

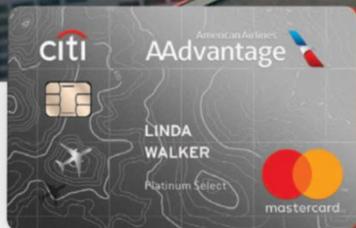
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JULY 24, 2017

THE NEW YORKER



Skyline Sophie Wow



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THE NEW YORKER

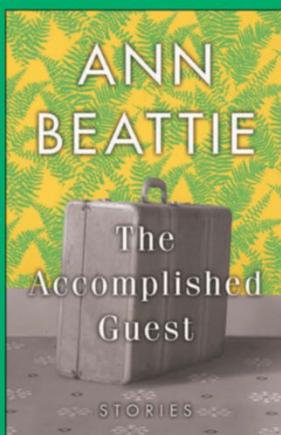
JULY 24, 2017

- 4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
- 15 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
David Remnick on the Trumps' family drama; M.T.A. malaise; how to be a goddess; a new way to study abroad; David Lowery.
- LETTER FROM COLORADO
- Peter Hessler** 20 Follow the Leader
A small-town movement echoes the President.
- SHOUTS & MURMURS
- Jack Handey** 27 Don't Blame Yourself
- ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY
- Nathan Heller** 28 Mark as Read
The slippery insights of e-mail.
- PERSONAL HISTORY
- Danielle Allen** 32 American Inferno
How a teen-ager becomes a crime statistic.
- PROFILES
- Kelefa Sanneh** 42 Hat Trick
George Strait's startling consistency.
- FICTION
- Cristina Henríquez** 52 "Everything Is Far from Here"
- THE CRITICS
- BOOKS
- Hua Hsu** 56 *Revisiting Bob Marley.*
58 Briefly Noted
- James Wood** 62 *Joshua Cohen's "Moving Kings."*
- MUSICAL EVENTS
- Alex Ross** 66 *A unique performance space in Colorado.*
- THE THEATRE
- Hilton Als** 68 "Pipeline."
- THE CURRENT CINEMA
- Anthony Lane** 70 *"War for the Planet of the Apes," "Lady Macbeth."*
- POEMS
- Natalie Shapero** 25 "They Said It Couldn't Be Done"
John Skoyles 48 "My Mother, Heidegger, and Derrida"
- COVER
- Barry Blitt** "Grounded"

DRAWINGS Amy Hwang, P. C. Vey, Barbara Smaller, Edward Koren, Paul Karasik, Liana Finck, Benjamin Schwartz, Sam Gross, Edward Steed, Roz Chast, William Haefeli, Drew Dernavich, Robert Leighton, Alex Gregory **SPOTS** Jean Jullien

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—O, *The Oprah Magazine*

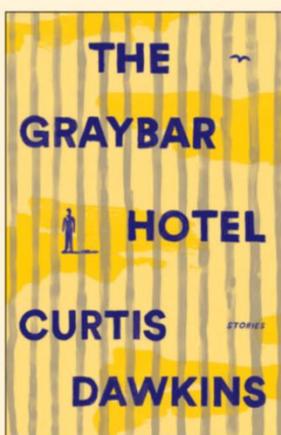


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DAILY SHOUTS

A child’s commentary on her mother’s “squishy and wobbly” body, illustrated by Glynnis Fawkes.



FLASH FICTION

Amelia Gray’s “The Hostage” is the latest in our new series of very short stories.

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THE MAIL

PUTTING AFRICA ON THE GRID

Bill McKibben, in his piece on off-the-grid solar power in sub-Saharan Africa, unfortunately lapses into a cliché account of the region (“Power Brokers,” June 26th). Although McKibben quotes Africans, he presents the story of Africa as the story of Westerners in Africa, and makes the task of rural electrification seem to be a series of technical problems for Americans to solve. The Westerners in his article are presented as operating in an idealized environment, one devoid of the gritty institutional challenges to development in Africa, such as local politics, government accountability, and legal empowerment. Alloysius Attah, a Ghanaian entrepreneur, notes that “there are a lot of Ivy Leaguers coming to Africa to say, ‘I can solve this problem.’ . . . They’re doing good work, but little investment goes to community leaders.” Rather than examine the broader implications of this observation—including the West’s attitude toward Africa—McKibben narrowly interprets the “whiff of colonialism” as an issue of money: aid versus private capital. Having lived in Africa for nearly a decade and worked for African social enterprises, I know that McKibben, whose work is indispensable to today’s environmental movement, has accurately described the African solar-startup scene. But stories like this perpetuate the ugly narrative of the West solving Africa’s problems. When will journalists stop making Westerners the focus of stories about Africa?

Matthew Muspratt
Berkeley, Calif.

KEEP TEXAS WEIRD

Lawrence Wright’s article on Texas, which describes the state legislature moving farther to the right as voter demographics move to the left, stirred up memories of a state I’ve known and watched evolve since the nineteen-eighties (“The Future Is Texas,” July 10th & 17th). I am from San Francisco, and have spent time

over the years visiting siblings who lived in Austin. I suspect that, were Austin transplanted to the Bay Area, it would be considered similar to Sacramento. It is Austin’s juxtaposition with the rest of the state that makes it seem weird, and endears it to people all over Texas. Texans who gloat about new Austinites who fled San Francisco’s “out-of-control housing costs” gloss over a basic fact: San Francisco is more expensive than cities in Texas in part because more people want to live here than there is housing. The fact that property values are rising faster in Austin than in other Texas cities indicates that the state is becoming increasingly liberal, tolerant, and “weird.”

Peter Albert
San Francisco, Calif.

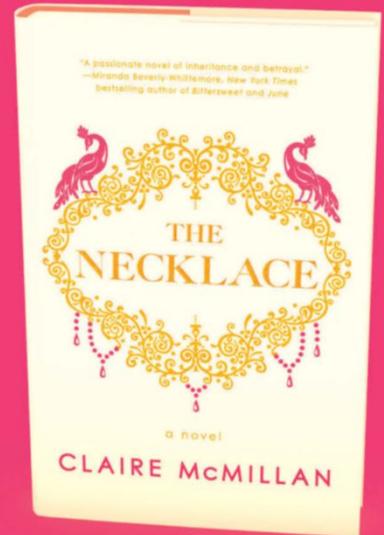
Wright notes the grassroots opposition to the “bathroom bill,” but that’s not the only thing that Texans are organizing against. In April, I rode in a convoy of buses from Dallas to Austin, where I joined people from across the state to lobby against budget cuts to Planned Parenthood. The Women’s March in Austin drew more than forty thousand participants, and there were similar rallies in cities throughout the state. Fed-up citizens have flooded town halls. In the wake of Donald Trump’s first travel ban against people from seven Muslim-majority countries, Mike Rawlings, the mayor of Dallas, held a press conference to denounce the executive order, and a large group of people protested at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. Based on the level of unrest among fair-minded Texans—Republicans and Democrats alike—the future of Texas could turn out to be very different from its present. Don’t give up on us yet.

Marian Avalos
Dallas, Texas

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—CRISTINA ALGER,
author of *The Darlings*



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JULY 19 – 25, 2017

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The game-changing Austrian-Italian designer Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007) was ambivalent about retrospectives. “It’s like having a birthday party where too many relatives show up,” he once said. That family is about to expand. On July 21, the **Met Breuer** opens a six-decade survey of Sottsass’s impertinent genius, from the lipstick-red typewriter he conceived for Olivetti, in 1969, to his gonzo work with the Milan-based Memphis design group, in the early eighties (including the “Carlton” room divider, pictured above).

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW B. MYERS

CLASSICAL MUSIC

CONCERTS IN TOWN

“Calder: Hypermobility”

If any artist deserves the tribute of live-action performance, it is Alexander Calder, whose principal works—mobiles—are constantly in motion. The Whitney Museum is augmenting its current Calder show with a number of events; this week features Christian Marclay, a creator of both sound and art, who collaborates with the cellist Okkyung Lee in performances inspired by, and interacting with, “Small Sphere and Heavy Sphere” (1932-33), Calder’s first suspended mobile. (July 19-20 at 8 and July 21 at 1.) (99 Gansevoort St. whitney.org.)

National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America

Stern Auditorium resounds with youthful vibrancy for three consecutive evenings, beginning with the Carnegie Hall debut of the ensemble NYO2, which performs alongside members of the Philadelphia Orchestra in classics by Copland and Stravinsky, and in collaboration with Esperanza Spalding, the celebrated young jazz bassist and singer. On the next evening, Marin Alsop conducts the full N.Y.O.-U.S.A. in Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 in D Major and works by John Adams and Gabriela Lena Frank. Finally, as an added attraction, Ludovic Morlot will lead the newly assembled National Youth Orchestra of China in Zhou Long’s “The Rhyme of Taigu,” Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 (with Yuja Wang), and Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony. (July 20 at 7:30 and July 21-22 at 8.) (212-247-7800.)

Lincoln Center Festival

Morton Subotnick, an éminence grise of the electronic-music scene and the subject of a forthcoming documentary, is featured in a concert that showcases him as both a forefather of modern electronica and a creator still current and relevant today. Alongside a live rendition of his groundbreaking work “Silver Apples of the Moon,” commissioned in 1967 for release on Nonesuch Records, is a performance of a new piece, “Crowds and Power,” inspired by Elias Canetti’s disquieting 1960 study of authority and obedience. Joan La Barbara, a maverick vocalist and composer (and Subotnick’s wife), voices the central character; the German artist Lillivan provides visuals. (July 20-22 at 8:30.) • Maria Pomianowska, a Polish singer, instrumentalist, and composer, makes her U.S. debut with the songful repertoire she has fashioned for the Bilgoraj suka, a rustic Eastern European fiddle she reconstructed based on a handful of archaic texts and images. Though grounded in Polish folk styles, her music also shows influences absorbed during travels throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, producing an idiom that is cordially rootless and instantly appealing. The event opens “Nomadic Nights: Music at the Crossroads,” a five-concert series devoted to polyglot artists and hybrid sounds. (July 25 at 8.) (Kaplan Penthouse, Rose Building, Lincoln Center. lincolncenterfestival.org.)

International Keyboard Institute and Festival

For nearly two decades, this festival, spearheaded by the pianist Jerome Rose, has been a go-to event for piano aficionados, offering a combination of

lectures, master classes, and, most tantalizing, robust concert programs from a variety of international virtuosos and up-and-comers. One of this year’s more notable soloists is the veteran Russian pianist Vladimir Feltsman, who performs works by Brahms (including the Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79) and Mussorgsky (the composer’s original piano version of “Pictures at an Exhibition”) at the Kaye Playhouse. (July 23 at 4.) (Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. ikif.org.)

Mostly Mozart: “The Singing Heart”

A festival quietly and continually reinvigorated through fresh ideas and noteworthy artists gets under way with a mix of symphonic compositions, sacred vocal pieces, and folk songs, a nod to both the music of Mozart’s day and the current season’s emphasis on lyrical works. Mostly Mozart’s music director, Louis Langrée, conducts the festival orchestra, along with the pianist Kit Armstrong, the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, the Concert Chorale of New York, and a clutch of fine vocal soloists in Mozart’s “Kyrie” (K. 90) and “Haffner” Symphony (K. 385), as well as Beethoven’s “Choral Fantasy,” Op. 80. (July 25 at 8 and July 26 at 7:30.) (David Geffen Hall. mostlymozart.org.)

OUT OF TOWN

Tanglewood

The preëminent Emerson String Quartet enjoys a two-concert residency at the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s musical duchy this week. On the first evening, the group performs Shostakovich’s String Quartet No. 14 in F-Sharp Major as part of “The Black Monk,” a unique theatrical event (with the actors David Strathairn and Jay O. Sanders) inspired by Chekhov’s short story of the same name, which Shostakovich, over many years, struggled to transform into an opera. The second finds the foursome teaming up with several noted colleagues (such as the pianist Thomas Adès) in a program that surrounds Mark-Anthony Turnage’s quartet “Shroud” with favorite works by Schubert (including the “Trout” Quintet). (July 19-20 at 8.) • The resplendent Boston Symphony Orchestra offers a slate of keyboard-centered concerts this weekend. On Friday night, Gustavo Gimeno leads the ensemble in ardent works by Bernstein (the Symphony No. 2, “The Age of Anxiety,” with the pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet) and Tchaikovsky (the Fourth Symphony). Thomas Adès takes the podium on Saturday night, directing music by himself and by his great Britannic predecessor Benjamin Britten (“Sinfonia da Requiem”) before joining the soloist Emanuel Ax in Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5, “Emperor.” And on Sunday afternoon the B.S.O. gives the podium to Ken-David Masur, who conducts pieces by Aaron Jay Kernis, Prokofiev (the Third Piano Concerto, with Nikolai Lugansky), and Tchaikovsky (the buoyant Symphony No. 2, “Little Russian”). (July 21-22 at 8 and July 23 at 2:30.) (Lenox, Mass. bso.org.)

