from a political dynasty; her father, Anatoly, was mayor of St. Petersburg and her mother, Lyudmila Narusova, is a former deputy in the Federation Council, or upper house. Ms. Gordon was born to well-educated parents, but had a comparatively humdrum upbringing.)

This year marks the first time a woman has declared her intention to run for Russian president in 13 years. In 2004, the role was played by Irina Khakamada, at the time a liberal politician. (She later became a member of Mr. Putin's advisory Human Rights Council.) Before Ms. Khakamada, there was Ella Pamfilova, who in 2000 became the first woman in Russia to run for president in a long-shot campaign that she hoped would encourage others to come forward.

Ms. Sobchak and Ms. Gordon are



ANTON VAGANOV/REUTERS

Ksenia Sobchak, a 36-year-old TV personality, in St. Petersburg. She is running for president of Russia next year, but she is viewed by many as a puppet of Vladimir Putin.

both running on pro-women platforms. Ms. Sobchak graced the cover of Russian Glamour in November, punching the air with her fist and wearing a T-shirt scrawled in English with the words “Women Power.” Inside the magazine, she bemoaned the country's 30 percent gender pay gap and the sidelining of women in the workplace. “When you're missing out on freedoms like speech and elections, gender equality takes last place,” she said in a long interview, interspersed with photos from a fashion shoot. Ms. Gordon, taking a leaf out of her Bolshevik forebears' playbook, has been championing the rights of women and chil-

dren. “We are a country of single mothers whom no one cares for,” she said in a campaign video.

Almost no one in Russia takes seriously the idea that either Ms. Sobchak or Ms. Gordon is truly attempting to challenge Mr. Putin. To get a place on the actual ballot that Russians will see in March, a candidate needs to collect 300,000 signatures in order to register — an almost impossible goal without the aid of the Russian government. This ensures that Mr. Putin will face off only against opponents of his choice. (Ms. Sobchak, in particular, is viewed as a Putin puppet.) Candidates must also have a political party; Ms.

Gordon has yet to join one.

So the question, in this case, is not why two women have finally decided to run for president in Russia but rather: Why does Mr. Putin want to run not only against women, but against women talking about feminist issues?

The Kremlin is often seen in the West as a slick political machinator, but this image belies the truth. It follows broader societal currents as often as it leads. Big ideas are felt out; messaging is gleaned. And so, perhaps, the subject of women, and their place in Russian society, is in the air. There have been other signs that the government has been thinking about this issue: Last March, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev unveiled a national strategy for improving the lives of women by 2022.

The timing of the two women's political entrance comes as Russia embraces a wave of traditionalism, one in which women have not fared well. In a move that won the backing of a resurgent Russian Orthodox Church, domestic violence legislation was softened earlier this year from a criminal to an administrative offense. (The bill was pushed by the same female lawmaker who advocated for the country's anti-gay laws several years ago.) Abortion, which has been legal and common in Russia for decades, is also increasingly under attack, with the full support of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who wants the practice banned.

But if Ms. Sobchak and Ms. Gordon were sent out to talk female power on **FERRIS-ROTMAN, PAGE 15**

OPINION

The New York Times

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THE REPUBLICAN TAX ON THE FUTURE

More debt, a growing trade deficit, factories moving overseas — that’s no way to make America great.

Of all the lies Republican lawmakers and President Trump tell about their tax bills, the biggest whopper is that these windfall tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy would generate so much growth that they would pay for themselves.

The House and Senate tax bills probably would provide a tiny lift to the economy for a couple years — enough, supporters no doubt hope, for them to cynically claim success. It’s what comes next that the G.O.P. glosses over: the addition of more than a trillion dollars to the federal debt in just 10 years. Far from paying for themselves, these cuts would leave a bill for several future generations to pay off.

In other words, Republican leaders aren’t just trying to transfer money from current middle-class and poor Americans to corporations and the very wealthy. They are also trying to transfer money from future middle-class and poor Americans to corporations and the very wealthy.

In addition, these bills would create new incentives for businesses to move production offshore and increase the trade deficit, which will benefit foreign economies and hurt the very factory workers Mr. Trump claims to fight for.

Consider the following: The Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center recently concluded that the House bill would end up lifting the country’s gross domestic product by just 0.3 percent in 2027. The University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Wharton Budget Model is slightly more optimistic, but not by much: It expects the House bill to increase G.D.P. by 0.4 percent to 0.9 percent cumulatively after 10 years and pegs the Senate bill’s impact at 0.3 percent to 0.8 percent.

These pitiful estimates are a far cry from Mr. Trump’s prediction that economic growth could rise a full percentage point a year, or more than 10 percent over a decade.

It is not surprising, then, that just one of 38 prominent economists surveyed by the University of Chicago agreed that the Republican tax cut would substantially lift the economy. And all but one economist said that the bills would substantially increase the federal debt as a percentage of G.D.P.

At the heart of these bills is a cut in the corporate tax rate to 20 percent, from 35 percent, that the administration and congressional leaders argue will encourage businesses to invest, hire more people and give workers raises. They base this claim on cherry-picked studies finding that countries with lower corporate tax rates have had higher wage growth, while ignoring evidence that past cuts to the corporate tax rate in the United States and Britain did not lead to economic booms or higher incomes.

In fact, many business executives say that a big tax cut would not propel them to invest and give raises. “From real world experience I can tell you that tax rates literally never came up in any discussion about hiring or pay levels,” David Mendels, a former top executive at Brightcove and Adobe, wrote on Linked-In recently. Companies invest more when they anticipate greater demand for their goods and services. With the economy close to full employment and corporate profits at record levels, it is hard to see a tax cut doing much to stimulate investment.

At the same time, experts warn that by lowering tax rates for foreign earnings, the bills would encourage businesses to move more of their operations overseas. And the bills exempt some of those foreign profits from United States taxes entirely. Further, companies would be able to claim taxes paid in high-tax countries like Japan as a credit against profits earned in countries like Bermuda with no corporate tax.

Economists also expect the tax bills to lead to bigger trade deficits because the government would be forced to borrow more to pay its bills, driving up interest rates. Those higher rates would prompt foreigners to buy more United States bonds, driving up the value of the dollar. That would make American exports less attractive to other countries and imports cheaper to American consumers. American factories and their workers would become less competitive in the global market, adding new victims to the “rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation” that Mr. Trump deplored in his Inaugural Address.

Republicans appear to be hoping that Americans would be so happy with temporary tax cuts that would kick in next year that they would look for someone other than Mr. Trump or Mr. Ryan to blame when things didn’t work out as promised. But if the vast majority of serious economists are right, these bills would bring nothing but bad news. At least three Republican senators need to vote no to stop that from happening. Surely there are three such lawmakers with the integrity and decency to stop this boondoggle.

Old and lonely in the new India

Sandip Roy

KOLKATA, INDIA Once when I was searching for old-age homes in Kolkata for a story, my mother said sardonically: “Look around you. The whole neighborhood has become an old-age home.” It was an exaggeration but not by much.

The old man down the street was recovering from a knee replacement. The elderly lady across from him spent her days in her nightgown feeding the neighborhood’s stray dogs. The children were gone — to the United States and Australia, to Bengaluru and Mumbai. When my sister went to pay our property taxes she found a separate line for seniors. It was pointless. Almost everyone there was a senior.

My mother had grown up as one of 30-odd cousins, all living in one sprawling house. In the morning they would leave their soaps outside the common bathroom to mark their place in the line. On holiday afternoons they would crowd onto their grandmother’s bed. It was not a very big bed but somehow they all fit. Only a few of the next generation still live in Kolkata. The others return for weddings and funerals.

When I lived in the United States, my immigrant friends would always say their dream was to retire in India. The magnetic lure of the dollar had pulled them to the United States. In old age they planned to be economic migrants again, returning to India, where their dollar would go much further.

India was the coda to their American dream. Who wants to live in the United States in old age, they would shudder. It was too expensive, too lonely, too difficult.

But according to the Global Age Watch Index, a survey by Help Age International that measures the quality of life — using income security, health, personal capability and enabling environment — for people age 60 and older, India ranked 71 out of 96 countries in 2015.

There have always been instances of older people being abandoned and neglected, treated as burdens and cheated out of property. It is just that now modernity, immigration and globalization make for more convenient scapegoats.

An aging specialist once told me that in the West, development came before longevity, but in India aging has come before development. The problem is not the 100 million seniors. The problem is they do not have enough savings. There is little by way of a social safety net and health infrastructure. Too few have health insurance or pensions.

India still largely relies on the family to take care of its elderly. The strain is showing as families splinter. The population of Indians older than 60 has grown at twice the rate of the overall population in recent years.

Over 100 million Indians are older than 60, according to the Indian government estimates. Help Age India suggests that by 2050 a quarter of the population will be over 60. But facilities have not kept up with the population.

Old-age homes still carry the stigma

of abandonment and destitution. Adult day care centers are too few. Many old-age homes do not accept patients with dementia. Public transport is not senior friendly. Physicians who do home visits are hard to find, though cataract and knee replacement surgeries are booming.

In India’s graying cities the greatest enemy is not failing knees and clouded vision. It is isolation. One of the biggest

hit movies in recent years in Kolkata is a family drama called “Belase-she” (“At the End of the Day”), about lonely elders, busy children and relationships that are taken for granted. It is steeped in nostalgia for my moth-

er’s grandmother’s four-poster bed and the children who crowded on it in a time before cellphones, video games and the internet.

What my generation can offer our parents is money and technology. We install Skype on their phones so that they can talk to faraway grandchildren. What did you eat today? How is school? We fly back and forth to do our duty, propelled by equal parts love and guilt. An uncle pretty much commutes from New Jersey to Kolkata to arrange for his mother’s cancer treatment. A grand-aunt insists her grandchildren take exemplary care of her. Her old family retainer scoffs at the face-saving lie.

One cousin flew in from Canada to research old-age homes for his 90-year-old mother. Even in her 80s she would go up and down four flights of stairs until a fall left her shaken. My cousin tried to find her a place that was comfortable, somewhere not too far, so that friends could visit. She did not protest, but four days before the move, she died quietly in her own bed at home. My mother just said: “Thank God. She was saved.”

Simply keeping up with change can feel overwhelming. Three years into her semi-smartphone, my mother still complains, “Come quick, I don’t understand what it just did.” But she, too, has adapted. She asks me to wish a cousin “happy birthday” on Facebook. She uses WhatsApp as a verb. But she is still part of an analog generation grappling with a digital world.

Bad knees and frail health mean she goes out rarely, not even to vote. But when the government demanded that the mobile phones be linked to the recently introduced biometric identification cards, my mother, terrified about losing her phone connection, decided to go to the phone store. No one had any idea what to do for those physically unable to go to the mobile phone stores to register themselves. We rented a car for a five-minute journey and chaperoned her to the store.

The store needed her fingerprint. But in old age, the lines get blurred. There was no clear fingerprint to be had. My mother would have to remain an outlaw in digital India. “At least we are out of the house,” she said.

SANDIP ROY is the author of the novel “Don’t Let Him Know.”



TSERING TOPGYAL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

An elderly woman along the Yamuna River near New Delhi. Help Age India suggests that by 2050 a quarter of the country’s population will be over 60.

Ivanka, Louise and the little people



Frank Bruni

Like most Americans, I woke up the morning after Thanksgiving and thought first about atonement. How to work off all of that stuffing?

Also like most Americans, I thought next about Ivanka. What was her holiday like? More specifically, what was her holiday “tablescape” like?

That gilded neologism appeared in a story that was published shortly before Thanksgiving on her company’s website, promoted by its Twitter handle and exquisitely emblematic of her approach to her self-appointed role as heroine to and model for working women the world over. It recommended festooning the terrain around the turkey with Waterford crystal, Astier plates (\$300 and up for a single place setting) and driftwood gathered from the shore. In Ivanka’s world, the shore is never far, the driftwood is always photogenic and there’s time aplenty, because there are servants galore, to forage for it.

Can Ivanka’s “tablescape” coexist harmoniously with her papa’s “populism”? I’m skeptical, but Ivanka co-exists harmoniously with Louise Linton, most recently seen drooling over a sheet of freshly minted dollar bills at a U.S. Treasury plant. They bore the name of her husband, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, so she gripped them with an elegantly gloved hand

and displayed them triumphantly for the camera, an image that understandably went viral.

“Who could fail to be moved, at least a little, by the sight of Louise Linton photographed with the love of her life?” asked Kevin Williamson in National Review.

“Steven Mnuchin was also in the picture,” Williamson added. “Portrait of a marriage, right there.”

Portrait of an administration, really.

If Donald Trump wants to keep insisting that he’s some scrappy watchdog keeping the corrupt elites at bay so that the little people have their day, then I want to keep pointing out what an utter crock his supposed populism continues to be. If you can produce for me an administration that has showcased as much unabashedly, unrepentantly regal behavior as his, then I’ll personally collect and supply the driftwood for your Thanksgiving tablescapes for the next three decades. I’ll throw in a few clamshells and pinecones, too.

Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Trump golfs — at Trump-branded properties — while working-class parents see their children’s dreams of affordable college go up in smoke. This brings me to tax reform, which has taken shape in ways that hardly prioritize struggling Americans who are trying to climb the economic ladder a rung or two. There is arguably no engine of advancement as powerful as a college degree, so what does the tax bill passed by the House do? At a time of mammoth student debt, it eliminates the deduction for interest on student loans.

My Times colleague Erica Green noted that it also taxes the value of college tuition benefits that thousands of university employees receive. She described one such employee, Fred

Vautour, who worked a graveyard shift collecting trash and scrubbing toilets at Boston College in order to send all five of his children to school there. The House bill’s proposed changes would make a success story like his much less possible, but it would do away altogether with the estate tax, so that a billionaire like Trump could pass down the entirety of his wealth to Ivanka and the rest of the brood. So much for the little people.

While it’s true that simplification of the tax code was in order and had to come from somewhere, how can reformers justify erasing the \$250

deduction for teachers who reach into their own pockets to buy school supplies but not getting rid of the carried-interest loophole? Both

the House and the Senate version — to be voted on as early as this coming week — merely tweak it, though Trump pledged on the campaign trail to kiss it goodbye.

That was back when he was demonizing Wall Street and the plutocrats gorging at its trough. Then he began filling positions in his administration.

For Treasury he picked Mnuchin, a former Goldman Sachs partner whose net worth, according to one authoritative estimate earlier this year, is \$385 million. Another Goldman Sachs alumnus, Gary Cohn, became the director of the National Economic Council. His net worth is apparently north of \$250 million.

That’s unremarkable in Trumplandia, where such colossuses as Education Secretary Betsy DeVos (\$1 billion) and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross

(around \$700 million, according to financial disclosure forms) reign. “I love all people, rich or poor,” Trump explained at a rally in June. “But in those particular positions, I just don’t want a poor person.”

It’s in the context of his extraordinary sacrifices for American workers that we can view the similar self-effacement of those at his side — for instance Tom Price, the toppled secretary of health and human services, who squandered hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars on private charter flights.

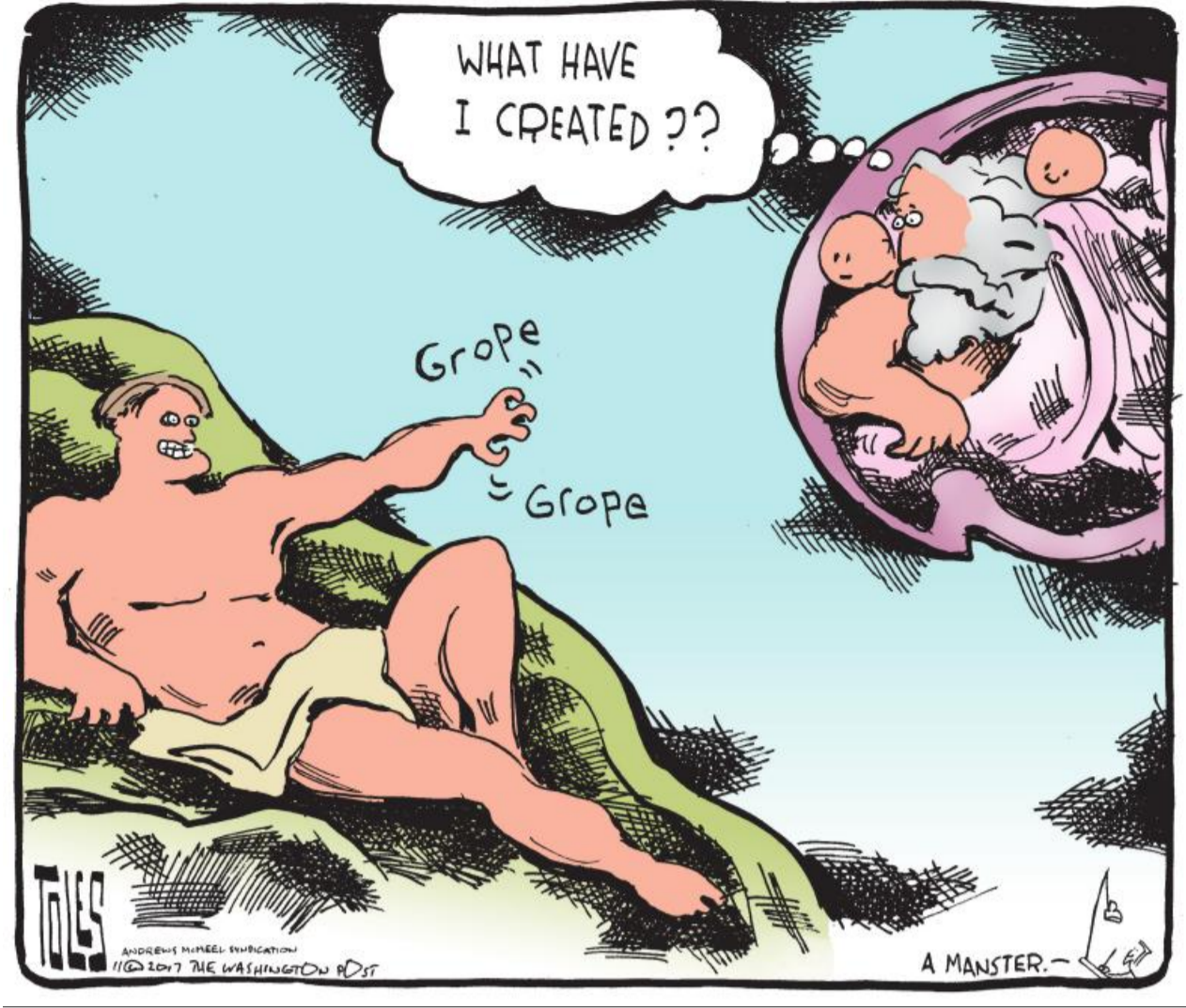
Or Scott Pruitt, the remaining head of the Environmental Protection Agency, whose bill for noncommercial flights topped \$50,000 and who spent nearly \$25,000 on a soundproof communications booth of ambiguous necessity.

Or Mnuchin, who also hewed to an administration-wide predilection for requesting or using government planes instead of cheaper commercial ones. For Trump’s cabinet, populism means never having to worry about legroom.

Ah, Mnuchin. I can offer no description of him better than the one rendered by Williamson, who observed that he was “pure Wall Street malignity in concentrated form,” while Linton, an ostensible actress with an almost nonexistent résumé, was “raised partly in a castle outside Edinburgh” and posted that cringe-inducing Instagram photo alerting her dubiously interested followers to the Hermès, Tom Ford and Valentino items that she wore on a government trip with her husband.

“Linton, being a Hollywood nobody, has not exactly been beset with paparazzi, but this is the age of social media, and so she has become her own paparazzo,” he wrote.

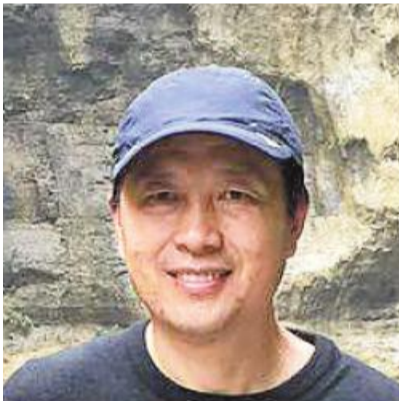
Ivanka maintains a glam Instagram feed of her own. The people whose lives she and her father are bettering would settle for nothing less.



The brutality of detention inside China

MYERS, FROM PAGE 15
presence of guards and prosecutors can serve as a deterrent to violations. In the solitary confinement typical of “designated locations,” there are few constraints. It has become “a more severe, more terrible, coercive measure than normal criminal detention,” Teng Biao, a lawyer who left China after his own secret detentions, writes in the book’s foreword.

China under Xi Jinping seems increasingly impervious to criticism. And the United States under President Trump no longer presses the issue of human rights. What follows are adapted excerpts, rare in their detail, from the accounts of three of those who remain in China and are taking a great risk to recount their experiences.



TANG JITIAN

Mr. Tang, one of the country’s most prominent defense lawyers, was arrested in 2011 for his work defending activists including Chen Guangcheng, the blind dissident who would later escape house arrest and hide in the United States Embassy in Beijing. He had just met with a group of lawyers when police officers pushed into his apartment. The officers covered his head with a black plastic shopping bag and drove him to what “looked like a country resort,” though one without amenities. He was later moved again in similar fashion. Last weekend he was barred from crossing into Hong Kong for medical treatment.

The room was small. The two beds were pressed almost together. There was no toilet seat. I had to use a ladle to scoop water to clean the toilet after using it.

I was made to sit up straight, facing the wall in a tiny space. One bright light shone directly onto my face. Even though it was winter, the air-conditioner was blowing cold air. My captors wore big cotton padded coats. I had sweated a lot on the way there, crammed into the car between the guards, with my head in a plastic bag and wearing my thick jacket. My jacket was so wet with sweat I couldn’t wear it anymore.