Glimmerglass Festival

The long weekend at Glimmerglass, the leading summer opera company on the East Coast, begins with Handel’s “Xerxes”: John Holiday, an up-and-coming countertenor with an appealing, soprano-like timbre, sings the title role, giving audiences

the chance to hear his rendition of one of the most exquisite arias the composer ever wrote, “Ombra mai fu.” Nicole Paiement conducts, and Tazewell Thompson directs. (July 20 at 7:30.) • This season’s schedule mixes classic Americana and stories that echo today’s headlines. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!” a complex but idyllic slice of frontier life, changed Broadway forever when it premiered, during the Second World War. The young opera singers Jarrett Ott and Vanessa Baccera star as Curly and Laurey, respectively, in a staging by Molly Smith, the artistic director of Arena Stage, in Washington, D.C.; James Lowe conducts. (July 21 at 7:30 and July 23 and July 25 at 1:30.) • This summer’s flagship work is George Gershwin’s beloved “Porgy and Bess,” a jazz-and-blues-inflected piece that depicts the lives of a fictionalized African-American enclave bedevilled by drugs and poverty, in Charleston, South Carolina. Gershwin, of course, had an extensive Broadway background, but the piece was conceived as grand opera, and Glimmerglass’s artistic and general director, Francesca Zambello, and its conductor, John DeMain, have restored the work’s original recitatives and orchestrations. Musa Ngungwana and Talise Trevigne take the title roles. (July 22 at 1:30.) • With its muted colors and sympathetic narrative, Donizetti’s “The Siege of Calais” dramatizes the struggle of the French port city during the Hundred Years’ War, when it was under sustained attack by Edward III. The spectre of the so-called Calais Jungle—the migrant camps that were dismantled by the French government in 2016—lingers over Zambello’s production, the work’s American premiere. Joseph Colaneri conducts a cast that includes Aleks Romano, Leah Crocetto, Adrian Timpa, and Chaz’men Williams-Ali. (July 22 at 8 and July 24 at 1:30.) (Cooperstown, N.Y. glimmerglass.org.)

Marlboro Music

Another summer of glorious music arrives at Marlboro, the festival where a conclave of the world’s leading classical virtuosos (and their exceptionally talented protégés) gather to intensely rehearse a range of chamber-music masterpieces, and the occasional novelty. Brett Dean is this year’s composer-in-residence, with the conductor Leon Fleisher as guest artist. Programs are announced one week in advance on the festival’s Web site. (July 22 at 8 and July 23 at 2:30.) (Marlboro, Vt. marlboromusic.org.)

Caramoor

Bel Canto at Caramoor has provided New Yorkers with destination-worthy concerts of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti for twenty years, and Rossini’s “Petite Messe Solennelle”—literally, “Little Solemn Mass”—provides a fitting coda as the final concert in the series’ final season; much like the series itself, the work’s depth of feeling and confident style belie its ostensibly modest ambitions. Rachele Jonck conducts the program’s Bel Canto Young Artists in the original version of the score, for two pianos and harmonium. (July 23 at 4.) (Katonah, N.Y. caramoor.org.)

Maverick Concerts

In the last of three Sunday concerts celebrating the achievements of Aaron Jay Kernis, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer who has made a specialty of the quartet form, the Maverick brings the superb young Jasper String Quartet to its charming woodland hall. Kernis’s epic String Quartet No. 3, “River,” is a specialty of the Jaspers, who perform it as the center of a concert that also features Haydn’s Quartet in G Major, Op. 76, No. 1, and Brahms’s Quartet No. 2 in A Minor. (July 23 at 4.) (Woodstock, N.Y. maverickconcerts.org.)

THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

A Midsummer Night's Dream

The Public Theatre's second Shakespeare in the Park offering of the summer features Annaleigh Ashford (Helena), Danny Burstein (Bottom), Phylicia Rashad (Titania), and Kristine Nielsen (Puck). (*Delacorte, Central Park. Enter at 81st St. at Central Park W. 212-967-7555. In previews.*)

A Parallelogram

Michael Greif directs a dark comedy by Bruce Norris ("Clybourne Park"), about a woman (Celia Keenan-Bolger) who can use a remote control to travel to any moment in her life. (*Second Stage, 305 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422. In previews.*)

The Suitcase Under the Bed

The Mint stages a quartet of short plays by the deaf Irish playwright Teresa Deevy, whose work was produced at Dublin's Abbey Theatre from 1930 to 1936. (*Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Previews begin July 21.*)

Summer Shorts

The yearly festival of short plays returns, with playwrights including Neil LaBute, Graham Moore, and Alan Zweibel. (*59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin July 21.*)

NOW PLAYING

Hamlet

Sam Gold's interpretation of the Bard's classic work about truth and illusion, madness and sanity, fathers and sons (and one daughter) is perplexing—but to what end? As an intellectual exercise about "Hamlet"—with the luminous and real Oscar Isaac in the title role—the production is a jumble of various styles, including those of Ivo van Hove and the Wooster Group's Elizabeth LeCompte. What gets lost in it is what Gold may really think of the script, let alone of his actors (including Keegan-Michael Key, as Horatio), who play so much of the story as a bitter joke or a prank. Gold treats Shakespeare's tragedy as the work of a young writer whom he delights in opening up for a contemporary audience, but at the expense of the language, and of our patience. (*Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.*)

Lincoln Center Festival

The troubled Middle East is the locus of several works at this year's festival. The playwright Mohammad Al Attar and the director Omar Abusaada, both Syrian, stage "While I Was Waiting," about a young man in Damascus who falls into a coma after an attack (Gerald W. Lynch, July 19-22; in Arabic). The filmmaker Amos Gitai wrote "Yitzhak Rabin: Chronicle of an Assassination," a multimedia piece about the death of the Israeli Prime Minister (Alice

Tully Hall, July 19). And the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv and Ha'Bima National Theatre of Israel co-produce "To the End of the Land," based on David Grossman's novel, which follows three characters who meet during the Six-Day War (Gerald W. Lynch, July 24-27; in Hebrew). (*212-721-6500. lincolncenterfestival.org.*)

Marvin's Room

In Scott McPherson's 1990 play, revived by the Roundabout, Bessie (Lili Taylor) is told that she has leukemia. For most of her adult life, she has protected herself against her own needs by taking care of others. Bessie's sister, Lee (Janeane Garofalo), left home long ago to live her own life, but that wasn't what she got. While Taylor gives the play's most interesting, poised performance, Garofalo can't seem to speak and do any stage business at the same time. The director, Anne Kauffman, does the best she can, but what can you do with a script whose most potent influence seems to be TV—or, more precisely, all those Lifetime movies that end with a healing circle and the quiet acceptance of "home"? (Reviewed in our issue of 7/10 & 17/17.) (*American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.*)

1984

In a number of ways, Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan, who adapted George Orwell's 1949 novel (they also directed, and obviously have a passion for the material), have made a successful film, which indirectly emphasizes how constricting the stage can be. Airstrip One, formerly known as Great Britain, is ruled by the Inner Party, a political regime in which having your own opinion is considered a "thoughtcrime." At the Ministry of Truth, Winston (Tom Sturridge) works with Julia (Olivia Wilde), as Inner Party members walk by, including O'Brien (Reed Birney). Later, during a series of excruciating exchanges, O'Brien physically tortures Winston. Icke and Macmillan intensify the horror by turning up the lights and amping up the sound on the teeth-grindingly effective music. Ultimately, the torture comes off as imagined and theatricalized; it's more about what Icke and Macmillan want us to see than what Winston might feel. (7/10 & 17/17) (*Hudson, 139-141 W. 44th St. 855-801-5876.*)

Pipeline

Dominique Morisseau's play, directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, is about a teacher at an inner-city public school who sends her son to a private academy. (Reviewed in this issue.) (*Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.*)

Seeing You

Randy Weiner, who more or less started the immersive-theatre trend, as a producer of "Sleep No More," attempts total theatre again, with a spectacle that incorporates dance, scripted and improvised dialogue, lights, music, and so on to describe the horrors of the Second World War and how death can affect the psychology of lovers and the idea of family. Unlike "Sleep No More," "Seeing You" doesn't get into your bones, because its gimmickry feels manufactured purely to freak you out. Actors enact narratives—cheating lovers fight, closeted gay soldiers meet and then part, a family eats dinner—that are clichéd versions of Second World War movies. Stories about queerness in this context—the show is staged in a former meatpacking warehouse across the street from a shopping emporium—feel designer-driven; nothing's organic here, not even death. (7/10 & 17/17) (*450 W. 14th St. 866-811-4111.*)



"While I Was Waiting," at the Lincoln Center Festival July 19-22, tells the story of a young man in Damascus who falls into a coma after being attacked at a checkpoint.

NIGHT LIFE

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



Chino Amobi conjures metropolises across the globe in his cacophonous instrumentals.

Past Customs

An electronic producer's mission to reroute ambient music.

The Nigerian-American producer Chino Amobi grew up in Virginia, the site of the first permanent British settlement, and often speaks of the outsider's gaze with which he approached a state so steeped in history. The experience may explain the thirty-two-year-old's awed fascination with the subject of race in his music. "I would go to school with kids that had the Confederate flag on their backpack," Amobi recently told Jezebel, "but still want to hang out with me because they listened to hip-hop."

Amobi was producing and rapping for fun by age twelve. After he enrolled at Virginia Commonwealth University, in 2006, he began releasing patchwork cyberpunk instrumentals under the name Diamond Black Hearted Boy. The project continued through his twenties, largely unnoticed, until he was drawn toward a different sound altogether. In March of last year, Amobi released "Airport Music for Black Folk," a short collection of ambient tracks named after cities—"Malmo," "Berlin," "Rotterdam." Far from the sustained keys and billowing loops of Brian Eno's ambi-

ent opus "Music for Airports" (1978), Amobi's transcontinental score has a more explicit take on air travel: buzzy synths swell into prominence like a takeoff, asymmetrical percussion mimics the metallic dance of landing gear unfolding, and talk-box samples evoke the chorus of voices, automated and analog, that echo through terminal halls.

Amobi's output is mostly distributed via his own independent label, NON Worldwide, which he co-founded with his fellow-artists Nkisi, based in London, and Angel-Ho, in Cape Town. Amobi's latest album, "Paradiso," released by NON and UNO NYC in May, conjures a decrepit metropolis that runs on chaos—shattered glass, gridlocked traffic, scorched beaches—along with the parallel histories of the NON founders' native cities and the populations that have travelled through them. There is no shortage of edgy collectives in electronic music, but Amobi and his flock have managed to repurpose the scene's tropes to tell a story rarely discussed by its denizens. He headlines, along with the Brooklyn singer Embaci, at Saint Vitus on July 20, piloting a flight that fans won't want to sleep through.

—Matthew Trammell

Algiers

"The Battle of Algiers," the storied 1965 Gillo Pontecorvo movie that documented the Algerian fight for independence, gave the contemporary gospel-punk group Algiers its name. The four-piece creates rapturous, politically charged music that examines gnarled and prevalent issues, including anticolonialism, fascism, dystopia, and police brutality, while making it impossible not to dance to the pulsating, soulful post-punk—some of which was written while the front man, Franklin Fisher, worked the coat check at a night club in the East Village. The group's second release on Matador Records, "The Underside of Power," is a dense, disarming album that both devastates and inspires, while sending forth a potent message to listeners: resist, in any way possible. (*Baby's All Right*, 146 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718-599-5800. July 22.)

Burger Records Beach Bash

In ten short years, California's Burger Records has graduated from a homegrown boutique label to a real and remarkable contributor to the history of rock and roll. With more than eleven hundred D.I.Y. releases under its belt (most of them dubbed directly to cassette tape), the label has become synonymous with starry-eyed underground power pop and keyed-up garage. This weekend, Burger throws its second annual beach party on Coney Island, hosted by **Randy Jones**, most recognizable as the cowboy from the Village People. Arrive early to get a spot up front for the **Zeros** (a seventies punk act), **Nobunny** (a garage rocker who performs in a homemade rabbit mask), and all-vinyl soul and R. & B. sets from the d.j. **Jonathan Toubin**, of the celebrated New York Night Train party series. And don't miss the budding bands that are the meat of Burger's roster, including **Habibi**, an all-female crew with sea-mist riffs, and **Sunflower Bean**, Brooklyn rockers barely out of high school who write songs beyond their years. (*Coney Art Walls*, 3050 Stillwell Ave., Brooklyn. burgerbeachbashnyc.com. July 22.)

ESG

The South Bronx group ESG (short for Emerald, Sapphire, and Gold) formed in the early eighties, at the dawn of hip-hop and New Wave. The Scroggins sisters, Renee, Valerie, Deborah, and Marie, were given musical instruments by their mother as a distraction from city temptations, and the young women were soon crafting catchy, sparse dance grooves like "You're No Good" and "Moody." But "U.F.O." became their most famous cut, sampled in hundreds of songs, by artists from the Beastie Boys to Nine Inch Nails. Other résumé highlights include performances on the historic first night of Manchester's Hacienda and on the final night of the Paradise Garage, in N.Y.C., as well as recording with the Joy Division producer Martin Hannett. The legendary band convenes this week for its only home-town show of the year. (*Good Room*, 98 Meserole Ave., Brooklyn. goodroombk.com. July 20.)