Four armed policemen and two

younger guards took turns monitoring me. They made sure I knew who was in charge, saying: “Our soldiers take orders from the top. If you don’t behave, we will break your kneecaps.” I wasn’t allowed to sleep. I was cold and tired. It was hard to sit still. If I didn’t sit properly, they would kick me.

Soon after we arrived, they started to make me do military drills. An armed police officer demonstrated how to squat, stand to attention, stand at ease, turn and salute, each position requiring precise movements and timing. When I squatted, I had to put my hands behind my neck and keep my body straight. I had to practice folding a blanket into a right angle, like the shape of tofu. This was not easy for me. The hardest part for me was giving military salutes to my captors.

Their purpose was to break my determination, to make me accept their power. They sometimes use this kind of military training on detainees they don’t like. The armed police in China have strong bodies, but very simple minds.



LIU SHUHUI

Mr. Liu, born in 1966, practiced law for a decade until the authorities refused to renew his license in 2010. In February 2011, he was assaulted by plainclothes security officers in Guangzhou for trying to photograph a demonstration that was part of what was called the Jasmine Revolution. The assault left him with deep bruises and a gash on his left leg. Days later he was arrested and held in secret detention for four months; his wife, who is Vietnamese, was held for 17 days, then deported.

I wasn’t allowed to sleep the first night, or the second, or the third. Even when I wasn’t being interrogated, I had to sit upright on a chair, and that was exhausting after a long time. I would nod off sometimes. The officers would slam the table next to me and yell. My leg kept swelling, and the pain in my chest grew. I didn’t know how long I could tolerate it.

“Exhausting an eagle” is an expression that is used to describe the torture of extended sleep deprivation. I knew

about this torture technique. Since it was usually reserved for serious crimes under Chinese law, I hadn’t come across it much. It was from an older time. I had rarely seen or heard of clients who had suffered it, and in the rare cases they had, it was usually for a day or, at most, two.

I realized I was in a place where the law does not exist, a black hole, a camp controlled by monsters.



TANG ZHISHUN

Mr. Tang, originally trained as an engineer, became involved in civil rights activism when fighting to keep the authorities from tearing down his home. He was seized while helping the teenage son of the human rights lawyer Wang Yu and her husband, Boa Longjun, cross the border into Myanmar.

Their accounts of secret detention are also included in the volume. The son, Bao Zhuxuan, now 18, was again barred this month from leaving the country by officials who described him as a security threat. Mr. Tang served more than a year in detention, first under residential surveillance, then in a regular detention center in Tianjin.

At times the guards warned me that my wife and child, despite being in the United States, were not as safe as I might think they were. Chinese agents could still kill them. They said the same about my mother. All I owned, money, valuables, they could take everything.

At one point, they informed me that the charge against me had been changed from illegally crossing a national border to inciting subversion of state power. What a threat! They really overestimated me.

The policemen would say they held no personal grudge against me, but they acted with such cruelty, tortured me the way they did, as if knowing that it was not personal would somehow change anything. I believe justice comes for everyone one day, and those who have done wrong will get the punishment they deserve.

STEVEN LEE MYERS is a correspondent in the Beijing bureau of *The New York Times* and author of “*The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin.*”

Vladimir Putin vs. the token women

FERRIS-ROTMAN, FROM PAGE 13
the notion that the Russian public could be developing an appetite for women’s issues, it appears that the Kremlin may have misinterpreted. The campaigns of Ms. Sobchak and Ms. Gordon are hardly gaining any traction. Ms. Sobchak may have a following among young urban women, thanks to her TV presence, but according to the independent pollster Levada, less than 1 percent of Russians would vote for her. That could be because of gender: Earlier this year, a survey showed that 53 percent of Russians said they opposed having a woman as their president within the next 10 to 15 years; a third said the country had no women at present fit for the job.

Their campaigns might also be failing to take off because the man viewed as the real opposition leader in Russia, the

anti-corruption activist Aleksei Navalny, has been barred from running, because of a revived criminal conviction. (In recent days, in an attempt to discredit him, the women or all three, a popular meme has been circulating on Russian social media showing Ms. Sobchak and Ms. Gordon, heavily pregnant and posing naked beside a potbelied, bare-chested Mr. Navalny in swimming trunks.)

Or maybe the Kremlin didn’t miscalculate after all. Generating any excitement amid the monotony of Russian politics — where the same man, representing the same party, has been in power for nearly two decades — is proving difficult. Two months ago, it was reported that the Kremlin was searching for female sparring partners for Mr. Putin to satisfy the “tired people” of the Russian electorate, who

needed the diversion. In Soviet times, polling stations lured in voters with promises of discounted food, hoping to maximize turnout in elections everyone knew didn’t matter. Today, it appears that the Kremlin has expanded its toolbox: Efforts to feign an active and lively political culture have now been expanded to include “women.”

On International Women’s Day last March, dozens of women protested in St. Petersburg and Moscow in a rare feminist demonstration. They held posters with “radical slogans,” according to state-run media. Among the signs? “Men, out of the Kremlin!” and, “A woman for president!”

Someday, maybe. But not next year.

AMIE FERRIS-ROTMAN is a journalist based in Moscow, where she reports for *Foreign Policy* magazine.

Equatorial Guinea’s plunder

Lucas Olo Fernandes

On Oct. 27, a Paris criminal court convicted Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, the vice president of Equatorial Guinea and son of its president, of money laundering and embezzlement of more than \$100 million.

Mr. Obiang received a suspended three-year prison sentence and was fined \$35 million. The judge ruled that the French government would keep more than \$100 million of Mr. Obiang’s assets, seized by the police in Paris in 2012. They included a 100-room mansion and a collection of sports cars.

More than a decade earlier, CCFD-Terre Solidaire, a French nongovernmental organization, denounced Western companies and governments for enabling dictators by welcoming their ill-gotten wealth. That prompted the anticorruption groups Transparency International France and Sherpa to start legal proceedings against the presidents of Equatorial Guinea, the Republic of Congo and Gabon.

Mr. Obiang’s case is the first to go to trial. His particularly ostentatious lifestyle raised questions about corruption, with posts on Instagram showing him driving luxury cars or riding limited-edition motorcycles.

In Paris, where he would spend a few months a year, he flaunted a fleet of obscenely expensive cars and motorcycles. He displayed a \$22 million art collection in his mansion. Bénédicte de Perthuis, the French judge who found him guilty, said Mr. Obiang had failed to produce a “convincing justification of the origin of his fortune.”

I was born in Equatorial Guinea in 1979, when his father, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, took power in a coup. He is still in power. The corruption of the Obiang family and their retainers grew exponentially after oil was discovered in 1996.

The United States Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations found in 2004 that the Washington-based Riggs Bank, now closed, which had helped the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet transfer huge amounts of money to offshore shell companies, provided similar services to the Obiang family. The Senate report stated that Riggs Bank opened personal accounts for the Obiangs, unquestionably accepted millions of dollars of deposits into their accounts, and helped establish

offshore shell corporations for them.

The ruling family of Equatorial Guinea doesn’t seem to care much about foreign legal proceedings. Mr. Obiang, who did not appear in the Paris court, reacted to the verdict by posting smiling selfies on Instagram.

In 2014, the United States Justice Department reached a settlement of its civil forfeiture cases against Mr. Obiang and forced him to relinquish assets worth \$30 million. “After raking in millions in bribes and kickbacks, Nguema Obiang embarked on a corruption-fueled spree in the United States,” the Justice Department said in a statement. Court documents revealed that Mr. Obiang, who received a government salary of less than \$100,000, had amassed assets worth more than \$300

The vice president flaunts ill-gotten wealth on Instagram while the citizens live in dire poverty.

million through corruption and money laundering. But Mr. Obiang, who has a fetish for Michael Jackson memorabilia, managed to spirit away his collection in a private jet. Both the

jet and the memorabilia are now “subject to seizure and forfeiture” if ever brought back to the United States.

Transparency International France and the judge are arguing that the confiscated assets should not revert to the French treasury as the French laws require but instead used for truly independent civil society organizations or institutions that support development and strengthen good governance in Equatorial Guinea, such as an independent electoral body.

It is too early to assess if the 2014 settlement with the United States has set a positive precedent, but it mandated that the assets Mr. Obiang relinquished in America benefit the people of Equatorial Guinea through a charity, which would be forbidden to make any payments to Mr. Obiang’s government and his associates.

While Mr. Obiang enjoys his wealth, a majority of the 1.2 million people in Equatorial Guinea live on less than \$2 a day. They lack safe drinking water, and electricity failures are consistent and common, even in the capital.

When I was growing up in Equatorial Guinea in the 1980s, we had no running water or electricity most of the year. We would study by kerosene lamp. Streetlights barely worked in Bata, my home-

town, but Mr. Obiang drove around in luxury cars.

On a visit last year I admired the skyscrapers in Bata but — as in my childhood — there was no electricity in the rest of the city. A month ago, I heard that an acquaintance had died in childbirth because of poor facilities. Infant mortality at 68 deaths per 1,000 live births was among the 10 highest in the world, according to the World Bank.

Elections remain a farce, with the ruling party receiving nearly 100 percent of the votes in elections this month. Political rights are an illusion. The political cartoonist and activist Ramon Esono Ebale published a graphic novel in 2014 titled “Obi’s Nightmare,” which imagined President Obiang waking up to find himself an impoverished everyman in Equatorial Guinea suffering the hardships and humiliation ordinary citizens endure. Mr. Esono, who had been living in Spain and Paraguay, visited the capital, Malabo, to renew his passport in September and was arrested. He remains in prison.

Western banks and oil corporations, which have enthusiastically and unquestionably worked with the Obiangs, have contributed to the misery of Equatorial Guinea. Prosecutors in the United States say that Mr. Obiang was the owner of two shell companies used to buy his mansion in Malibu, Calif. He similarly used five companies based in Switzerland to buy his mansion in France for \$29.5 million.

Company registries around the world should be open and indicate the real owners to end the secrecy of myriad shell companies based in “comfortable” jurisdictions (the United States, Switzerland, France or Luxembourg in this case) to the detriment of the struggling people of Equatorial Guinea. Banks and regulatory authorities should do their due diligence and not accept dirty money — both the United States investigations and the French court have indicated that it was not possible for the Riggs Bank or the Central Bank of France to be unaware of the evidence of Mr. Obiang’s ill-gotten wealth.

Oil companies likes ExxonMobil, Glencore and SBM Offshore, which have major investments in Equatorial Guinea, must stop helping Mr. Obiang keep such a beautiful country in perennial agony.

LUCAS OLO FERNANDES is programs coordinator at Transparency International, the global anticorruption organization.

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Sports

Surplus of contenders for college football playoff

On College Football

BY MARC TRACY

AUBURN, ALA. Just a week before revealing its final four-team bracket, the College Football Playoff selection committee faces its biggest challenge yet.

In the three previous seasons of the playoff, three of the five power conferences had clear-cut, one-loss or undefeated teams that went on to win their championship games.

In the first year of the playoff, 2014, the only disagreement about the committee's final judgment was over the semantics of the "13th data point" that put Ohio State in over the Big 12 co-champions Baylor and Texas Christian. In 2015 and 2016, the committee was so confident about two 11-1 teams that it telegraphed ahead of time that each would make it in.

This year is much messier, and last weekend's games, starting with No. 2 Miami's loss to Pittsburgh on Friday and including Saturday's Iron Bowl, in which top-ranked Alabama lost to Auburn, did not help. Alabama fell to fifth in The Associated Press poll, and Miami to seventh.

The next round of playoff rankings will be released Tuesday night, but never before, it seems, have so many teams been alive for the four spots with only the conference championship games to go. Georgia. Auburn. Miami. Clemson. Wisconsin. Ohio State. Oklahoma. Maybe even Texas Christian and Alabama, the latter on pedigree alone.

The potential for chaos exists despite the fact that never before in the playoff's three completed seasons has one of the five power conferences dug itself so deep a hole as has the Pacific-12, which features two teams with at least two losses, Stanford (9-3) and Southern California (10-2), in its title game on Friday night.

Although Stanford slammed the door on Notre Dame (9-3) on Saturday night, 38-20, the biggest news in the Pac-12 over the weekend may have been the return of Chip Kelly, who,

several years after making Oregon into a national title contender and then departing for the N.F.L., was hired Saturday by U.C.L.A.

As the Bruins (6-6) settle for a middler bowl, the committee will watch the five power-conference title games play out and then release its final rankings on Sunday, choosing first versus fourth and second versus third in the Rose Bowl, in Pasadena, Calif., and the Sugar Bowl, in New Orleans. The priorities that day will be to give the top-ranked team home-field advantage and to try to avoid a rematch — which could become a surprisingly germane detail.

Given where their teams are currently ranked, two of the championship games are effectively national quarter-finals, with their winners all but guaranteed semifinal berths. The winner of the Southeastern Conference game — in Atlanta, between Auburn (10-2) and Georgia (11-1) — is in. So is the winner of the Atlantic Coast Conference game in Charlotte, N.C., between Clemson (11-1), which boasts an early-season win over Auburn, and Miami (11-1).

Two more title games promise playoff spots should the right team win them. Unbeaten Wisconsin (12-0) plays Ohio State (10-2) for the Big Ten championship in Indianapolis, and despite the Badgers' generally weak schedule, it would be all but unfathomable for the committee — which serves a playoff that was created precisely to ensure undefeated power-conference champions can play for all the marbles — not to include Wisconsin in the final bracket with a win. Similarly, Oklahoma (11-1), with victories over Ohio State and its own conference championship opponent, Texas Christian (10-2), on its résumé already, is a virtual shoo-in with a win and the Big 12 championship.

But what if the "wrong" teams win those latter two games? Who fills the remaining two spots? Cross off Notre Dame and Stanford,



BRYNN ANDERSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Auburn may have wrecked Alabama's playoff hopes Saturday, but the Tigers cannot afford to lose the Southeastern Conference final.

with their three losses (even if one wonders whether Stanford, which has won eight of its past nine games, is better than its record). The same is true for Penn State; the committee has seemed strangely ill-disposed to the

Nittany Lions (10-2), ranking them behind Ohio State even though Penn State's two losses came to two ranked teams — the Buckeyes and Michigan State (9-3) — on the road by a combined 4 points.

Cross off, also, Central Florida, the clearest proof yet that a team from the so-called Group of 5 conferences would have to play an almost impossibly difficult out-of-conference schedule to receive the committee's considerations.

With a win over Memphis, another well-regarded and ranked opponent, in the American Athletic Conference title game, the Knights would be 12-0 champions, and they rarely won by a little. Still, in last week's rankings, the committee slotted them 15th.

Who is left, then, for the two spots alongside the SEC and A.C.C. champs? • Southern California, T.C.U. and Ohio State all could finish 11-2 and power-conference champions. • The loser of Clemson-Miami; Georgia, if it is defeated again by Auburn; and Oklahoma could be two-loss power-conference runners-up. (Given its two losses, Auburn most likely must win the SEC title to receive playoff consideration.) • Alabama will sit at home and remain 11-1.

The defending national champion, Clemson, even if it loses, has a strong résumé, with the committee seemingly discounting its sole regular-season loss, at Syracuse, which the Tigers played partly without their top quarterback, Kelly Bryant. Alternatively, how much shame would there be in Miami's losing to the likely No. 1 seed?

U.S.C. and T.C.U. were slotted behind four other two-loss teams entering Saturday, leaving their chances dim but not unimaginable.

So the photo finish will probably be between those two redoubtable blue bloods Ohio State and Alabama. Ohio State lost to Oklahoma and lost badly at Iowa, but otherwise generally took care of business, especially against the well-regarded Penn State and Michigan State (and, in its best case, Wisconsin). Alabama is likely to have beaten just one ranked team, Louisiana State, but statistically it has been its usual dominant self. And it would not be unprecedented for an 11-1 non-champion, such as Alabama, to leap over an 11-2 champion, such as Ohio State. Ohio State did it to Penn State last season.

Alabama's coach, Nick Saban, has an opinion, in case you were wondering.

"We have won 11 games, and not many teams have been able to do that," Saban said Saturday night.

He added, "I think this team deserves the opportunity to get into the playoff."

Anyone want to argue with that?

NON SEQUITUR



SENIOR CENTER HEALTH CARE REFORM

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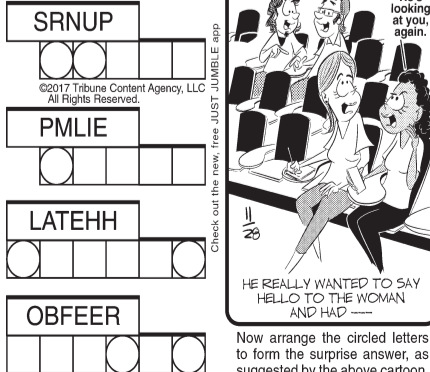
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JUMBLE

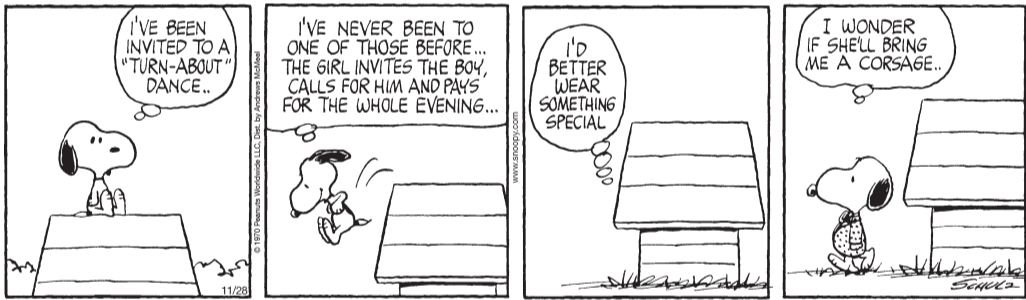
Unscramble these four Jumbles, one letter to each square, to form four ordinary words.



Print answer here: " " (Answers tomorrow)

Yesterday's Jumbles: BEGUN HOUSE SHIRUP INVENT Answer: The teacher was explaining action words to the students and was being — VERBOSE

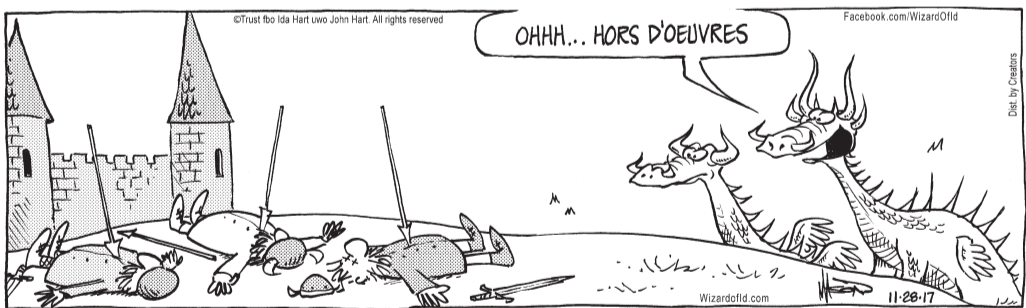
PEANUTS



GARFIELD



WIZARD of ID



KENKEN

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Fill the grids with digits so as not to repeat a digit in any row or column, and so that the digits within each heavily outlined box will produce the target number shown, by using addition, subtraction, multiplication or division, as indicated in the box. A 4x4 grid will use the digits 1-4. A 6x6 grid will use 1-6.

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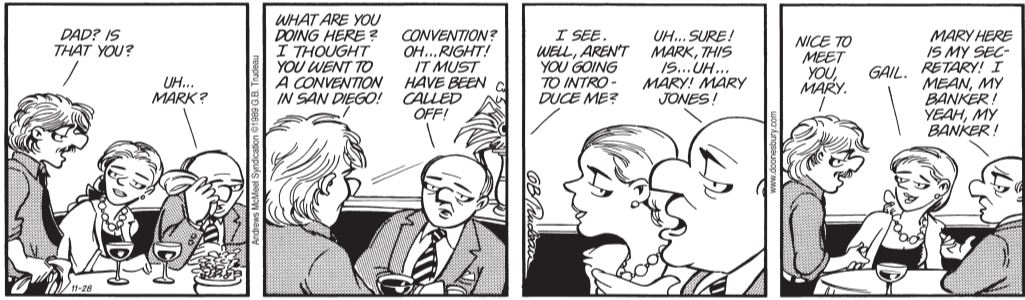
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Answers to Previous Puzzles

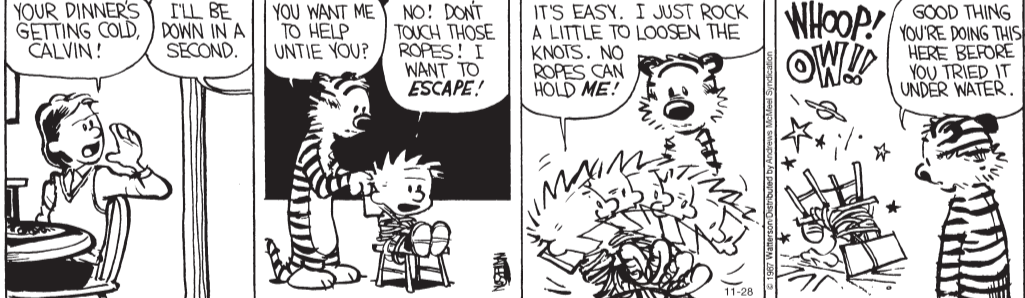
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5	4	1	6	3	2
3	5	6	1	4	2