Jidenna

In 2015, Jidenna Mobisson offered up the slick, Grammy-nominated single "Classic Man." The track—which included nods to both his

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

sartorial preferences (“Your needs get met by the street-elegant old-fashioned man”) and his charisma (“I got charm like a leprechaun”)—proved inescapable that summer. Two years later, Jidenna has followed up with a full-length album, “The Chief,” which finds him flexing his talents for production and clever rhymes over a mix of electronic and trap-informed beats. The album fights against Jidenna’s near-fate as a flash in the pan, pushing to complicate his image and further his career. Fans of the rapper—known as Jenerals—gather to celebrate his latest effort. (*Gramercy Theatre, 127 E. 23rd St. venue.thegramercytheatre.com. July 25.*)

Kendrick Lamar

Four albums and seven Grammy Awards in, Lamar remains one of music’s most arresting voices, and not just because of his nasal delivery. His gift for telling hyper-specific stories in universal terms was evident as early as 2010, in songs like “Cut You Off,” about gossips, naysayers, and family members more concerned with “blah-zay-blah, he-say-she-say” chatter than with self-improvement. Fans have enjoyed watching his progress in real time, mapping the vivid biographical details that he’s teased out across a triumvirate of modern-classic rap records: “Good Kid, m.A.A.d City,” “To Pimp a Butterfly,” and, the newest, “DAMN.” “Duckworth,” the climax of his April release, might be his best yarn yet. An explosive headlining show at Coachella has set the bar high for his latest tour, where he’ll be joined by the wild child **Travis Scott** and the beaming crooner **D.R.A.M.** (*Barclays Center, 620 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. barclayscenter.com. July 20 and July 23.*)

Ride

Andy Bell, Mark Gardener, and Laurence (Loz) Colbert met in 1988 at Banbury Technical College, in Oxfordshire. The young men found kindred spirits in one another, and in Steve Queralt, who later joined the shoegaze outfit they’d started. They shared a love for forward-thinking rock music and also for peculiar qualities in art, such as the “bleak, oddly warm, existential simplicity that could be ‘nowhere,’” as Colbert told the *Guardian* several years ago. It’s no coincidence, then, that their most acclaimed album, which is hailed as one of the linchpins of the shoegazing movement, is entitled “Nowhere.” The pivotal group disbanded in 1996, following the release of its fourth album, “Tarantula,” but got back together several years ago, with the intention of playing some festivals. The latest reunion finds the bandmates refreshed, ready to pick up on ideas that have been germinating for years. (*Brooklyn Steel, 319 Frost St., East Williamsburg. July 20.*)

Hank Wood and the Hammerheads

Emerging from the fertile punk scene found in Bushwick warehouse spaces, Hank Wood and the Hammerheads have become the best garage act working in New York today. They play a high-octane strain of rock and roll that’s best described as ripping, advancing a thread of brawny, pissed-off fight music hybridized by groups like the Dwarves and Fear. The effect is ideally experienced while pogo-dancing around a room of diaphoretic night owls. (*Pioneer Works, 159 Pioneer St., Brooklyn. pioneerworks.org. July 21.*)

Karrin Allyson

Although she can add polish to any number of Great American Songbook standards—as evinced by her most recent album, “Many a New Day,” which focusses on the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein—the singer Karrin Allyson has delved deeply into all manner of material, from tributes to John Coltrane to popular music from France and Brazil. Matching versatility with vocal flair, she’s a staple worth attending to. (*Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. July 18-22.*)

Marty Ehrlich

If you were paying close attention to the work of Ehrlich back in the mid-eighties, it was obvious that mastery was his destiny. Ehrlich’s extraordinary command of saxophones, flutes, and clarinets, as well as his compositional and band-leading skills and his ease with both conventional and new jazz practices, has ripened at a sure and steady pace. He leads a taut quartet that includes the pianist **James Weidman**. (*Smalls, 183 W. 10th St. 212-252-5091. July 22.*)

Mary Halvorson Octet

The headlining appearance of the guitarist and composer Mary Halvorson is further proof that new jazz has found a welcoming home at this most hallowed of venues. That each of the members of her octet is an exemplar of cutting-edge jazz—the trumpeter **Jonathan Finlayson**, the saxophonists **Jon Irabagon** and **Ingrid**

Laubrock, the trombonist **Jacob Garchik**, the bassist **Chris Lightcap**, the drummer **Ches Smith**, and the pedal-steel guitarist **Susan Alcorn**—speaks to the commitment of its leader. (*Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. July 18-23.*)

Noah Preminger and Rob Garcia: The Chopin Project

The saxophonist Noah Preminger and the drummer Rob Garcia are the kind of unblinkered contemporary musicians for whom the restrictions of genre have little meaning. So an evening of interpretations of the music of Frédéric Chopin, without a piano in sight, is just more grist for the creative mill. The guitarist Nate Radley and the bassist Kim Cass join in on the subversive fun. (*Cornelia Street Café, 29 Cornelia St. 212-989-9319. July 22.*)

“Universal Consciousness: Melodic Meditations of Alice Coltrane”

The recent release of “The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda”—an album of previously unheard music by the late keyboardist, harpist, and singer, recorded at her Los Angeles ashram in the nineteen-eighties—was a cause for celebration among the coterie of listeners who revered the spiritually laden work of this often undervalued figure. The saxophonist **Ravi Coltrane** explores his mother’s music with an ensemble that includes **Brandee Younger** on harp and **David Virelles** on keyboards. (*Jazz Gallery, 1160 Broadway, at 27th St., fifth fl. 646-494-3625. July 18-19.*)

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Met Breuer

“The Body Politic: Video from the Met Collection”

Four hard-hitting video works—by David Hammons, Arthur Jafa, Steve McQueen, and Mika Rottenberg—play in four separate rooms. The artists’ formal approaches diverge, but they share a profound awareness of bodies and of the camera’s power to disrupt stereotypes about race, class, and gender. Rottenberg’s “NoNoseKnows” deploys the artist’s trademark politically razor-sharp absurdism, intercutting footage of Chinese women laboring to harvest pearls with surreal scenes shot in New York. McQueen’s “Five Easy Pieces” is a seductive meditation on voyeurism, with its slow-motion footage of unsuspecting subjects, from a tightrope walker to a man urinating. Hammons’s only video work, “Phat Free,” is a powerfully simple vignette in which a disorientingly noisy darkness lifts to reveal a man kicking a metal bucket down the street, evoking the danger of walking while black in America. Racist violence is more than a spectre in Jafa’s timely marvel of rhythmic editing, “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” in which archival civil-rights-era images, sports and entertainment clips, and dash-cam and cell-phone footage shift seamlessly—and heartbreakingly—between moments of triumph and terror. *Through Sept. 3.*

MOMA PS1

“Maureen Gallace: Clear Day”

Sixty-eight calm, cool little oil paintings—of landscapes, seascapes, barns and cottages, and flowers—hang in big rooms on walls painted a warm white. It’s heaven. For thirty years, Gallace has wondered, with brush in hand, if semi-realism is still viable in wised-up art. Each picture is a new guess: maybe so, given the insistent appeal of a breaking wave, a humble house, or a shadow on snow. Gallace doesn’t so much see as notice, suspending observation in states of unending, mild surprise. Like the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, her work generates power from reticence. She serves us with practical, remedial beauty. Once seen, this show won’t be forgotten. *Through Sept. 10.*

Asia Society

“Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions: South Asian Art in the Diaspora”

This thoroughly enjoyable group show brings together work by nineteen artists of South Asian origin, all now based, at least part time, in the United States. Themes of identity and dislocation crop up, notably in Jaret Vadera’s “Emperor of No Country,” a sumptuous blue robe printed with a map whose place names have been redacted, and in Tenzin Tsetan Choklay’s moving documentary film “Bringing Tibet Home,” which follows the artist Tenzing Rigdol as he smuggles thirty-five thousand pounds of Tibetan soil into the refugee community of Dharamsala, India, for a three-day-long installation. But the

show's politics never crowd out aesthetics. Other high points include a beautiful series of minimal woodcuts with Urdu text by Zarina and a whip-smart and languorous eight-foot-tall painting by Mequitta Ahuja, a self-portrait of the artist as her own muse. *Through Aug. 6.*

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Betty Blayton

This stunning show was curated by Souleo as part of the inaugural Harlem triennial “Uptown,” a multi-venue affair organized by Columbia University’s Wallach gallery. In an upstairs room, Blayton’s small round canvases suggest portholes onto a hazy pastel and earth-toned realm. Blayton, who died last year, worked in this vein for decades: in the earliest painting here, “At Onement” (1970), a periwinkle oval levitates above a gold river against a rich brown background. In “Consciousness Traveling” (2012), a rectangular desert sunset is framed by a slightly paler, otherworldly terrain. Blayton was perhaps best known as a lifelong advocate for African-American artists and art-world diversity—she was a founding board member of the Studio Museum in Harlem. These serene, transporting abstractions reveal the spiritual and introspective side of a life devoted to social justice. *Through July 20. (Dee, 2037 Fifth Ave. 212-924-7545.)*

Sturtevant

The brilliant American artist—who died in Paris in 2014, at the age of eighty-nine, shortly before the opening of her career retrospective at MOMA—was a harbinger of appropriation art. Starting in the nineteen-sixties, she made provocative, inexact copies of works by other artists, from Marcel Duchamp to Robert Gober, which she called “repetitions,” wryly dramatizing the foibles of the self-referential, self-perpetuating avant-garde. Famous examples of Sturtevant’s copycat oeuvre, including ver-

sions of Warhol’s silk-screened flowers and Jasper Johns’s “White Flag,” are on view. But replication was not Sturtevant’s only mode: two rotating video projections are installed to exhilarating effect. On the ground floor, a Muybridge-inspired, slide-show-like sequence of photographs, from 2000, documents the artist walking, accompanied by a propulsive techno soundtrack. The projection hurtles around corners, its size changing dramatically from wall to wall, in keeping with the irreverent, quicksilver spirit of Sturtevant’s art. *Through Sept. 9. (Brown, 439 W. 127th St. 212-627-5258.)*

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Nathan Carter

With his invention of the Dramastics, a fictional punk band, the Texas-born, Brooklyn-based artist introduces figuration to his abstract lexicon, crossing the biomorphism of Miró and Calder with a confetti-colored cartoon realm. The band stars in Carter’s short film “The Dramastics Are Loud.” But the action, while undeniably charming, pales in comparison with the meticulous detail and handcrafted beauty of the paper-and-wire figures and the dioramalike sets, which were used to create the stop-motion animation. This bright, appealing world, which might have been built by a team of sophisticated bowerbirds, is displayed in the gallery, where we see the young women rehearsing, performing in dives, and touring the world (with a noteworthy stop in Paris). Airy sculptures and colorful drawings—Carter collectively titles these abstractions “The Fascinators”—fill out the installation, but it’s the Dramastics who steal the show. *Through July 29. (Kaplan, 121 W. 27th St. 212-645-7335.)*

Meschac Gaba

The tent that opens this transfixing show is deceptively cheery: it may be stocked with paper and colored pencils, but it was inspired by the

global refugee crisis. Gaba, who divides his time between Holland and his native Benin, made it from fabric printed with a candy-stripe pattern he calls Citoyen du Monde (Citizen of the World); the stripes are actually elongated versions of the flags of many nations. Elsewhere, thirteen elaborately braided sculptures assume the shapes of national landmarks in Washington, D.C. (The White House is now red, black, and gold.) In a related short video, Gaba leads a small parade through the dusty streets of Cotonou, Benin—the participants wear his objects like crowns, as if to lampoon U.S. imperialism. *Through July 28. (Bonakdar, 521 W. 21st St. 212-414-4144.)*

“Cells”

This ten-person show of works that flirt with functionality is as fun as a visit to Pee-wee’s Playhouse. The splendidly weird designs of the Haas Brothers include several “Zoidberg lamps,” silver-plated fixtures ringed with bulbous protrances reminiscent of their namesake, a crustaceanlike alien on the cult T.V. show “Futurama.” Jessica Jackson Hutchins’s low ceramic tables are simultaneously heavy, delicate, busy, minimal, and unstable. Jackie Brookner contributes wooden seating, coated with crusts of black earth and sporting red-velvet tongues. A ten-foot-wide cotton embroidery by Cosima von Bonin, which involves a cigarette smoker, a cartoonish critter, and disembodied white gloves, hangs on the wall like a quilt awaiting a wild night’s sleep. *(Boesky, 509 W. 24th St. 212-680-9889.)*

“Kink and Politics: The Ties That Bind”

What unites the disparate works by ten artists in this thought-provoking group show, curated by the artist Wardell Milan, is a sense of diversionary tactics. Two spare paintings by Lucas Michael, of purple and black oblongs surrounded by gray swirls of graphite, look abstract, but in fact depict a glory hole at a gay club in L.A. called Slammer. Johnathan Payne’s “Watermelon (Akrum Doing a Handstand)” is a four-and-a-half-foot-high photograph, enlarged until it’s a red-and-green blur, that has been hand-cut into a curtainlike pattern. At times, the diversions become politically pointed, notably in Melvin Harper’s video “3017,” which combines disturbing footage of recent police violence against black citizens and vintage sci-fi clips of alien invaders. *Through July 28. (Nolan, 527 W. 29th St. 212-925-6190.)*

GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

Miguel Calderón

The heart of this moodily beautiful show, titled “Caída Libre (Free Fall),” is a video about a Mexico City bouncer named Camaleón and his pet falcon—a measured but chilling meditation on male aggression. As we watch Camaleón working at a night club and taking the falcon hunting, he speaks, in a voice-over, about being abandoned by his father, about picking up women, and about the four men he’s murdered. What makes Calderón’s treatment so affecting is his balanced approach: we see his subject’s fear as well as his violence, while the genuine tenderness Camaleón expresses for his beloved bird is offset by his glowering menace. Installed in front of the projection is an arrangement of found falcon perches that may call to mind a readymade homage to Alberto Giacometti’s “The Palace at 4 A.M.” *(Luhring Augustine, 25 Knickerbocker Ave., Bushwick. 718-386-2746.)*



In 1978, Sandy Skoglund played with her food in a giddy series of still-life photographs (including “Cubed Carrots and Kernels of Corn,” above), on view at the Ryan Lee gallery through Aug. 11.

MOVIES



In *“Privilege,”* the actress Gabriella Farrar’s speech to the camera and her Carmen Miranda costume challenge narrative and political assumptions.

Class Clowning

Yvonne Rainer’s playful movie artistry reflects serious political intentions.

Movies that make political points are often contrasted—by critics and filmmakers alike—with those that display aesthetic sophistication. But the clarity, complexity, and audacity of the political ideas that the choreographer and director Yvonne Rainer develops in her 1990 feature, *“Privilege”*—playing July 26 at Film Society of Lincoln Center, in a retrospective of her films, July 21–27—are inseparable from her bold disruption of her movie’s genre, tone, and through line.

“Privilege” starts as an apparently straightforward documentary, in which Rainer interviews middle-aged women about their experience of menopause. But Rainer soon gives herself an onscreen double, Yvonne Washington (played by Novella Nelson), and turns *“Privilege”* into a film-within-a-film made by her fictional counterpart. Rainer’s movie is on the front lines of intersectionality (a term coined in 1989 by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw) in its connection of the strug-

gles for the rights of women, African-Americans, homosexuals, the aged, the disabled, and the poor. It’s also aesthetically intersectional in its fusion of cinematic styles.

The character Yvonne, who is black (Rainer is white), interviews a middle-aged white character named Jenny (Alice Spivak), who reminisces about freewheeling times in the nineteen-sixties on the Lower East Side. As Jenny tells that story, Rainer depicts it in flashbacks. They show Jenny’s friendship with a white lesbian neighbor named Brenda (Blaire Baron) and incidents involving a Puerto Rican couple, Digna (Gabriella Farrar) and Carlos (Rico Elias), in the building next door—Carlos’s abuse of Digna and his attempted rape of Brenda, as well as the differing approaches to these events by police and prosecutors.

Yvonne extracts from Jenny’s tale a skein of hidden themes, such as the prevalence of rape and domestic violence; racism in law, housing, and personal attitudes; the sexualization of women’s personal identities; and the role of class and economic power in reinforcing these and other forms

of injustice. Rainer unfolds these themes with an incisively imaginative approach to Jenny’s recollections, which she analyzes prismatically, with a gleefully diverse array of cinematic devices—voice-overs, fantasylike stagings on a half-finished movie set, interviews with fictional characters, texts posted on the screen of an early-generation Apple computer. Jenny interrupts a sex scene with a monologue to the camera; Digna silently accompanies her, phantomlike, on a series of dates.

Rainer reserves the highest flourishes of style for scenes of anguished historical and intimate complexity—a florid crane shot, on a movie set, of a performance of writings by Eldridge Cleaver endorsing rape as a political weapon, and fluid tracking shots of Carlos and Brenda in a dancelike pose. For Rainer, drama and style aren’t innocent, and the very concept of a story, and the way it’s told, is political. Suggesting that political progress can’t emerge from conservative storytelling, *“Privilege”* reflects, in its stylistic diversity, the expanded consciousness on which social change depends.

—Richard Brody

OPENING

Dunkirk Christopher Nolan directed this historical drama, about the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Allied troops from France to England in 1940. Starring Tom Hardy, Cillian Murphy, Kenneth Branagh, and Mark Rylance. *Opening July 21. (In wide release.)* • **Girls Trip** A comedy, directed by Malcolm D. Lee, about the adventures of four friends who travel to New Orleans for the Essence Festival. Starring Jada Pinkett Smith, Queen Latifah, Tiffany Haddish, and Regina Hall. *Opening July 21. (In wide release.)* • **Landline** Reviewed in Now Playing. *Opening July 21. (In limited release.)* • **Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets** Reviewed in Now Playing. *Opening July 21. (In wide release.)*

NOW PLAYING

Baby Driver

In Edgar Wright's propulsive new film, Ansel Elgort plays Baby, a young getaway driver who works for the implacable Doc (Kevin Spacey). There are banks to be robbed and cops to be eluded at top speed; Baby's partners in crime include Buddy (Jon Hamm) and Bats (Jamie Foxx). The setting is Atlanta, worlds away from the peaceable English village that Wright patrolled in "Hot Fuzz" (2007), and although the chases are energetically staged, you don't get much sense of the city, and the diner where Baby falls for Debora (Lily James) could scarcely be mistaken for a real place. Elgort has plenty to do, including some dancelike moves, but he radiates less cool than the movie requires; Spacey alone seems attuned to the knowing tone of the whole endeavor, with its multiple thefts from heist flicks of the past. The film is best approached as a near-musical, with almost every action, in or out of cars, being hustled along by the kick of a song. Most of the tracks resound within Baby's head; he is seldom parted from his iPod, and the movie begs to be screened on the wall of your nearest Apple store.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 7/3/17.) (In wide release.)*

A Ghost Story

David Lowery's film tells the tale of M (Rooney Mara) and her beloved, C (Casey Affleck). Sadly, their love is not long for this world (he is killed in a car crash, only a few minutes into the film), yet it seems to run forever in the next, for the spirit of C soon returns, dressed in a white sheet, to the house that they happily shared. He stands, unseen, and observes her as she goes about her life; even when she moves out, he lingers there, watching other inhabitants come and go, and stretches of history roll by. We are also shown another spectre, who is doing much the same thing in the house next door; the deceased must be waiting and watching all over the place. What are they hoping for? The film is not afraid to test our patience, or to play with supernatural logic, and you are left with much to puzzle over, but there are passages of quiet grace, and even a mournful hint of comedy. Affleck does more with a sheet and a couple of eyeholes than you would think possible, and the sight of the dead giving up the ghost, at last, is unforgettable.—*A.L. (7/10 & 17/17) (In wide release.)*

Landline

This heartfelt but mild comedic melodrama, set in 1995, relies on the era's pre-cell-phone, pre-search-engine habits to spotlight the secrets and lies that wrench families apart. Dana (Jenny Slate), a twentysomething journalist, finds her fi-

ancé (Jay Duplass) unromantic and seeks adventure with a college ex (Finn Wittrock). Her sister, Ali (Abby Quinn), a high-school student, is dabbling in serious drugs. Tension arises between their parents, Pat (Eddie Falco), a successful executive, and Alan (John Turturro), a copywriter and frustrated playwright, and Alan tries to save his ego with an affair with a theatre-workshop actress (Amy Carlson). The director, Gillian Robespierre, who co-wrote the script with Elisabeth Holm, keeps the action moving with rapid-fire dialogue and a sprinkle of time-capsule references; the actors fling themselves with forced charm into their narrowly defined roles, and Robespierre juggles the story lines with a bland vigor that lacks any observational, analytical, or symbolic dimension.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*

Okja

The title is—to state the obvious—the name of a giant pig. Mighty but cherubic, she is the exemplar of a new breed, which has been developed to ease a chronic lack of food around the world. Technically, she belongs to a corporation, whose gamely smiling boss (Tilda Swinton) is dressed in ice-cream tones of white and pink. From day to day, however, Okja is raised in the Korean hills by a teen-age girl (Ahn Seo-hyun), in an Arcadian harmony of human and beast; their scenes together are not just the calmest but also the most convincing in the film. The director, Bong Joon-ho, is famed for his mingling of moods and for the suavity of his action sequences, but on this occasion the mixture proves almost too rich. With the story shifting first to Seoul and then to New York, the tone of it sways between menace, high farce, and uneasy satire, with performances to match—Paul Dano, for instance, as a creepy and soft-spoken animal-rights activist, and Jake Gyllenhaal as a television presenter with a drinking problem (not his finest hour). In Korean and English.—*A.L. (7/10 & 17/17) (In limited release and on Netflix.)*

Spider-Man: Homecoming

Stepping into the spandex is Tom Holland (as he did briefly in "Captain America: Civil War"), whose eager demeanor reminds us that superheroics can—and should—be less of a world-redeeming vocation and more of a youthful spree. Holland's Peter Parker, compared with previous incarnations, is a coltish schoolboy, liable to gallop into errors that he didn't see coming. He has an easily wowed best friend (Jacob Batalon) and a crush on a clever girl (Laura Harrier), who is taller than him by a head. He also has the requisite power suit, thanks to the patronage of Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.), but he needs to earn his stripes before he can join the noble regiment of Avengers. There's a rough and pragmatic edge to the villain, played by Michael Keaton, who forges weapons from high-tech alien scrap and sells them on the black market. In short, by the standards of Marvel, Jon Watts's movie steers refreshingly clear of bombast, and the one disappointment is that Peter's Aunt May (Marisa Tomei), the coolest presence in the story, doesn't get to hang out with Iron Man. Tomei and Downey, Jr., made sweet music in "Only You," back in 1994. Why not try again?—*A.L. (In wide release.)*

An Unmarried Woman

Paul Mazursky wrote and directed this instant-classic drama, from 1978, starring the luminous and lyrical Jill Clayburgh as Erica Benton, an educated and cultured Upper East Side mom and art-gallery assistant, whose husband, Martin (Mi-

chael Murphy), a Wall Street executive, leaves her for a younger woman. Mazursky applies a light and graceful touch to matters of intimate agony, which he probes in insightfully crafted dialogue scenes with Erica's three best friends (Kelly Bishop, Patricia Quinn, and Linda Miller), her daughter, Patti (Lisa Lucas), and her therapist (Penelope Russianoff). The action unfolds with a documentary-style geographical specificity, offering a catalogue of Manhattan locations. Mazursky's achievement is distinctively choreographic: for all the trenchant conversation, he sets the characters into mad motion, alone and together—jogging, dancing, fighting, strolling, embracing—and even the static set pieces, in bars and at dinner tables, have the sculptural authority of frozen ballets. When the unmoored Erica finds a new lover—the artist Saul Kaplan (Alan Bates)—her struggle for independence, after a life of comfortable subordination, resumes, and it's as much a matter of her physical space as her emotional one.—*R.B. (Film Forum, July 24, and streaming.)*

Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets

Luc Besson's visually bloated, emotionally stunted 3-D science-fiction extravaganza is set mainly in the twenty-sixth century, at a time when mind control, teleportation, and virtual reality are integral aspects of daily life, and when exotic intelligent species intermingle with humans. Two intrepid young officers of a country-size intergalactic space station, Major Valerian (Dane DeHaan) and Sergeant Laureline (Cara Delevingne), are sent on a dangerous mission to recover their commander, Arün (Clive Owen), who has been kidnapped by the gentle and persecuted survivors of an interplanetary attack. The survivors can't live without high-energy pearls excreted by pocket-size armadillo-like creatures called "converters," but Arün has commandeered the last converter, and the survivors want it back. Along the way, there are grandiose outer-space battles, a side trip to a space brothel (Ethan Hawke plays the pimp), a leaden romance, and a handful of whimsical creations, none better than a brief shape-shifting routine by Rihanna, whose voice steals the film. The overwhelming quantity of effects offers little style or surprise; the movie is a joyless, effortful slog.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

World on a Wire

Rainer Werner Fassbinder's three-and-a-half-hour, two-part, made-for-TV science-fiction thriller, from 1973—which he directed at the age of twenty-seven—is an astonishing display of precocious virtuosity. It's set in and around an ultrasophisticated cybernetic institute, where vast resources are devoted to a project called Simulacron—a virtual replica of a city, with ten thousand humanoid "identity units"—which corporate plotters seek to use for their own interests. The drama is launched by the death of the project's mastermind and the discovery by his associate and successor, Fred Stiller (Klaus Löwitsch), that much of the world as he knows it seems to have been corrupted and falsified by simulations. Fassbinder unfolds the labyrinthine identity games in a setting of deceptive appearances. With high-style, high-gloss décor and ubiquitous video monitors, captured in gyrating tracking shots and jolting zooms, he evokes unstable distortions of images within images. He also evokes the self-consuming realm of the cinema itself, by way of borrowings from sleek melodramas, cheesy B movies, and Godard's "Alphaville," whose star, Eddie Constantine, makes a surprising, sardonic appearance. In German.—*R.B. (MOMA, July 23, and streaming.)*