DOONESBURY CLASSIC 1989



CALVIN AND HOBBES



DILBERT



CROSSWORD | Edited by Will Shortz

Across									
1	Molded jelly	36	Piano teacher's assignment	60	Fish eggs	61	Morning TV co-host	62	Lawn mower brand
6	Pitch a tent	38	Fort ___, N.J.	63	Mosque V.I.P.s	65	___ smasher	66	City that's home to the Viking Ship Museum
10	Snoozes	39	Neighbor of an Estonian	67	To the ___ (one way to dress)	68	Odorous Le Pew	69	Beginning point for a first flight
14	/	40	Coat for a cat	70	Singer of the 2012 #1 hit "Somebody That I Used to Know"	Down			
15	Dell competitor	41	"No shoes, no shirt, no service," e.g.	1	Wan	25	Precisely	35	Shakespearean king
16	Spoken	42	Stick in a lake?	2	Lovers running to each other may be shown in it	28	Weight	37	River to the Caspian
17	Charley ___	43	"Ad ___ per aspera" (motto of Kansas)	3	Way to get from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon	29	Often-forbidden maneuver ... as hinted at four times in this puzzle	41	Opposite of set
18	Actress Taylor of "Mystic Pizza"	44	Wallace's partner, in claymation	4	Magazine unit: Abbr.	30	On fire	43	Congressional worker
19	Tidbit at a Spanish bar	45	Light purple	5	Root for	31	Spirit of motel	44	Begin, as a task
20	Music conglomerate that broke up in 2012	46	Wallace's partner, in claymation	6	Colombian metropolis	11	Splited steed	45	Running out
21	Receptacle carried from a crime scene	48	Div. that manager Bobby Cox won every year from 1995 to 2005	7	Turns target	12	"Come to ___!" (gambler's cry)	46	Title for Tussaud
24	Cosa ___	50	Actor Driver of "The Force Awakens"	8	Free-for-all	13	Refinery waste	47	112.5° on a compass: Abbr.
26	List-ending abbr.	52	Crowd chant to an award honoree	9	Paid part of a magazine	22	Some military hospitals, for short	49	Costume that might involve two people
27	Kind of pork on a Chinese menu	55	The Silk Road and others	10	Kind of motel	23	Establishment with a brunch rush, maybe	53	Former F.B.I. director James
30	On fire	Solution to November 27 Puzzle							
34	Appropriate for all audiences, as humor	C	O	N	A	I	S	I	R
		A	S	S	I	S	I	H	U
		T	H	E	L	O	S	T	B
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		E	P	S	O	M	U	N	I
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		E	R	E	I	E	N	V	I
		E	G	G	E	D	O	L	E
		L	E	T	H	A	L	W	E
		A	C	T	S	S	L	R	P
		T	O	R	P	U	L	P	F
		C	L	E	E	T	S	Y	S
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69									70			

PUZZLE BY ANDREW J. RIES

25	Precisely	35	Shakespearean king	54	German state or novelist
28	Weight	37	River to the Caspian	55	Sand, in golf
29	Often-forbidden maneuver ... as hinted at four times in this puzzle	41	Opposite of set	56	Having your first shave or buying your first bra, e.g.
31	Substance that decreases purity	43	Congressional worker	57	Each
32	Kunis of "Friends With Benefits"	45	Begin, as a task	58	Website links, for short
33	One high up on the corporate ladder, informally	47	Title for Tussaud	59	Blow on a horn
34	Pipe problem	49	112.5° on a compass: Abbr.	60	"O Sole ___"
		51	Costume that might involve two people		
		53	Former F.B.I. director James		

TECH

Entry-level electric transportation

Wheels

BY JOHN R. QUAIN

Electric cars remain something of a novelty, commanding premium prices and presenting charging challenges, but another kind of electric vehicle has been gaining momentum: the e-bike.

Globally, electric cars — battery and plug-in hybrids — account for only about 1 percent of all vehicle sales, with about 1.15 million expected to be sold worldwide this year, according to EV-volumes.com. Compare that with the 35 million e-bikes expected to be purchased this year, according to Navigant, with countries like Germany and the Netherlands experiencing double-digit percentage sales growth over the previous year.

“We see e-bikes as the entry point into electric mobility,” said Claudia Wasko, director of e-bikes for Bosch America. Bosch makes one of the more popular electric motor systems for bicycles but is better known as an auto parts supplier and designer of advanced automotive technologies.

E-bikes have taken off in Europe, Ms. Wasko said, because they are viewed not just as recreational vehicles but as a practical transportation option. In fact, electric-assist bicycles offer significant advantages over electric cars.

“If you run out of power in an electric car, you have a problem,” she said. “With a bike, you can still pedal.”

And then there are the advantages in cost and convenience: E-bikes can be had for less than \$1,000, and their batteries can be easily removed, plugged into a regular outlet and charged in about three hours.

With designs that have to accommodate a motor and battery, e-bikes are heavier — weighing about 50 to 60 pounds — than traditional bicycles. Most models in the United States are pedal-assist e-bikes — they provide an electric boost only when the rider is pedaling, unlike throttle e-bikes, which can provide assistance even when the rider isn't pedaling. Typically, pedal-assist models have a handlebar-mounted digital display where riders can select various levels of electronic aid, from zero on level paths to full power when climbing hills or dealing with challenging terrain.

Pedal-assist bikes are available in every bike category to appeal to every type of rider. There are step-through cruisers like the Raleigh Sprite iE Step Thru for casual cyclists. There are serious daily commuters like Riese & Müller's Charger GX, and there are even folding models like the Oyama CX E8D.

“We think of these as an alternative to cars, not as an alternative to bicy-



EMMANUEL DUNAND/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

A Dutch assembly line for the Gazelle brand. Countries like Germany and the Netherlands are experiencing double-digit percentage sales growth over the previous year.

cles,” said Sandra Wolf of Riese & Müller. The company also makes a line of Packster cargo models, which can haul a week's worth of groceries or two small children.

Indeed, the e-bike market is so broad today that every major brand, even those traditionally associated with dedicated cycling enthusiasts, has jumped onto the e-bike saddle.

“E-mountain bikes these days are super popular,” said Dominik Geyer of Specialized, whose company did some soul searching before developing its own e-bikes. But now even advocacy groups like the International Mountain Bicycling Association have abandoned their anti-e-bike stance and now support the use of pedal-assist bikes on some trails.

E-bikes can enhance the cycling experience for all kinds of riders, from novices to committed commuters who want to extend their routes without arriving at the office soaked in perspiration, said Murray Washburn, the director of global marketing for Can-

nondale. The technology also encourages owners to ride more often, safe in the knowledge that they can get a boost should they encounter steep hills or become fatigued far from home.

Improved technology has also helped their popularity. Manufacturers have switched from motors attached to the hub of the rear wheel to more efficient center-drive motors in the pedal crankshaft, which improve the bike's center of gravity and handling. New lithium ion batteries are more efficient and able to deliver greater range. Depending on the weight of the cyclist and the terrain, a single charge can last between 20 and 70 miles.

More important, the experience is much more akin to riding a traditional bicycle than it was in the past. Less than a decade ago, e-bikes struggled with lugubrious handling and motors that would kick in with a jolt. Today's models are better balanced and use smart algorithms to apply torque gradually, sensing when the rider is putting more pressure into the pedals

and then delivering subtle assistance. The latest models even know when they're stopped and can help the rider get away after a red light quickly.

That adds up to increasing sales. About 400,000 e-bikes are projected to be sold in the United States this year, double last year's total, according to PeopleForBikes, an advocacy and industry trade group. But that would be just 2.5 percent of the 16 million bikes sold in the country.

Before they can succeed in America as much as they have in Europe, e-bikes will have to negotiate a few potholes. Most notably, there is the criticism of throttle e-bikes, which can reach speeds of 28 m.p.h. or more, presenting a danger to pedestrians and other cyclists.

A phalanx of silent, high-speed bikes being used for deliveries in neighborhoods like the Upper East Side of New York has drawn attention to the need for new and better-defined regulations. About a half-dozen states have instituted rules recognizing different classes

of e-bikes and allowing pedal-assist bikes that are limited to 20 m.p.h. to be used in bike lanes, without a license.

Nevertheless, the varying rules can be confusing. Officials from the New York City Department of Transportation insisted in emails this month that all bicycles with any sort of electrical assistance were illegal.

But just last month, Mayor Bill de Blasio directly contradicted that view. In an announcement of a crackdown on businesses using all-electric throttle bikes, Mr. de Blasio made it clear that slower pedal-assist e-bikes, like those made by Cannondale, Riese & Müller and Specialized, “are allowable.”

But Tim Blumenthal, the president of PeopleForBikes, said he did not believe that legislative restrictions were as big a factor in sales as cost.

While e-bikes are available for about \$500, buyers can expect to pay \$2,000 or more for a quality model with a reasonable range and reliable service, said Chris Nolte, the owner of Propel Bikes in Brooklyn.

High-end phone from Huawei stalks Apple

SHENZHEN, CHINA

Company hopes product will overcome global disdain for Chinese brands

BY RAYMOND ZHONG

The phone takes dazzling photos and sports advanced artificial intelligence. Its display stretches gloriously from edge to edge. And at nearly \$1,000, it pushes into eye-watering territory on price.

But the Mate 10 Pro isn't the latest high-end offering from Samsung or Apple. It comes from China — a country that for all its growing sophistication in technology, has yet to produce a name like Lexus, Canon or Samsung that consumers around the globe associate with premium quality at premium prices.

Huawei Technologies, the new smartphone's creator, thinks the world is ready to pay top dollar for a Chinese product. It is rolling out the Mate 10 Pro — plus two sibling devices, one less expensive and lower spec, the other pricier and sleeker — in Europe, in the Middle East and elsewhere in Asia. And it is in talks with AT&T to offer the phones in the United States, according to a person familiar with the matter, who asked not to be named because the discussions are not public.

In technology, China is no longer the land of knockoffs and copycats. Its labs are racing ahead in artificial intelligence, quantum computing and other frontier fields. Its internet companies are in the vanguard in devising ways to upend retail, finance, transport and other industries using mobile technology.

The trouble is getting the world to recognize all that. China wants to upgrade its economy by selling the world higher-value goods such as cars, jetliners, advanced electronics and more. Famous brand names can help open up new markets and convince global customers that Chinese products are as dependable as American, Japanese or South Korean ones.

Huawei (pronounced HWA-way) is already well known at home. The company outsells all others in China, the



GILLIA MARCHI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Customers in a Huawei store in Beijing trying out the new Mate 10 Pro smartphone, which retails at nearly \$1,000.

world's largest smartphone market. And it is nipping at Apple's heels to be the No. 2 phone maker worldwide. According to the research firm Canalsys, Huawei shipped 39 million phones in the latest quarter; Apple shipped 47 million. But those Huawei devices were mostly low or midrange.

“We see good signs that people have seen the brand change to a large degree,” to one that is “stylish and innovative,” said Glory Cheung, Huawei's marketing chief for consumer devices. “I think that's a very good sign for us.”

Still, Ms. Cheung said, Huawei would rather spend on developing smarter features and better technology than on marketing, though she acknowledged the importance of building an emotional bond with users. The challenge for the company on that last front is significant: Compared with Apple or Samsung, Huawei has much further to go in forg-

ing that elusive something that leads someone to commit to a brand.