DANCE

Ballet Festival

The festival, conceived in 2013, features works by up-and-coming ballet choreographers performed by young companies. First up is Emery LeCrone (July 18-20), who has a grounded, legato style, in which dancers twist and interconnect in space, almost as if they were moving through liquid. The young choreographer Claudia Schreier (July 21-22) has created a solo for the former New York City Ballet star Wendy Whelan and a duet in which Whelan partners with Dance Theatre of Harlem's Da'Von Doane, backed by a chorus. Jeffrey Cirio (July 23-24), a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre, brings his ensemble, Cirio Collective, to perform a medley of works in a more contemporary vein, with pieces by Cirio, Paulo Arrais (of Boston Ballet), and Gregory Dolbashian, who has an acrobatic, street-dance-infused style. All evenings include live music. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. July 18-24. Through July 29.*)

Lincoln Center Festival / Compagnie XY

This French circus collective specializes in group acrobatics: stacking bodies into towers, launching off one another en masse. It's an enterprise that re-

quires trust, and human solidarity is the message underlying "Il N'est Pas Encore Minuit" ("It's Not Yet Midnight"), which evolves from a brawl into marvels of mutual effort. Casual and carefree in tone and attire, the no-frills production stitches some of its stunts together with the Lindy Hop, and the whole show is choreographed and danced with the smooth buoyancy of swing. (*Rose Theatre, 60th St. at Broadway. 212-721-6500. July 19-22.*)

Lincoln Center Festival / "Jewels"

The three-part, evening-length ballet "Jewels," by George Balanchine, was conceived in 1967 as a blockbuster for New York City Ballet's new home in Lincoln Center. The festival celebrates the work's fiftieth anniversary with three of the world's greatest companies: the Paris Opera Ballet, City Ballet, and the Bolshoi. Each section is devoted to a gemstone and set to the music of a different composer. The French dancers will perform the quiet "Emeralds," set to music by Gabriel Fauré. The Americans and the Russians will take turns in the jazzy "Rubies" (set to Stravinsky) and the majestic "Diamonds" (set to Tchaikovsky). Both City Ballet's Sara Mearns (July 21 and July 23) and the Bolshoi's Olga Smirnova (July

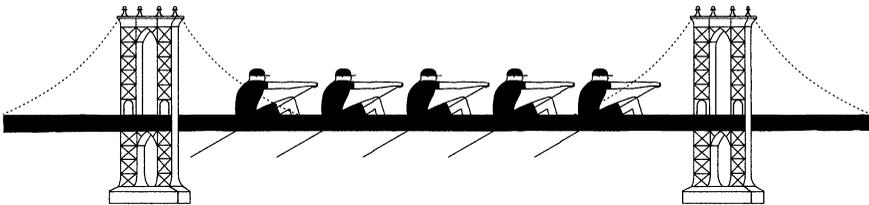
20 and July 22 evening) are fantastic in "Diamonds." The elegant and musical Dorothee Gilbert will debut in "Emeralds" on July 21. And the cool, stylish Teresa Reichlen, of City Ballet, presides over "Rubies" on July 20 and at the July 22 matinee. (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. July 20-23.*)

OUT OF TOWN

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Compagnie Marie Chouinard (making its Pillow debut at the Ted Shawn) has a French-Canadian sensibility that often looks pretentious and daft to viewers on this side of the border. In "Henri Michaux: Mouvements," the dancers mimic sinuous ink drawings when they're not thrashing and screaming pseudo-surrealistically; in "24 Preludes by Chopin," tight scenes of alienation and aggression pass in possibly ironic relation to the music's conventional associations. • Trained in the classical Indian forms of kathak and bharata natyam but open to contemporary influences, Aakash Odedra is an exceptional dancer: fast, flexible, rapturous in motion. Of the four solos that make up "Rising" (at the Doris Duke), it isn't the three high-tech, high-concept selections by top-shelf European choreographers (Akram Khan, Russell Maliphant, and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui) that best display Odedra's gifts; it's the simple, more traditional one he made for himself. (*Becket, Mass. 413-243-0745. July 19-23. Through Aug. 27.*)

ABOVE & BEYOND



OZY Fest

OZY, a digital daily news magazine, was launched in September, 2013, by Carlos Watson, a former MSNBC contributor. He aims for the outlet's marquee live event, OZY Fest, to be "the new South by Southwest." For its second year, the festival hosts an array of musicians, writers, entrepreneurs, and athletes, with headlining performances by Jason Derulo, Talib Kweli, and Zara Larsson; talks and panels featuring Samantha Bee, Issa Rae, Malcolm Gladwell, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Katie Couric, and Van Jones; and food from the chef and author Eddie Huang. (*Rumsey Playfield, Central Park, mid-Park at 69th St. 800-745-3000. July 22.*)

Come Out & Play

Street games shouldn't need organizers, beyond the loudest participant choosing who's it and what nearby surfaces count as base. But the world of adults rarely operates so loosely, so the founders of this annual festival have taken it upon themselves to add a bit of structure to outdoor play. This week, the festival turns Dumbo streets into an alfresco arcade, then heads to Governors Island for a field day, with competitions and team activities, as well as a family-friendly game series based on the idea of time travel. Volunteers can submit their own concepts for large-scale games

that could be added to the two-day schedule. (*Mannhattan Bridge Archway Plaza, 155 Water St., Brooklyn, July 21. Governors Island, July 22. comeoutandplay.org.*)

The Grace Jamaican Jerk Festival

Jerk chicken is one of Jamaica's most beloved culinary exports. A careful blend of ginger, thyme, and peppers, coupled with meticulous charcoal grilling, makes for a one-of-a-kind flavor that can be enjoyed year-round, but it's best experienced in the summer. Each July, the city's largest Caribbean food festival draws more than twenty thousand patrons to Queens to celebrate authentic jerk chicken and the culture that surrounds it, as chefs compete for the festival's Dutch Pot Trophy. Attendees can take in performances from the reggae and soca stars Barington Levy, Morgan Heritage, Alison Hinds, and Konshens. (*Roy Wilkins Park, at Merrick and Baisley Blvds., Queens. jerkfestivalny.com. July 23 at noon.*)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

At **Sotheby's**, the summer doldrums lift for a day with a sale of objects related to space exploration (July 20). Along with a selection of photographs,

spacesuits, and model rockets, the auction offers a polyester pouch—resembling a toiletry bag—which was used for transporting little fragments of the moon back to Earth after the first lunar landing. (The bag, which was carried by Neil Armstrong on his extraterrestrial walk, still contains traces of moon dust.) Also included in the sale are a report (in English), signed by Yuri Gagarin, of what he observed during his first circumnavigation of the Earth (aboard the Vostok), and the flight plan for the dramatic Apollo 13 voyage, aborted after an oxygen tank exploded on board ("Houston, we've had a problem here"). (*York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.*)

READINGS AND TALKS

92nd Street Y

Kevin Bacon stars in Amazon's new original series "I Love Dick" and in "Story of a Girl," the directorial debut of his wife, Kyra Sedgwick, which premieres on Lifetime this month. Sedgwick also stars in an upcoming ABC pilot, "Ten Days in the Valley," a drama about a television producer and a missing child. The two discuss their careers and observations on a changing industry with Amy Wilkinson, of *Entertainment Weekly*. (*Buttenwieser Hall, 1395 Lexington Ave. 92y.org. July 19 at 7:30.*)

McNally Jackson

For all the emotional attachment we have to the music formats we knew and loved in our youth, the technologies are almost always shaped by cold, hard commerce. The LP was introduced in 1948, and labels encouraged their acts to embrace the new format, because it could earn more profit per unit than the 45. The record collector was born. John Corbett became one such enthusiast: as a columnist for *DownBeat* magazine, he espoused rare LPs not available on other formats, and now he has written "Vinyl Freak," a hybrid of memoir and criticism that discusses his lifelong love of the medium, the collector culture, and the LP's steady resurgence over the past decade. (*52 Prince St. mcnallyjackson.com. July 24 at 7.*)

FOOD & DRINK



TABLES FOR TWO

L'Antagoniste

238 Malcolm X Blvd., Brooklyn
(917-966-5300)

When construction began on L'Antagoniste, in 2014, the only restaurants in Bedford-Stuyvesant liable to draw Manhattanites east of Marcy Avenue were Peaches HotHouse, the New York king of Nashville hot chicken, and Saraghina, an unmissable Neapolitan pizza spot. When the French restaurant debuted, the next spring, the *Daily News* seemed to distill de Blasio's "tale of two cities" campaign pitch into one headline: "Bedford-Stuyvesant bistro opens selling \$1,900 wine bottle, costing more than most residents' rent." That's one definition of destination restaurant.

But gentrification's got hungry maws, and Bordeaux sells in de Blasio's Brooklyn. Fortunately, L'Antagoniste's phenomenal wine list starts at \$19.50, for a Sauvignon Blanc from the same region, zippy and dry. The restaurant has, over the past two years, unstarched its French cuffs, through the introduction of a happy hour, a more affordable brunch (try the Rusty Parmentier in the sanctuary of a back garden), and a welcoming young waitstaff.

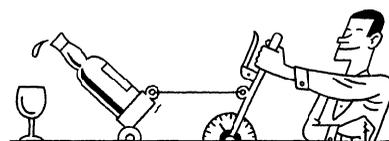
The food itself remains traditional: classic French fare, heavy and without fear of pungency. The steak tartare features confidently, startlingly thick chunks of meat. The cheese board includes head cheese from a suckling pig. Lately the kitchen has

rolled out its version of duck *à la presse*, a Tour d'Argent signature, and a succulent *poulet en vessie*—whole chicken cooked in pig's bladder, served with black truffles and foie gras. But it's not all self-serious stodge; the duck *à l'orange* gains capricious tartness with kumquat and lime; hake is served with cumin and chermoula; and Burgundy snails are baked in puff pastry, like a pot pie, with tomato and wasabi butter. Then there's the pornographic toile in the bathroom, which puts female pleasure first.

The owner, Amadeus Broger-Hetzner, of NoHo's recently closed *Le Philosophe*, and the chef, Anthony Bacle, who trained under Alain Ducasse, live around the corner, and may turn L'Antagoniste into a neighborhood joint yet. This spring, they opened their "*carnotzet*" (cellar fondue room) for an animated community-garden meeting. One recent summery evening, a nonprofit founder with a libertine streak headed for the late-night prix fixe with friends. The pours were generous, and an extra dessert was proffered—the sublime Vacherin, a meringue concoction with vanilla ice cream and raspberry sorbet. The do-gooder told of a secret sadomasochism parlor nearby, and then of a new boyfriend, a French neighbor. "I'll have to take him here," she said, beneath the photomural of antagonists throughout history: Serge Gainsbourg, Catherine Millet, Alain Badiou, Astérix. "It's fucking delicious. He'll feel right at home." (Dishes \$9–\$29.)

—Emily Greenhouse

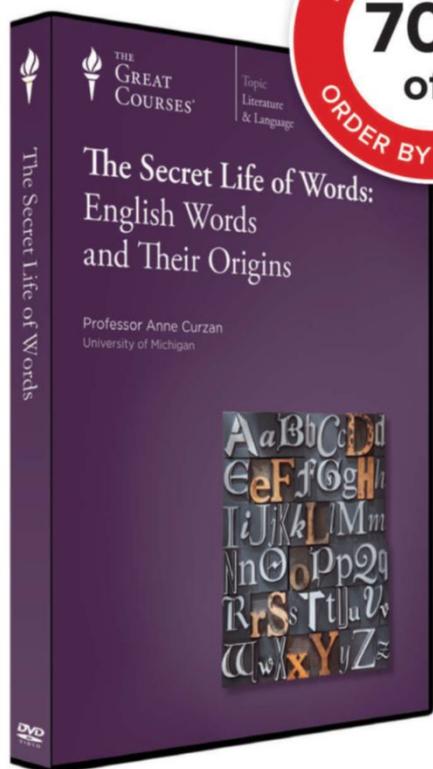
BAR TAB



Highlands

150 W. 10th St. (212-229-2670)

Near the door of Highlands, opposite the bar, there are mirrored shelves up to the ceiling full of lit candles and bottles of whiskey. They cast, on hands and faces, a tremulous amber glow, and this flattering warmth seems ready to forgive the sins of tipsy patrons. Highlands calls itself a "contemporary Scottish gastropub," a claim buttressed by an abundance of tartan—in lampshades, in the waitresses' minidresses, in chair coverings—and by a painting of a beady-eyed Scots guard hanging in the rest room. The Scottish influence is most resplendent, however, in the abundance of whiskeys, which an obliging bartender will nimbly clamber up the shelves to fetch, before serving cocktails like the peaty Blackberry Tartan (whiskey, blackberry compote, walnut bitters) and the Krankie (rosemary-infused bourbon, tamarind purée). One night, a person of Scottish descent judged the haggis favorably—it was accompanied by the traditional neeps and tatties, a fluffy, buttery rutabaga-and-potato mash. The Scotch egg was perfectly runny, and even an incongruous hummus plate was satisfying. A business-casual crowd filled the West Village redoubt, and the music played at a pleasant soft throb. "I need to find another lover," a man in a lavender shirt sighed; ice clattered in a shaker as another cocktail was poured with luxuriant slowness. The Catholic Guilt left a taste of anise on the tongue. For the less whiskey-inclined, the Wobbly Piper (mezcal, cardamom syrup) and the Royal Mile (vodka, a grapefruit rhubarb purée) offered their own path to contentment. As the evening deepened, the eyes of the deer heads on the walls glinted in the tawny light, but without malice.—Talia Lavin



Uncover the Secret Life of Words

If it seems as if English is changing all around you, you're right. It's evident in newer words such as "bling" and "email," and from the loss of old forms such as "shall." But does this mean our language is in decay—or is change just the natural order of things? *The Secret Life of Words* answers this question by presenting the fascinating history behind the everyday words in our lexicon.

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT THINGS FALL APART

In the September 11, 1989, issue of *The New Yorker*, a twenty-eight-year-old writer named Bill McKibben published a lengthy article titled “The End of Nature.” The previous year had been especially hot—the country suffered one of the worst droughts since the Dust Bowl, Yellowstone was ablaze for weeks—and some Americans, including McKibben, had taken note of the ominous testimony that James Hansen, a NASA climatologist, gave before a Senate committee, warning that, owing to greenhouse gases, the planet was heating up inexorably. McKibben responded with a deeply researched jeremiad, in which he set out to popularize the alarming and still largely unfamiliar facts about climate change and to sharpen awareness of what they implied for the future of the planet and humankind:

Changes in our world which can affect us can happen in our lifetime—not just changes like wars but bigger and more sweeping events. Without recognizing it, we have already stepped over the threshold of such a change. I believe that we are at the end of nature.

By this I do not mean the end of the world. The rain will still fall, and the sun will still shine. When I say “nature,” I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it. But the death of these ideas begins with concrete changes in the reality around us, changes that scientists can measure. More and more frequently these changes will clash with our perceptions, until our sense of nature as eternal and separate is finally washed away and we see all too clearly what we have done.

Last week, a hunk of Antarctica the size of Delaware, weighing a trillion metric tons, hived off from the Larsen C ice shelf and into the warming seas. Such

events now seem almost ordinary—and harbingers of far worse. It is quite possible, the environmental writer Fen Montaigne wrote recently, in the *Times*, that, should the much larger West Antarctic Ice Sheet thaw and slip into the ocean, sea levels across the globe could rise as much as seventeen feet. This would have devastating implications for hundreds of millions of people, disrupting food chains, swamping coastal cities, spawning illnesses, sparking mass migrations, and undermining national economies in ways that are impossible to anticipate fully.

Around the time that this event was taking place, Donald Trump, who has lately detached the United States from the Paris climate accord and gone about neutering the Environmental Protection Agency, was prowling the West Wing of the White House, raging Lear-like not about the fate of the Earth, or about the fate of the Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, who was dying in captivity, but about the fate of the Trump family enterprise. In

particular, he decried the awful injustice visited upon him and his son Donald, Jr., who had, in a series of e-mails last June, giddily advertised his willingness to meet with Natalia Veselnitskaya, a Kremlin-connected lawyer, to receive *kompromat* intended to undermine the reputation and the campaign of Hillary Clinton. He did not mention another participant in the meeting: Rinat Akhmetshin, a Russian-born lobbyist, who admitted to the A.P. that he had served in the Soviet Army, but denied reports that he was ever a trained spy.

The President argued that his son, “a high-quality person,” had been “open, transparent, and innocent.” This was a statement as true as many, if not most, of the President’s statements. It was false. Donald, Jr., had concealed the meeting until he could do so no longer. Social-media wags delighted in reviving the Trump-as-Corleone family meme and compared Donald, Jr., to Fredo, the most hapless of the Corleone progeny. This was unfair to Fredo. On Twitter, Donald, Jr., had spoken in support of cock-eyed conspiracy theories and once posted a photograph of a bowl of Skittles, writing, “If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you, would you take a handful? That’s our Syrian refugee problem. . . . Let’s end the politically correct agenda that doesn’t put America first.”

Still, the President, loyal to nothing and no one but his family, argued that “a lot of people” would have taken that meeting. Leaders of the U.S. intelligence community did not whistle their agreement. They were quick to say that such a meeting was, at best, phenomenally stupid and, at worst, showed a willingness to collude with Moscow to tilt the



election. Michael Morell, a former acting director of the C.I.A., told the CIPHER Brief, a Web site that covers national-security issues, that Trump, Jr.'s e-mails are "huge" and indicate that the President's inner circle knew as early as last June that "the Russians were working on behalf of Trump." In the same article, James Clapper, the former director of National Intelligence, said that the e-mails were probably "only one anecdote in a much larger story," adding, "I can't believe that this one exchange represents all there is, either involving the President's son or others associated with the campaign." Intelligence officials speculated that the tradecraft employed in setting up such a meeting was possibly a way to gauge how receptive the Trump campaign was to even deeper forms of cooperation. In any case, the proper thing to have done would have been to call the F.B.I. Now the country is headed toward a "constitutional crisis," Clapper said, and the question has to be asked: "When will

the Republicans collectively say 'enough'?"

Good question. Mike Pence, Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell, Ted Cruz, business leaders such as Stephen Schwarzman and Carl Icahn, and a raft of White House advisers, including the bulk of the National Security Council, cannot fail to see the chaos, the incompetence, and the potential illegality in their midst, and yet they go on supporting, excusing, and deflecting attention from the President's behavior in order to protect their own ambitions and fortunes. They realize that Trump's base is still the core of the G.O.P. electorate, and they dare not antagonize it. The Republicans, the self-proclaimed party of family values, remain squarely behind a family and a Presidency whose most salient features are amorality, greed, demagoguery, deception, vulgarity, race-baiting, misogyny, and, potentially—only time and further investigation will tell—a murky relationship with a hostile foreign government.

In the near term, if any wrongdoing

is found, the Trump family member who stands to lose the most is the son-in-law and consigliere, Jared Kushner, who accompanied Donald, Jr., to the meeting with Veselnitskaya and Akhmetshin. Kushner seems to see himself and his wife, Ivanka, as lonely voices of probity and moderation in an otherwise unhinged West Wing. Why they would believe this when their conflicts of interest are on an epic scale is a mystery. But such is their self-regard. It is said by those close to Kushner that, if he fears anything, it is to repeat the experience of his father, Charles, who, in 2005, pleaded guilty to charges of making illegal campaign contributions and hiring a prostitute to entrap his brother-in-law, and spent fourteen months in an Alabama penitentiary.

Meanwhile, as the Trump family consumes the nation's attention with its colossal self-absorption and ethical delinquencies, the temperature keeps rising.

—David Remnick

OPTICS THE SEVENTH CIRCLE



"I live in absolute fear of what happens in those tunnels," Joseph Lhota said last week, at a press conference at Penn Station. Lhota is the new chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the beleaguered state agency that runs the New York City subway system. The occasion for the remark was the beginning of the "summer of hell," an appellation coined by Andrew Cuomo, the governor of New York, to prepare commuters for rough times ahead. (Gone, evidently, are the halcyon days of empty assurances.) With three derailings since March, Amtrak has been forced to undertake repairs to the tunnels into and out of Penn Station, which will severely cut capacity at a time when the system is already bursting at the seams.

So what does happen in those tunnels? Hard to tell—it's dark in there, and this car's windows are scratched and smudged. One imagines torrents of storm water and sewage, rats the size of pedi-

cabs, and roving pods of zombies and CHUDs. If you squint, you might just make out Snake Plissken.

Mainly what happens in there these days is trains get stuck. The thing to fear, it seems, is ancient equipment and misallocated funds. An important distinction: subway trains use different tunnels from the ones Lhota was talking about. The summer of hell, strictly speaking, applies to Penn Station and all who must pass through it—patrons of Amtrak, New Jersey Transit, and the Long Island Rail Road. But it's hard not to extend the Governor's felicitous phrase to the whole regional transportation mess, not least the crumbling, overcrowded subway system in the five boroughs and the political game of hot potato that has doomed it to accelerating decay. Getting into and out of Manhattan has never seemed more fraught.

Last Wednesday morning, a woman named Jessica Ramos began tweeting from the 7 train, inbound from Queens. It had been stalled under the East River for more than thirty minutes, before returning to Queens and stranding the passengers there for almost an hour. "Summer of hell for outer boros!" she wrote. "There are people sobbing because they think they are going to lose their job."

Between each word and the next was a hands-clapping emoji. As it happens, Ramos is a spokesperson for Mayor Bill de Blasio, and the claps seemed to be a sarcastic dig at the Mayor's regular hot-potato opponent, Governor Cuomo, who, as the state's chief executive, is notionally the overlord of the M.T.A.

Nonetheless, citizens, among them the transit blogger Benjamin Kabak, quickly took Ramos to task for de Blasio's reticence on transportation matters and his indifference to the concerned public's favored mitigations, such as bus



Andrew Cuomo and Snake Plissken

lanes, bike lanes, and congestion pricing. Kabak: “Her boss has abandoned his responsibility to help.” (He was more civil than the *Post*, which, after de Blasio flew to Germany to address the G-20 protesters, featured him on its front page with the headline “DEUTSCH BAG.”)

The inattention crosses state lines. New Jersey’s governor, Chris Christie—who killed an earlier iteration of a much needed rail tunnel between New Jersey and New York (a different version is now expected in 2026, at a cost of \$11.1 billion, according to what Kabak calls the “random number generator”)—has appeared to be taking the summer off. After getting caught lounging on a public beach that had been closed to his constituents because of a government shutdown he’d ordered, he went on the sports-talk station WFAN, wearing a Dallas Cowboys cap, as a guest host. A caller, Mike from Montclair, referred to the Governor’s “fat ass”; Mike, Christie retorted, was a Communist and a bum.

“You have bad optics, and you’re a bully,” Mike said.

“Oh, bad optics,” Christie replied. “I’d like to come and look at your optics every day, buddy.”

More optics: the *Times* revealed that money from the Port Authority, which is chaired by a Christie appointee, had been earmarked for that vetoed tunnel, but instead was used to subsidize ferry trips for commuters to New York from the Jersey shore, to the tune of more than forty-six dollars per passenger per ride. (The fare was just twelve bucks.) Good money overboard.

Cuomo, at least, had recently declared a state of emergency and pledged a billion dollars for subway repairs. But optics soon caught him up, too, when the public learned that the M.T.A. had funnelled almost five million dollars to three upstate ski areas to offset losses incurred during a recent warm winter. “They’re stealing from one bankrupt place to prop up another bankrupt place,” a former gubernatorial aide told the *News*. (A reader tweeted, “They needed money bc no one was skiing bc warm weather bc climate change bc driving bc poorly funded mass transit.”)

On the horizon, fresh circles of hell: next spring, the L train, that essential link between Brooklyn and Manhattan, will shut down for fifteen months while repairs are carried out on the Canarsie

tunnel, which, during Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, was inundated with millions of gallons of salt water. As Christie was bickering with Mike from Montclair, an iceberg seven times the size of New York City was calving from Antarctica into the sea. Absolute fear.

—Nick Paumgarten

BAREFOOT DEPT. FIERCE



Last week, Beyoncé released the first photograph of her month-old twins on Instagram. She poses with them against a floral backdrop, her hair flowing, one knee slightly bent, like Botticelli’s Venus rising from the sea. It complemented a look she took up at the Grammys, when she performed pregnant, channelling African, Hindu, and Roman deities.

Goddesses seem to be in season. In China, fans of Ivanka Trump refer to her as the goddess Yi Wan Ka, citing her perceived power and poise. The TV show “American Gods” features several divine female beings, including the Evening Star, the Morning Star, and a goddess of media.

“And there’s the Wonder Woman movie,” Lucie McQuilkan said. A former fashion designer from New Zealand, McQuilkan hosts Mischievous Goddess parties, where young girls can “play beyond this realm.” She also offers weekly classes in goddess awareness at ABC Carpet & Home, in Manhattan, and Greene Moments Studio, in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. The goal is to give girls role models. “I want them to come across a goddess later on and say, ‘Oh, I learned about her when I was a little girl,’” she said.

McQuilkan took inspiration from the idea that “brave, strong women are so often called bossy and bitchy, but goddesses are powerful and fierce but really feminine in their power.” In the aftermath of the 2016 election, business has been booming. “Women were heartbroken for their girls,” she said.

On a recent Sunday, her Clinton Hill class drew eight students, ages three to six. There were seven girls, mostly in dresses (hot-pink tulle, navy-blue floral),

and one boy, Kai, three, who wore a Batman costume. “This week everything is Batman,” his mother, Brooke Magnaghi, a fine-jewelry consultant, said with a note of weariness. She’d also enrolled her daughter, Nova, five. “I grew up in Vermont and had this supermagical, bohemian, progressive childhood in the woods, and I’m trying to create some of that for my children in the city.”

At ten-thirty, McQuilkan rang a tiny bell and gathered the children on a blanket. They began their weekly affirmations. “I am powerful,” she said. “I am powerful,” the children yelled back. Next: “I am valuable,” “I am intelligent,” “I am creative,” “I am brave,” and, finally, “I trust my Earth sisters, and they believe in me.”

The day’s lesson was about mother goddesses. McQuilkan passed around images of Gaia, from Greek mythology; the Hindu goddess Durga; and the Yoruba goddess Yemoja. “The mother animal is the most fierce and protective,” she explained, and added, “Women are fierce!” She roared at Kai, who giggled.

“Why did Durga have so many arms?” Gianna, five, asked.