Even in China, many people still view Huawei devices as good value for the money and not much else.

Li Haoran, a 24-year-old accountant in Beijing, is a longtime Apple user. Would she switch to Huawei?

“Not for myself,” she said. “But I'd consider buying Huawei phones for my family, because they are relatively cheap.”

As for the Mate 10 series, Li Weitao, a 40-year-old marketer in Shanghai who is no relation to Li Haoran, said that for more than \$600, “you should probably get an iPhone.”

Founded in Shenzhen three decades ago, Huawei was already one of the world's largest suppliers of telecommunications equipment when it released its first Android smartphone in 2009. Its earliest handsets were run-of-

the-mill in looks and performance. But Huawei has since invested more in design and technology, opening a design center in London and a research and development facility in Finland.

With the Mate 10 series, Huawei is debuting one of the fruits of its research: a processor dedicated to artificial-intelligence tasks such as identifying people in photos and translating text.

Christophe Coutelle, vice president of software marketing for Huawei, said the new processor let the phones perform such tasks more quickly, with less power and — as no data needs to be sent to a faraway server — with better privacy protection.

“Not everyone is willing to share all of their information, pictures and everything with cloud-based services,” he said.

The emphasis on privacy could help Huawei crack its last big untapped mar-

ket: the United States. The company's experience there has been fraught.

Its network-equipment business has effectively been banned in the United States since a congressional report said in 2012 that Huawei gear could be used by Beijing to spy on Americans. The company's founder, Ren Zhengfei, was once an engineer in China's military. Huawei has said its products pose no threat to security.

The company has also been in hot water in the United States over patent infringement and for failing to inform the authorities before acquiring American companies. The New York Times reported this year that United States officials were widening an investigation into whether the company broke trade controls on Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria.

Huawei's international presence and diverse work force make it more of a global company than a Chinese one, Ms. Cheung said. Whether Huawei is a global name — and an appealing one — is another matter.

“The brand still lacks personality,” Thomas Husson, an analyst at Forrester, said in an email. “The focus is still too much on technical specifications and functionalities.”

Figuring out how to strike a chord with ordinary consumers was never going to be easy for Huawei, which has spent most of its existence selling back-end equipment to mobile carriers.

It has enlisted Scarlett Johansson to star in ads, and teamed up with Porsche and Leica on design. Yet Huawei still has “very much of an engineering culture,” Mr. Coutelle said. In conversation, employees rarely fail to mention how much the company spends on research and development (more than 10 percent of revenue) or the number of its workers involved in research (nearly half).

Under-the-hood advancements may not drive sales unless Huawei brings them to the less expensive, midtier phones that will almost surely remain its biggest sellers, said Francisco Jeronimo, an analyst at the research firm IDC.

Mr. Jeronimo said he had laughed when he heard Huawei executives talk, years ago, about becoming a top-three phone maker. Today, he said, “I wouldn't be surprised if they become No. 1.”

Owen Guo contributed research from Beijing.

Q+a

Stop autoplay in Safari

Is it true you can now stop those annoying videos that automatically play on some websites in the Safari browser?

As part of its macOS High Sierra update, Apple has added controls to Safari that stop loud videos from unexpectedly blaring. For sites that play videos that you do not mind seeing right when you visit, you can also set your preferences individually by website.

You can manage autoplay videos in a couple of ways. If you land on a site that starts rolling a video clip, right-click (or hold down the Control key and click) in the Safari address bar and choose “Settings for This Website.” (The option is also available under the Safari menu.)

In the box that pops open, move the cursor over to Auto-Play and click the pop-up menu next to it. On the menu, you can choose to allow all videos coded to just play automatically, you can stop videos that start blasting audio or you can just block all autoplay videos on that particular site.

If you do not want to change the video settings on a site-by-site basis, you can take a more global approach. Under the Safari menu, select Preferences and then click the websites tab at the top of the box. Click Auto-Play on the left side of the box. You can see the settings for sites you have previously visited — and change your initial choices on how to handle video. In the “When visiting other websites” menu at the bottom of the box, you can choose to allow or block all auto-play videos, or just mute them.

Getting to know Control Center

On the new iPhone system, where did the button for turning on AirDrop go when you swipe your finger up from the bottom of the screen?

The iOS Control Center — that panel of icons you can open by swiping up from the bottom of the phone or tablet screen — got a makeover with the release of iOS 11. (iPhone X owners need to swipe down from the top-right edge of the screen to open the panel.) When you open the Control Center, press and hold the quartet of icons on the top-left side to pop open the full panel. If you have the 3D Touch feature, you can press firmly on one of the icons.

The icon for AirDrop, Apple's technology for wirelessly beaming files between iOS devices and Macs, is in the bottom-left corner of the expanded panel.

The iOS 11 software also allows users to personalize the look of the Control Center panel by adding the icons for apps and utilities used most. You can also leave others off the screen. To choose the icons you want to see, go to the iPhone's home screen, tap the Settings icon and select Control Center. Tap the Customize Controls option, and on the Customize screen use plus and minus icons to add or subtract the listed shortcuts from the Control Center screen. You can rearrange the order by dragging the items in the list up or down using the icon of three gray lines to the right of each control.

Later, when you are using the Control Center, you can find additional shortcuts with some icons — if you are using an iPhone with 3D Touch. For example, press and hold the Camera icon to get a quick menu of shortcuts for taking a selfie, recording a video of other photographic functions. You can adjust the intensity of the flashlight beam by pressing the flashlight icon or see your last Apple Pay transaction by pressing the Wallet icon.



Culture

An immediate test for Churchill

MOVIE REVIEW

Gary Oldman portrays the prime minister in the early days of the war

BY A.O. SCOTT

In the late spring of 1940, German forces invaded Belgium and France and pushed most of the British army onto a beach in the French coastal town of Dunkirk. Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister best known (then and still) for his policy of appeasing Hitler, was replaced by Winston Churchill, whose first weeks as head of the government — culminating in the Dunkirk evacuation — are the subject of “Darkest Hour,” Joe Wright’s new film. (The evacuation itself was reconstructed in Christopher Nolan’s “Dunkirk,” released in July.)

Considered as history, “Darkest Hour,” written by Anthony McCarten (“The Theory of Everything”), offers the public a few new insights and details about the practice of statecraft in a time of crisis. Churchill is disliked by many of his colleagues in the Conservative Party (notably Chamberlain and his vulpine sidekick, Viscount Halifax) and distrusted by King George VI. The political situation is shaky, the military reports dire. The new prime minister, a man of large emotions and larger appetites, who drinks whiskey with breakfast and is rarely without a cigar, is plagued by frustration and doubt as he tries to navigate between two bad options. Will Britain enter into a ruinous war or submit to humiliating and most likely temporary peace on terms dictated by Hitler?

The contours of this story are reasonably familiar. The outcome even more so. (Just in case, a helpful text before the final credits reminds us that Germany eventually lost the war.) Churchill himself is among the most revered and studied figures of 20th-century history: a synonym for leadership; a great man in an age of monsters; a source of pithy quotations,



Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill in “Darkest Hour,” a film directed by Joe Wright.

JACK ENGLISH/FOCUS FEATURES

some of which he actually said; an example to be cited by political mediocrities in need of an ego boost.

And, of course, an irresistible role for actors of every shape and size. (His American counterpart in this regard is not Franklin D. Roosevelt, Churchill’s partner and peer, but Lyndon B. Johnson, who also possessed impressive

jowls and a colorful way with words.) Gary Oldman, aided by diligent make-up artists and propelled by his own unmatched craft and discipline, embraces the task with almost palpable delight. The challenges facing Churchill are of lethal seriousness, but the key to his effectiveness is his capacity for pleasure. He enjoys the push and pull

of politics, the intellectual labor of problem-solving and the daily adventure of being himself. In grasping that joy, Mr. Oldman partakes of it and passes it along to the audience. He is having fun, *playing* the part in every sense. And his blustery, blubbery charm, backed as it is by a sly and acute intelligence, is hard to resist.

Apart from Halifax and Chamberlain, desiccated aristo puddings played by Stephen Dillane and Ronald Pickup, nobody makes much of an effort. Churchill is regarded with frank adoration by the camera and by the people, the women in particular, charged with the tasks of attending and indulging him. Kristin Scott Thomas is his wife,

Clementine Churchill, a woman of brisk confidence and ironic disposition who long ago made peace with her secondary place in his public life. Lily James is his secretary, Elizabeth Layton, a clever and wide-eyed English rose who types Churchill’s correspondence and chastely buoys his morale.

King George is played by Ben Mendelsohn as a weary and aloof sovereign — a chillier, sadder fellow than the version incarnated by Colin Firth in “The King’s Speech.” “Darkest Hour,” a companion to “Dunkirk,” is also in several senses a sequel to “The King’s Speech,” a mildly enjoyed best picture winner. It is similarly a movie about the production of an important piece of rhetoric, a “mobilization of the English language” in the service of a vital and righteous cause.

And like “The King’s Speech,” Mr. Wright’s film is a serviceable enough historical drama. But like “Dunkirk,” it falls back on an idealized notion of the English character that feels, in present circumstances, less nostalgic than downright reactionary, and as empty as those ubiquitous “Keep Calm and Carry On” internet memes. Rather than invite the audience to think about the difficulties of democratic governance at a time of peril, the filmmakers promote passivity and hero-worship, offering not so much a Great Man Theory as a great man fetish. Their sham populism is most evident in a ridiculous scene in which Churchill rides the London Underground and meets The People, a motley mass of stiff upper lips and brimming eyes.

Churchill’s resolve, like the bravery of the soldiers, airmen and ordinary Britons in “Dunkirk,” is offered not as a rebuke to the current generation, but rather as a sop, an easy and complacent fantasy of Imperial gumption and national unity. Standing up to the Nazis, an undeniably brave and good thing to have done, is treated like a moral check that can be cashed in perpetuity. “Darkest Hour” is proud of its hero, proud of itself and proud to have come down on the right side of history nearly 80 years after the fact. It wants you to share that pride, and to claim a share of it. But we have nothing to be proud of.

Long-overdue homage for documentary maker

Icarus releasing box set by Jean Rouch, who helped forge cinéma vérité

BY J. HOBERMAN

The four-disc box set “Eight Films by Jean Rouch” released by Icarus Films in time for the Rouch centennial currently celebrated by three Paris cultural institutions — as well as for the holiday season — is a gift for cinephiles.

A youthful devotee of surrealism turned anthropologist turned documentary filmmaker, Rouch (1917-2004) is best known for directing, along with Edgar Morin, the founding work of cinéma vérité, “Chronicle of a Summer” (1961). But he made an equal if not greater contribution to French film with his ethnofictions — a blend of documentary and imaginative drama — that he shot during the early 1950s with a hand-held 16-millimeter camera in colonial West Africa.

As influential as these movies proved to be, not least on the French New Wave directors, they have been difficult to view in the United States. The Icarus set makes available restored versions of Rouch’s three major ethnofictions, “Moi, un Noir” (“I, a Black Man”), from 1958, “The Lion Hunters” (1965), and “Jaguar” (1967). There are also two early shorts, “Mammy Water” (1955) and “The Mad Masters” (1956).