“Each one symbolizes something,” McQuilkan said, pointing out weapons in Durga’s hands, such as a thunderbolt and a flame. “Look, she has a spear, too.”

“Why does she have a spear?” Rae, six, wanted to know. “Is she Britney Spears?” McQuilkan smiled but didn’t answer. (Later, she expressed reservations about deifying Spears: “I don’t know what Britney’s been up to since she shaved her head, which was perhaps not her most goddess moment.”)

Sarah, four, pointed to Durga’s feet. “She doesn’t have any shoes on,” she said, and then screamed, “I don’t have any shoes on!” before running around in circles. (Everyone in the room was barefoot.) Rae’s sister, Sydney, four, joined her. Class had descended into chaos, but that was O.K. with McQuilkan. “I don’t encourage it, but girls are always told to be quiet,” she said. “You want them to be free to be a little wild.”

She called the children back onto the blanket to make beaded bracelets for their mothers. “What’s your favorite thing about your mum?” McQuilkan asked her pupils. Lea, a blond seven-year-old, said, “I like my mom because she’s nice.” Everyone nodded.

Rae picked up a white bead. “If it was

squished, it would look like a piece of gum,” she said.

Kai was reminded of a display of feminine power. “My mom said I can’t have a candy bar,” he said. McQuilkan considered her response. “Well, she’s protecting your teeth,” she said, finally. “That’s nice.”

At the end of the session, it was time to make a wish on a purple amethyst crystal. “Everyone close your eyes,” McQuilkan said, offering the crystal to each child in turn. Afterward, she led them in one more chant of “I am powerful” and opened the door to their waiting parents.

Gianna was the first one out of class. “She has no idea what is going on now in politics, but, when she does, this class will help her deal with it,” her mother, Courtney Lee, a doctor, said. “I don’t think she’s latched on to the goddess part yet, but she likes the magic. All kids need to believe in something that’s out there to help them.”

—Marisa Meltzer

PARIS POSTCARD OFF THE BOOKS



Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis once remembered her fellow-participants in the Smith College Junior Year Abroad in Paris as “slight expatriates . . . swaddled in sweaters and woolen stockings, doing homework in graph-paper *cabiers*.” Today,

the eighteen thousand Americans who study abroad in France each year prefer flip-flops and iPhones, but, as in Onassis’s day, they are still mostly white, well off, and enrolled at a four-year college. The French government is hoping to change that, by providing “students traditionally underrepresented in study-abroad programs with an affordable opportunity to attend an educative program in France.” While President Emmanuel Macron tries to recruit American scientists and engineers—“It’s your nation,” he told them, just before Donald Trump decided to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement—the country’s educators are homing in on American community-college students.

This month, the French Embassy, in partnership with the country’s top fifty engineering schools, launched a program called Community College Abroad in France. It is the brainchild of a young attaché named Léa Futschik, who deduced, after reading endless debates about the cost of college in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, that there were plenty of people out there besides Seven Sisters *débutantes* upon whose lives a *citron pressé* might make a permanent impact. “A whole semester away isn’t possible when you have a two-year program,” Futschik recalled. “So we said, ‘Let’s do a summer school!’”

She was eating canapés in an upper-floor reception room at the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, on the Quai d’Orsay, in Paris. Around her, the seventeen participants of the program’s inaugural “boot camp” waited to be presented

with diplomas. In ten days, they had not only hit the Louvre, tasted *macarons*, and picnicked by the Seine but also inspected a helium balloon that measures the city’s air quality, met the founders of a biomass startup, toured a water-treatment plant, and activated a fountain show at Versailles, using a subterranean network of seventeenth-century pipes. “We went to a supermarket, and they were all, like, ‘Cheese!’” Futschik said. “So we went to a real *fromagerie*.”

“Elena Bolotova, Tunxis Community College,” an official from the ministry read, calling each graduate to the front of the room.

“Ben Morrow, University of Mount Olive.”

“Daniela Markovic, Lone Star College.”

The students were majoring in environmental science or engineering. The French had paid half of the two-thousand-euro cost of the program for each of them, and funding from grants and from their colleges largely made up the rest. Earlier in the day, each group member had given a presentation on something he or she had learned during the trip.

“Mine was on heat reclamation from a service system in the Butte aux Cailles neighborhood,” Matt Stromberg, from Norwalk Community College, in Connecticut, said. “Sorry, my pronunciation’s terrible.”

“The thing different I noticed is that you sit down and eat for two hours,” Cole Fowler, from Davidson Community College, in North Carolina, added. Along with five other students, it was his first time out of the United States. “At the Versailles castle, they’ve got pipes down there that were from the sixteen-fifties. There aren’t too many buildings in the U.S. from that time, and, if there are, they’re a shack.”

“The best thing ever is the Line 1 train!” Ayesha Khatun, from LaGuardia Community College, in Queens, said. “It’s totally driver-free.”

Prasala Tuladhar, also from LaGuardia, moved to New York from Nepal three years ago. “When I got to Paris, I was so happy,” she said. “I was excited to see the gold and the windows and the doors. I had the feeling of Nepal again, because I saw the preservation of history.” As part of the program, students who graduate from their community colleges with honors will be offered admission to a French



institution, where they can earn a four-year *diplôme d'ingénieur*. "I'm looking forward to doing my master's, and may apply here," Tuladhar said.

Diana Calderón, another LaGuardia student, is forty-three and worked for many years as a weekend branch supervisor at a bank. "My company went to plant trees in the Rockaways after Hurricane Sandy, and that's what sparked the whole thing of going back to school," she said. "I was going places in my job, but, seeing everyone coming together to work for the environment, I said, You know, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life." She'd loved the conference on the nonpotable-water network and the riverside wine-and-cheese spread. "In mass transit, doing that little door thing, where you have to pull the handle up, that was, like, wow," she said. "My favorite thing was that we were not in buses—we were riding the trains. That gives you the best idea of how life really is in Paris." She added, "I expected basically what I saw, but, to me, what was amazing was that I was living it."

—Lauren Collins

THE PICTURES GLOAMING



A bedsheet with eyeholes makes a lovely, if lazy, costume for Halloween—and a lousy costume for a film. Last summer, two days after the director David Lowery finished the Disney film "Pete's Dragon," he secretly began shooting "A Ghost Story." In the newly released film, made for around a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, the devoted couple C and M (Casey Affleck and Rooney Mara) are sparring over their prospective move out of a ranch house in Irving, Texas, when C dies in a car accident. He returns in a white sheet to haunt the house. C's ghostly powers are faint—he can smash the odd glass—and mostly he just trails M longingly or studies her as she, for instance, eats an entire chocolate pie (in a single four-minute take), then vomits it up. So the movie hinges on the expressive powers of that sheet.

"I told Casey he'd get to show off the movements of his body, but it turned out that it felt wrong to recognize human traits under the sheet," Lowery recalled over dinner at Champs Diner, a vegan restaurant in Williamsburg. Except for his bluejeans, everything about the thirty-six-year-old director was gray, from his MacBook to his denim jacket to his shirt to his bag. The monochrome effect, set off by Lowery's large, shaved head, made him seem like an amiable Bond villain.

He ordered the Tatertachos—"This place has a lot of comfort food to convince non-vegans not to be scared off"—which arrived slathered in salsa, guacamole, and a form of animal-sparing cheese. Then he went on, "Also, the sheet kept getting caught in a doorway or gathering in a way that gave Casey 'droopy face,' or 'elephant face.' We'd kept the shoot secret in case it didn't work out, and my guts were churning and I got a big patch of white hair in my beard and I wanted to pull the plug. Finally, I just had the costume director lie on the floor and hold the sheet so it draped properly while Casey stood still in the corner of a room."

Realizing that it could be anyone under there—the art director stepped in for Affleck during reshoots—Lowery himself played the floral-sheeted ghost who lives next door, the so-called "grandma ghost." Communicating in halting subtitles, she tells C she's waiting for her family. Insofar as we can read C's eyeholes, we sense that he knows they're not coming back.

For his main course, Lowery ordered the Benedict, with tofu in lieu of eggs. A goth in high school, he now identifies as a vegan—as do Affleck and Mara. "It's like we've all read the same books," he said, explaining the collective shorthand. "And it makes catering lunches easier."

C and M's poignantly unfinished business was based on an argument Lowery had with his wife, Augustine Frizzell, about where she should live while he was working on "Pete's Dragon." He thought she should stay in their house in Dallas; she wanted to join him in Los Angeles. "It was a very polarizing argument, and it came to an impasse," he said. "So now we're planning to alternate between Dallas and L.A. Bicoastal!"

He and Frizzell dated briefly when he was twenty, then fell out of touch. "In

2008, I had a dream about her, randomly," he said. "All I remember is that it was in a parking garage and that it was very fond." After he found her on Facebook, they began e-mailing, then writing letters, then exchanging meaningful CDs. They married in 2010, in a vegan ceremony. Puzzling over the dream, he said, "I guess I wanted to get our relationship out of this temporary holding area."

Lowery grew up in a farmhouse in Irving that he was convinced was haunted.



David Lowery

One night, he saw a small, sad boy in the hall. And, beginning at the age of sixteen, he often woke with a sense that someone was in the room, or that he was being suffocated, or that helicopter blades were whirling toward him. Years later, after he read that these were standard manifestations of hypnagogic sleep disorder, the symptoms began to abate.

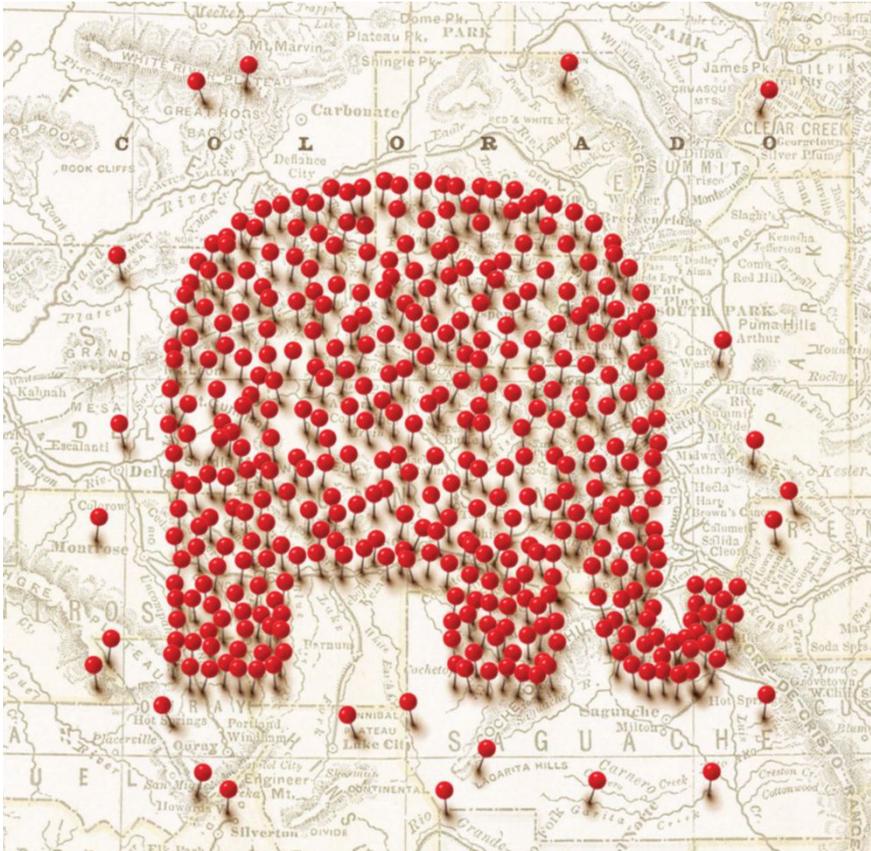
Raised Catholic, Lowery stopped believing in God or an afterlife by the time he was twenty. "But up through 'Pete's Dragon' I was still telling people that I wanted to make movies for posterity," he said. "A Ghost Story," which spans centuries, suggests that even posterity is just a temporary holding area. "I finally realized that not only will I not be around after I'm gone, but that eventually no one will be around to care." Why make movies, then? "I think there is a value in leaving the world a little better off, and movies can do that in a minor way," he said, slowly. "All I know is that I forget, about two-thirds of the way through watching this movie, that I made it. It moves me and makes me happy, and I've never had that before."

—Tad Friend

FOLLOW THE LEADER

How residents of a rural area started copying the President.

BY PETER HESSLER



In a small Colorado city, Trump's tone has a deeper influence than his policies.

When Karen Kulp was a child, she believed that the United States of America as she knew it was going to end on June 6, 1966. Her parents were from the South, and they had migrated to Colorado, where Kulp's father was involved in mining operations and various entrepreneurial activities. In terms of ideology, her parents had started with the John Birch Society, and then they became more radical, until they thought that an invasion was likely to take place on 6/6/66, because it resembled the number of the Beast. "We thought we were going to have a world war, there would be Communists coming, we'd have to kill somebody for a loaf of bread," Kulp said recently.

She was thirteen when doomsday came. The family was living in Del Norte,

Colorado, and they had packed gas masks, ammunition, canned food, and other supplies. As the day went on, Kulp said, she began to think that the invasion wasn't going to happen. "And then I thought, I'm going to have to go to school tomorrow."