The most notorious of Rouch’s early

works was “The Mad Masters.” Shot in the British colony that would become Ghana after its independence, the film showed members of a cult in the throes of spiritual possession, in part as a means of mocking their colonial overlords. The movie was banned in Britain and caused a sensation in France, where it has been credited with inspiring Jean Genet’s incendiary play “The Blacks.”

Abandoning sensationalism, Rouch next made “Moi, un Noir” in Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast, then a French colony. His method was collaborative. The movie features a group of young migrants from Niger who play themselves as well as the movie stars with whom they identify. The use of the lead actor’s voice-over narration to comment on the action, along with the spectacle of young people playfully acting in a movie (and thus further documenting their situation), was revelatory for French filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, who called “Moi, un Noir” “the greatest French film since the Liberation.” (One need only screen “Moi, un Noir” together with “Breathless” to gauge its impact on Godard’s film practice.)

Both “Jaguar” and “The Lion Hunters” took years to make and found their story lines in the course of their production and editing. “Jaguar,” which both documented and staged the adventures of three migrant workers traveling from Niger to Ghana’s coast, was filmed largely in 1954 and finished in 1967, but was not publicly shown until 1971. Again, Rouch recorded his actors’ spontaneous

comments as they watched themselves on film — a device also used in “Chronicle of a Summer.”

An existential quest that evidently required seven years to complete, “The Lion Hunters” is framed as a tale told to a group of children in an African village. It’s a legend, although Rouch’s sense of mythology is closer to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology than to the folklorist approach of the Brothers Grimm: For all the movie’s primal imagery, “The Lion Hunters” is ultimately a study of its subjects’ non-European logical thinking.

The Icarus set also includes two less familiar collaborative documentaries depicting the relations between Europeans and post-colonial Africans, “The Human Pyramid” (1961) and “Little by Little” (1969), as well as “The Punishment” (1962), in which one of the European women from “The Human Pyramid” wanders through Paris, approached by a succession of men.

Shot in Ivory Coast on the cusp of its independence, “The Human Pyramid” is largely an improvised group psychodrama in which African and European students try, with varying success, to break through the informal segregation that separates them. “Little by Little,” originally over four hours in length, but here 96 minutes, was conceived as a sequel to “Jaguar,” in which actors from the earlier film make an ethnographic expedition to Paris. (Jacques Rivette considers the movie the catalyst for his 13-hour opus, “Out 1: Noli Me Tangere.”)



ICARUS FILMS

A scene from “Jaguar,” a 1967 film by Jean Rouch.

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Photographs by Stephen Shore at the Museum of Modern Art, clockwise from left: “U.S. 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973”; “Sunset Drive-in, West 9th Avenue, Amarillo, Texas, October 2, 1974”; and “Second Street, Ashland, Wisconsin, July 9, 1973.”



Restless reformer and master photographer

ART REVIEW

Stephen Shore survey showcases his art as an autonomous discipline

BY JASON FARAGO

In the art world of the 1960s and 1970s, the photograph came to have a multiplicity of functions: it could document a performance (as in the art of Carolee Schneemann), advocate a social message (Danny Lyon), underpin a conceptual practice (Sol LeWitt), or relate a fictional narrative (Eleanor Antin). And today, now that cameras are ubiquitous and cloud-compatible, we often expect photography to serve as a tool for other efforts. But a photograph can still — we forget sometimes — have no function than to be itself.

That autonomous virtue comes through loud and clear at the Museum of Modern Art’s retrospective of Stephen Shore’s work: a sprawling, demanding exhibition that sticks up for photography as a discipline in its own right. Mr. Shore, who emerged in the 1970s alongside William Eggleston, Joel Sternfeld and other pioneers of color photography, has spent decades shooting landscapes and highways, motel rooms and diner breakfasts, with an unaffected mastery and subtle humor. Not staged, not lit, not cropped, not retouched, his photographs are feats of dispassionate representation, and yet their attentiveness and exactitude make them far, far more than snapshots.

Mr. Shore was born in New York in 1947 and may have had one of the most precocious childhoods of any American artist. He had darkroom equipment at age 6, a camera by age 10, and he

entered the collection of MoMA at just 14, when he persuaded Edward Steichen to buy three prints. Before he was out of his teens Mr. Shore had dropped out of high school and was hanging around the Factory, Andy Warhol’s all-purpose studio, where he shot cavorting superstars, musicians like Lou Reed and John Cale of the Velvet Underground, and visitors like Marcel Duchamp, pictured here with a cigar and a smile of refined forbearance. There’s an echo of Warhol’s aloof observational style in these early black-and-white images, as well as in a rare silent film by Mr. Shore, “Elevator” (1964), which intercuts shadowy shots of a lift’s metal grilles into flickering harmony.

By 1969 Mr. Shore had hit the road, and in Amarillo, Tex., he produced suites of photographs, shaped by a single principle, that pictured anodyne Americana in impassive repetition. “July 22-23, 1969,” a sequence of 49 square-format photographs, captures the artist’s friend Michael Marsh at precise half-hour intervals, lazing about in the desert or sleeping in a motel bed; in “4-Part Variation, July 1969,” Mr. Shore photographed his rented Oldsmobile at four different distances, then repeated the prints eight times to form a grid. These inexpressive sequences, as well as a related series of palm trees and gas stations he shot in Los Angeles, bear the clear influence of Ed Ruscha’s small books of serial photography, which Mr. Shore gobbled up in 1968. His focus on the everyday and the undistinguished would continue with “All the Meat You Can Eat,” a 1971 show at a gallery in then-rough SoHo, where Mr. Shore exhibited hundreds of dry or kitschy found images — flat picture postcards of hospitals and strip malls, topless pinup girls and F-106 fighter jets — among his own photographs, many



“1:35 a.m., in Chinatown Restaurant, New York, New York. 1965–67.”

shot with the Mick-a-Matic camera, a children’s apparatus shaped like Mickey Mouse.

Mr. Shore was on the road again in 1972, but this time he had a new piece of kit: a Rollei 35-millimeter camera, equipped with a flash (a rarity for him) and stocked with color film. “American Surfaces,” as the hundreds of prints he produced that year came to be called, captured the everyday sights of America — a car dealership, a stained mattress, a potted plant, a squat building by the roadside. Their diaristic plainness, exacerbated by the flattening effect of the flash, effects a sea change from earlier principles of documentary photography, which held that an image rose to the level of art by capturing what Henri Cartier-Bresson called “the decisive moment,” or what Roland Barthes named the “punctum,” or overlooked detail that holds the eye.

Mr. Shore put that aside, in favor of the noninterference he first embraced in Warhol’s Factory. More shockingly, he did so in color. Though these photographs would eventually influence a generation of photographers from Nan Goldin to Thomas Struth, they were reviled by defenders of advanced photography in the early 1970s, who held that only black-and-white images could have the distinction of art. Quentin Bajac, MoMA’s chief curator of photography and the curator of this exhibition, presents them here as they were initially shown in 1972: unframed, pinned to the wall, proudly bare-bones.

There were opponents, too, of “Uncommon Places,” (1973-1982), the first of his series shot with a larger 8-by-10 apparatus. Statelier and sterner than “American Surfaces,” these photographs translate the thoroughfares of Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Miami

Beach and especially America’s burgeoning suburbs into meticulously composed tableaux. A street in Spokane, Wash., appears as empty as a stage set, a stretch of U.S. Route 93 in Kingman, Ariz., is rendered as three bands of street, land and sky.

The images of “Uncommon Places” have the same impartiality as “American Surfaces,” but the earlier series’ offhandedness has given way to formalist exactitude. Look, for example, at “Breakfast, Trail’s End Restaurant, Kanab, Utah, August 10, 1973,” which endows a meal of pancakes and half a cantaloupe with the nobility of a Dutch still life. Mr. Shore shoots the table overhead, at a nearly 45-degree angle, such that the false wood of the table slices against the lower left corner’s red plastic seat and floral carpet. Paper place mats create a network of parallel diagonals, compounded by a fork and knife, disrupted by a misplaced spoon, and traversed by the butter on the pancakes, which has melted from left to right to create the image’s only orthogonal line. Sparks of color, such as the green of the cantaloupe pith, punctuate the rhyming browns of the pancakes, maple syrup, plates, table and water glass.

There is an extreme precision here, as there is in this show’s most surprising inclusions: rare stereographs from 1974, seen in a special viewer, that inject a spectral third dimension to a bathroom sink or a mother and daughter on the street. Its chilly stillness countermands the visual delight of Walker Evans, Robert Frank and other earlier photographers, but it also negates the diaristic intimacy of “American Surfaces.”

In the 1980s Mr. Shore moved to Montana, and turned his exacting gaze from suburbia to the landscape. Photographs of sinuous hills of the American northwest, and of Texan badlands and

craggy fields in Scotland, resist heroic grandeur. Yet the wide-ranging exhibition, which includes more than 500 images as well as cases of archival material, shows Mr. Shore lately returning to more diverting imagery, shot with a more lightweight kit. A series of print-on-demand books, from 2003 to 2010, capture a single day’s sights: the stone walls of Central Park, a visit to the dentist, the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

These days, Mr. Shore prefers to throw such images onto an Instagram account, commanding more than 100,000 followers, which unites landscapes, still lifes and (as any social media maven would) pictures of his food and his pets. In MoMA’s galleries the books hang in midair, swinging from the ceiling, while the Instagram images are displayed on finger-smudged iPads, which visitors were flicking through with the same attention usually given to social-media imagery — that is to say, not much attention at all.

There is a throwback, in these recent works, to the everyday impressions of “American Surfaces,” and the Instagram account parallels, too, Warhol’s documentation of forgettable daily minutiae on Polaroids or 16-millimeter film.

Mr. Shore, as this commanding show through May 28 demonstrates, has spent his career making images that matter out of subjects often overlooked, and via technologies (color film, the Mickey Mouse camera, the print-on-demand book) out of elite favor. Instagram may yet have the same potential, but it comes at a very high cost: losing the autonomy that this show begs to retain for photography, and freighting every image with commenters’ adulatory emoji and the metadata of Mark Zuckerberg’s ad sales team.

At the edges of memory

BOOK REVIEW

SWALLOWING MERCURY
By Wioletta Greg. Translated by Eliza Marciniak. 146 pp. Transit Books. Paper. \$15.95.

BY INARA VERZEMNIEKS

For those writers desiring to summon a lost past, especially as a way to re-enter childhood memory, the most pressing challenge is almost always one of resurrection: how to make what has already happened, that which can never happen again, feel as if they can still be happening.

In her entrancing fiction debut, “Swallowing Mercury,” the poet Wioletta Greg achieves a form of literary alchemy that mesmerizes for its ability to situate us inside a personal landscape where both the eternal past and the unfolding present feel as if they can exist simultaneously.

Although set in a fictional village in

rural Poland in the 1970s and 1980s, Greg’s book — which was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and elegantly translated by Eliza Marciniak — very clearly lays its claim to the territory of autobiography, as we progress through a series of tightly drawn scenes that suggest with flip-book-like economy the narrator’s progression from birth to adolescence. And yet it expands the potential of the personal by also asserting that this is a memoir of place, as Greg describes in loving detail a village she calls Hektary, and all that it contains: a world where pagan and Catholic tradition exist side by side, where “a poultice of parboiled cabbage leaves” and “a greasing with mutton and dog tallow” is trusted as much as any chemist’s prescription, and where experience is defined not “by field margins overgrown with thistles and goosefoot, by cobbled roads, fences or tracks trodden by humans, but instead by light, sound and the elements.”

At the same time, as much as such

idyll is celebrated, it is also beautifully complicated by Greg’s precise, evocative and, at times, delightfully unsettling prose, the gritty never sacrificed for the sake of simply being pretty. The air of August smells of “rotting mattress straw, laundry starch, mildew and cat piss.” At the family’s kitchen table, “the blood of the weasel that my father had stuffed the previous week was still clotting in the cracks.”

Greg trains our gaze on the smallest things — the blood of the weasel, the straw of the mattress — and yet there is also a much larger historical concern that forms the book’s whispered background: The narrator’s coming-of-age coincides with the last troubled days of Soviet-style Communism, and so even the most simply stated memories can’t help being laced with a strange, aching tension. Such as when the narrator is called into the headmistress’s office after she submits an entry to a state-run art competition — “Moscow through your eyes” — upon which ink had been accidentally spilled so that “it



Wioletta Greg revisits Poland’s past.

looked as if the capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was being engulfed by a viscous ocean of indigo.” The suited man who meets her in the office, who identifies himself only as someone who has “made a special trip all the way from the provincial govern-

ment to reward your work,” offers first chocolate, then the following question: “And who might have given you this . . . interesting idea?”

The moment, full of quiet menace, is deliberately pointillistic, the reader left to infer what is not being said — which feels in keeping with a history that depended as much on silence as what was actually spoken, where so much had to be communicated through elision or omission. Also ghosting the edges of this idea are the lasting repercussions of learning what not to say when telling a story to spare lives.

For even as the narrator learns the vulnerabilities of those around her — the combine driver who, in his drunkenness, blurts the name of a lost love; the village seamstress, and the succor she seeks in a locked room; the grandmother who loses her firstborn; the narrator’s father, who loses his own mother far too young — the narrator, in the moment, keeps her secrets. At the same time, by remembering them as she does now, summoning them, in

retrospect, through the most intimate details — she envisions her father, for example, calling for his lost mother under “a horse blanket and fresh walnut leaves, so that bedbugs wouldn’t bother him” — she also finds a way to “keep” these secrets in the sense that one also associates with, say, taxidermy, a ritual that runs through the book, and which is conducted by the narrator’s father at the kitchen table with a surprising tenderness that the narrator regards as almost holy, his supplies “anointed with alum and dried Butapren glue.”

The paradox of taxidermy, of course, is the way it both reanimates and stills — which is also perhaps the most poignant and complex achievement of Greg’s particular resurrection: She makes us feel the enduring presence of what is already gone.

Inara Verzemnieks teaches in the University of Iowa’s nonfiction writing program and is the author of a memoir, “Among the Living and the Dead.”

TRAVEL

Tote that barge, lift that shrine . . .

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

In rural Japan, a friendship is cemented by taking part in a summertime festival

BY KENAN CHRISTIANSEN

“How much does it cost?” I asked Hirota.

We were inside his neighborhood shrine and staring at what looked like a miniature Japanese palace, intricately gilded and lacquered red and black. It was the vessel for the community’s god, a portable shrine known as the mikoshi.

“More than my house,” Hirota answered.

Outside, men from the neighborhood were prepping for the summer matsuri (festival): shrugging into ceremonial white robes and loading a tiny pickup to the brim with ice chests full of beer, sake and shochu.

I looked back at the mikoshi and winced. It looked about as heavy as a brick oven and just as likely to move. But for the next nine hours, our task would be to move it. As Hirota put it, carrying the shrine would “show off our manpower” and prove to the unseen spirit inside, known as an ujigami, that the people in the small town of Miyoshi in Chiba prefecture were strong enough to take care of their community for yet another year.

“How much does it weigh?”

“You’re about to find out.”

Hirota helped me into my robe, tying all the knots for me, instead of guiding me on how to do it. It was one of those disarming breaches of male etiquette that winds up feeling paternal.

He looked a bit like Kikuchiyo, the samurai of dubious origin in Kurosawa’s classic “Seven Samurai,” with the same coal-black mustache and goatee, the same rustic and likable raffishness, the same boyish heart.

When he first asked if I wanted to take part in a “fun, Japanese tradition,” I initially refused. For one, the Japanese have yet to fully defang their ancient traditions. Every six years, for instance, men from Nagano’s Suwa region plunge down steep hillsides on unwieldy 10-ton logs in a celebration known as the festival of “the honored pillars.” Not all of the men make it down to the bottom uninjured, and, occasionally, not all of them make it down. Hirota listened to my excuses, from lingering back pain (real), a possible sun allergy (invented), to a sudden trip I remembered planning that fell on the same weekend (shameless), and rebuffed them all with a single word, “ganbarro”— “We’ll do our best.”

So there we were, swaddled like Hare Krishnas and ready to measure ourselves against the generations of ancestors who came before us to perform the exact same task.

When volunteers were called up to the line, without thought I stepped forward. Hirota, oddly enough, did not. Instead he donned a whistle and took a place on the outside, as one of the steerers.

Our team would be coached by the ki-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENJI HIROTA

Above, a dance with the mikoshi, or portable shrine. Carrying the mikoshi is a test of strength that measures whether the men will be able to take care of their community in the coming year.

be no challenging ourselves together. While I bore the load with the rest of the grunts, Hirota’s entire lifting duties would consist of holding a whistle, and he probably knew that when he recruited me.

“It’s an important position,” he called back, leaving to join the others.

The tradition of carrying the mikoshi is centuries deep, though which exact century is still up in the air. One of the first recorded mentions of mikoshi took place in 794 A.D. in Kyushu, where the god of the Usa Hachiman Shrine was brought outside on a palanquin to either — depending on accounts — ensure the safe construction of the Great Buddha at the Todaiji Temple or suppress a revolt. Possibly both.

However, by the beginning of the 11th century, while Murasaki Shikibu put the finishing touches on what many consider the world’s first novel (“The Tale of Genji”), her contemporaries in Kyoto were already marching mikoshi through the city streets to ward off malevolent spirits and natural disasters as a part of their festivals.

don’t have enough people. This will be their last year,” a man said.

This struck me as sad. Partly because their group was only slightly smaller than ours, but there was something else. Miyoshi lies on the far southern tip of the Boso Peninsula, where every weekend surfers and cyclists flock in from Tokyo and Yokohama to take advantage of the beaches and ocean-view roads, but between those coasts lies a rural landscape. A place where farmers sell crops via unmanned, roadside stands to customers who pay on the honor system; where crows are formidably enormous; and where every summer morning Asian lilies open with a pop and every summer night bush-league yakuza rattle past your windows, gunning motorcycle engines.

There’s a delicate balance to it all that is held together by a community willing to bend and band together.

But what happens to a place when its people are no longer strong enough to take care of their community another year?

I watched the procession disappear back into its neighborhood for the last time, where the drumbeats faded to a murmur: the sound of an ujigami retiring.

“Even if I drink sake, my spirit doesn’t get drunk, until the matsuri is over,” our kiyari-shu sang.

These songs — some silly, others bawdy, most not for children — weren’t going to help anyone up the steps of enlightenment; they were made to lift the spirits of generations of farmers, who were out seeking their gods in their own way.

But at the time, I could not see that. By now, all of my fellow grunts had either drunken themselves stuporous or had long since been rendered mute by pain. And yet the kiyari-shu still pushed — always prolonging each dance so that it was longer than the last; once we had given the supreme effort, he always found a new verse and kept on singing. My breaking point came at the seventh leg. I had made it seven hours. Seven hours of that unfamiliar god towering over, biting into my shoulder, and I hurt right down to the skeleton.

When the dance was finally over, I stormed off through the crowd.

I walked down a country road bordered by rice fields until I was far enough away to have to consider whether I should just walk home. Unsure, I stopped. At this point in the summer, the rice stalks were dense, yellowing and just starting to bend. Herons, white as candles, patrolled the shadows of their rows. A hand touched my arm.

It was Hirota. I was too angry to talk, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he offered a can of Pineapple Strong Zero — my favorite — and we drank in silence next to the rice fields, watching the wind comb them. “I wanted this to be fun for you,” Hirota finally said.

He was always trying to include me. And how many foreigners come to live in Japan, especially rural Japan, and find inclusion just out of reach? I suddenly felt ashamed of my anger. Here was the man who signed the lease for my apartment, without my even asking him; who taught me how to wrestle octopus and fist-sized mollusks from the ocean floor and later how to dice them up into fresh sashimi. He had invited me into his home and counted me among his community, and it was about time I started acting like it.

On our return, I scooped up one of

those balloon-size sake bottles off the blue tarp, and tilted it back with the rank and file until we were all sputtering alcohol. If the summer matsuri is as much about sharing happiness as sharing hardship, then it was time for me to even the balance.

I grabbed a shovel and drew a sumo

ring in the dirt. Ten minutes later, I was standing outside of it, holding up the fat arm of a fisherman who had ousted me.

When it was time to march again, Hirota put his whistle around my neck and took my place in line. But for the final length, we went together.

Back at the shrine, after 20 minutes of

continuous jostling, the men holding the mikoshi were crumbling. Backs were bending and the right side was starting to buckle. One man shouted, “Let this be the last one. Ganbarro!”

“Ganbarro!” we answered back.

And the kiyari-shu found another verse and kept on singing.



The shrines can weigh more than 800 pounds.

yari-shu, the procession’s leader, who would sing regional songs to cheer us up and dictate the length of our suffering at each waypoint; nine in total.

He sang for us to lift. We pressed the shrine a full arm’s length above our heads, and the men around me started chanting, “Ya, ya, ya!” I joined the rhythm, the acceleration, and just like that, our ship was underway.

The enthusiasm, however, wore off quickly. Feet were stepped on, dances were performed out of sync, and then an unexpected fight broke out between the left and right sides — which is to say unexpected only by me.

But what surprised me the most was how quickly carrying the mikoshi went from fun, social activity to actual labor to medieval punishment I would have loved to escape. While the others lounged on a blue tarp, guzzling beer and feasting on store-bought trays of sushi, tempura and onigiri, I spent the break huddled in a remote corner, convinced the next few hours were going to take years off my life.

“It’s heavy, isn’t it?” Hirota said. He was already tipsy, and wanted me to be, too.

“More than I thought, but maybe with both of us next time, it won’t be so bad.”

Hirota sighed. Bad news. Since he was a leader, he didn’t have to say any more. Since he was a leader there would



ICE CUBE PURE

ICE CUBE

Chopard