In time, Kulp began to question her parents' ideas. Her father became a pioneer in far-right radio, re-broadcasting the shows of Tom Valentine, who often promoted conspiracy theories and was accused of anti-Semitism. The Kulp family sometimes attended Aryan Nations training camps. "It was for whites only," Kulp said. "It would teach you that whites were the supreme race, all of that shit." She pointed to her heart: "It just didn't fit in with this right here."

By the time Kulp was twenty, she

had rejected her parents' racism. She worked as a nurse, eventually specializing in geriatric care, and during the nineteen-eighties she participated in pro-choice demonstrations. Last autumn, she was energized by the Presidential election. In Grand Junction, the largest city in western Colorado, Kulp campaigned with a group of citizens who became active shortly after the release of the "Access Hollywood" recording, in which Trump was caught on tape bragging about assaulting women.

One of the campaigners was a working mother named Lisa Gaizutis. Her eleven-year-old son had friends whose parents had declared that they would move to Canada if the election went the wrong way, so he did everything possible to free up his mother's afternoons. "He said he'd take care of himself as long as I was campaigning," Gaizutis remembered, after the election. "He'd text me and say, 'You can stay late, I'm done with my homework.'"

The majority of these activists were women, but their backgrounds were varied. Lauren Gutierrez's ancestors had come from Spain via Mexico; Marjorie Haun was a special-education teacher who had left her job because of a vocal disability. Matt Patterson was a high-school dropout who, through a series of unlikely events, had acquired a classics degree from Columbia University. All of the activists had arrived in the same place, as fervent supporters of Donald Trump, and on the day of the Inauguration they met in Grand Junction to celebrate.

On January 20th, nearly two hundred people attended the Mesa County Republican Women's Deploration Ball. They watched a live feed of the Presidential Inaugural Ball, and they took photographs of one another next to cardboard cutouts of Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan, which had been arranged on the mezzanine of the Avalon Theatre. The theatre has an elegant Romanesque Revival façade, and it was built in the twenties, during one of the periodic resource-extraction booms that have shaped the city and its psyche. Grand Junction, with its surrounding area, has a population of some hundred and fifty thousand, and it sits in a wide, windswept valley. There are dry mountains and mesas on all sides, and the landscape

gives the town a self-contained feel. Even its history revolves around events that were suffered alone. Residents often refer to their own “Black Sunday,” a date that’s meaningless anywhere else: May 2, 1982, when Exxon decided to abandon an enormous oil-shale project, with devastating effects on Grand Junction’s economy.

The region is a Republican stronghold in a state that is starkly divided. Clinton won the Colorado popular vote by a modest margin, but Trump took nearly twice as many counties. The difference came from Denver and Boulder, two populous and liberal enclaves on the Front Range, the eastern side of the Rockies—the Colorado equivalents of New York and California. “Donald Trump lost those two counties by two hundred and seventy-three thousand votes, and he won the rest of the state by a hundred and forty thousand votes,” Steve House, the former chair of the state Republican Party, told me. “That means that most of Colorado, in my mind, is a conservative state.”

It also means that Colorado’s economy and culture change dramatically from the Front Range to the Western Slope, on the other side of the Continental Divide. Between 2010 and 2015, the Front Range experienced ninety-six per cent of Colorado’s population growth, and the state’s unemployment rate is only 2.3 per cent. But Grand Junction lost eleven per cent of its workforce between 2009 and 2014, in part because the local energy industry collapsed in the wake of the worldwide drop in gas prices. Average annual family earnings are around ten thousand dollars less than the state figure.

Most Grand Junction Republicans initially supported Ted Cruz, and, in August, 2016, after Trump won the nomination, a young first vice-chair of the county Party named Michael Lentz resigned. Lentz decided that advocating for Trump would contradict his Christian faith; he was particularly bothered by Trump’s attacks on immigrants and on the press. “I spent a month trying to come to grips with it, but I couldn’t,” Lentz told me.

In October, Matt Patterson, who grew up in Grand Junction but now lives in Washington, D.C., returned to his hometown to serve as the Party’s regional field

director for the Presidential campaign. He lasted for four days. This was shortly after the “Access Hollywood” tape was leaked, and Patterson’s first act as field director was to propose that the Party hold a Women for Trump rally. But the county chairman refused. “His exact words were, ‘That’s picking a fight we can’t win,’” Patterson told me. He quit the campaign and organized the rally on his own. In his estimation, most Republicans would find Trump’s comments repugnant, but they would be even more resentful of the coastal media that was pushing the story.

The Women for Trump rally was a local turning point. More than a hundred people showed up, and it galvanized a group of activists. Like other grassroots supporters across the country, they named themselves after Hillary Clinton’s comment that half of Trump’s adherents were racists, sexists, and others who belonged in a “basket of deplorables.” The Deplorables’ approach to the election was fiercely unapologetic. Karen Kulp told me that Trump wasn’t racist; he was simply calling for immigrants to be held accountable to the law. She said she would never support a hateful candidate, because her childhood contact with extremist groups had made her sensitive to such issues.

For Kulp, who is in her mid-sixties and describes her income as limited, the campaign was empowering. Like many in Grand Junction, she believed that Trump would kick-start the local energy industry by reducing regulations. She told me that she had never shaken the sense that the country is under threat. “I think America is lost to us,” she said. “Because of the way I was raised, that is baggage that I will have for the rest of my life.” The Deplorables funded their own activities, and they pooled money in order to buy Trump shirts, hats, and buttons from Amazon, because the official campaign provided almost nothing. “I made about a dozen Amazon orders,” Kulp said, at the DeploraBall. “Every shirt you see here tonight, I bought.”

At the Avalon, the crowd fell silent while a woman prayed: “Thank you for giving us a President who will, with your help, restore this nation to her former glory, the way you created her.” Less than two weeks later, the Deplorables effectively took over the county Republican

leadership, with members winning three positions, including the chair. Others looked farther afield. “If Trump won Wisconsin, he could have won Colorado,” Patterson told me. “The issues were here—immigration and energy.” He believed that without the infighting of the last campaign they could do better. In 2018, there will be an election to replace John Hickenlooper, the Democratic Colorado governor, who will vacate his seat because of term limits. At the DeploraBall, Patterson told me that the Republicans can win the governorship and then, two years later, deliver Colorado to Trump. He said, “We’re going to start on the Western Slope and do a sweep east and color it red.”

Like many parts of America that strongly supported Trump, Grand Junction is a rural place with problems that have traditionally been associated with urban areas. In the past three years, felony filings have increased by nearly sixty-five per cent, and there are more than twice as many open homicide cases as there were a decade ago. There’s an epidemic of drug addiction and also of suicide: residents of Mesa County kill themselves at a rate that’s nearly two and a half times that of the nation. Some of this is tied to economic problems, but there’s also an issue of perception. The decrease in gas drilling weighs heavily on the minds of locals, although few people seem to realize that the energy industry now represents less than three per cent of local employment. They’ve been slow to embrace other sectors, such as health care and education, which seem to have more potential for future growth.

During the campaign, Trump’s descriptions of inner-city crime and hopelessness often seemed cartoonish to urban residents, but not to rural voters—in Mesa County, Trump won nearly sixty-five per cent of the vote. Pueblo, another large rural Colorado county, has a steel industry that’s been on the wane since the nineteen-eighties. Its county seat now has the state’s highest homicide rate, and last election the county switched from blue to red. Far from Denver and Boulder, there are many places where an atmosphere of decline has lasted for two or more generations, leaving a profound impact on the outlook of young people. Matt Patterson told me that as a boy he



"Don't worry, we only went out once. I never saw him naked—not until now, of course."

had always hoped to escape his home town. In 1985, when he was twelve, almost fifteen per cent of the homes in Grand Junction were vacant, because of the effects of Black Sunday.

Patterson's dream was to become a magician. His parents were middle class—his father sold lumber; his mother worked in insurance—and they were upset when he dropped out of school at the beginning of tenth grade. He moved to South Florida, where he established himself as a specialist in closeup magic. He worked in restaurants, performing sleight-of-hand tricks for diners, and eventually he expanded into private parties, trade shows, and cruise ships. By his early twenties, he was earning more than forty thousand dollars a year.

Years later, he described the experience as a "brutal education," and he self-published a business manual for aspiring magicians. Some advice is technical: for magic, silver Liberty half-dollars are better than Kennedys; in low light, use cards that are red instead of blue. The manual was written long before Patterson entered politics, but any

candidate would recognize the wisdom of sleight of hand. ("A good friend once told me that the only difference between a salesman and a con-man is that a salesman has confidence in his product.")

In 1997, Patterson was riding in a car that was hit by a drunk driver, and the bones of his left arm were shattered into several dozen pieces. After six surgeries, he suffered permanent nerve damage, decreased arm mobility, and no future as a closeup magician. Having acquired his G.E.D., he enrolled in classes at the University of Miami. The quality of Patterson's writing impressed an instructor, who persuaded him to apply to Columbia. The year that Patterson turned thirty, he became an Ivy League freshman. He majored in classics. Every night, he translated four hundred lines of ancient Greek and Latin. In class, he often argued with professors and students.

"The default view seemed to be that Western civilization is inherently bad," he told me. In one history seminar, when students discussed the evils of the Western slave trade, Patterson pointed out that many cultures had practiced slav-

ery, but that nobody decided to eradicate it until individuals in the West took up the cause. The class booed him. In Patterson's opinion, most people at Columbia believed that only liberal views were legitimate, whereas his experiences in Grand Junction, and his textbook lessons from magic, indicated otherwise. ("States of mind are no different than feats of manual dexterity. Both can be learned through patience and diligence.")

"Look, I'm a high-school dropout who went to an Ivy League school," Patterson said. "I've seen both sides. The people at Columbia are not smarter." He continued, "I went to Columbia at the height of the Iraq War. There were really legitimate arguments against going into Iraq. But I found that the really good arguments against going were made by William F. Buckley, Bob Novak, and Pat Buchanan. What I saw on the left was all slogans and group thought and clichés."

Patterson graduated with honors and a reinvigorated sense of political conviction. For the past seven years, he's worked for conservative nonprofit organizations, most recently in anti-union activism. In 2013, the United Auto Workers tried to unionize a Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, where Patterson demonstrated a knack for billboards and catchphrases. On one sign, he paired a photograph of a hollowed-out Packard plant with the words "Detroit: Brought to You by the UAW." Another billboard said "United Auto Workers," with the word "Auto" crossed out and replaced by "Obama," written in red.

In Patterson's opinion, such issues are cultural and emotional as much as economic. He believes that unions once served a critical function in American industry, but that the leadership, like that of the Democratic Party, has drifted too far from its base. Union heads back liberal candidates such as Obama and Clinton while dues-paying members tend to hold very different views. Patterson also thinks that free trade, which he once embraced as a conservative, has damaged American industries, and he now supports some more protectionist measures. His message resonated in Chattanooga, where, in 2014, workers delivered a stinging defeat to the U.A.W. Since then, Patterson has continued his advocacy in communities across the

country, under the auspices of Americans for Tax Reform, which was founded by the conservative advocate Grover Norquist. “So now I bust unions for Grover Norquist with a classics degree and as a former magician,” he told me.

As a magician, Patterson went by the name Magnus, taken from Albertus Magnus, the thirteenth-century saint and supposed alchemist. Patterson is of slightly less than average height, with features that are nondescript in a way that allows him to shift easily from one appearance to another. At the DeploraBall he wore a fedora, a pin-striped suit jacket, and eyeglasses with stylish John Varvatos frames. But at other times he dresses with the flair of a goth: black T-shirt, leather bracelet studded with skulls, silver ring decorated with a flying bat. Sometimes he paints his fingernails black. These accessories vanish when it’s time to interact with factory workers, voters, or Republicans in Middle America.

In July, 2016, Patterson bet a friend two hundred dollars that Trump would win the Presidency. His conservative Washington friends didn’t take Trump seriously, but Patterson believed that the candidate’s ability to connect with voters was uncanny. (“Remember that you will be performing for people of varying degrees of education, in varying degrees of sobriety, and your routines must be easily understood by all of them.”)

Last October, three weeks before the election, Donald Trump visited Grand Junction for a rally in an airport hangar. Along with other members of the press, I was escorted into a pen near the back, where a metal fence separated us from the crowd. At that time, some prominent polls showed Clinton leading by more than ten percentage points, and Trump often claimed that the election might be rigged. During the rally he said, “There’s a voter fraud also with the media, because they so poison the minds of the people by writing false stories.” He pointed in our direction, describing us as “criminals,” among other things: “They’re lying, they’re cheating, they’re stealing! They’re doing everything, these people right back here!”

The attacks came every few minutes, and they served as a kind of tether to the speech. The material could have drifted off into abstraction—e-mails, Benghazi,

the Washington swamp. But every time Trump pointed at the media, the crowd turned, and by the end people were screaming and cursing at us. One man tried to climb over the barrier, and security guards had to drag him away.

Such behavior is out of character for residents of rural Colorado, where politeness and public decency are highly valued. Erin McIntyre, a Grand Junction native who works for the *Daily Sentinel*, the local paper, stood in the crowd, where the people around her screamed at the journalists: “Lock them up!” “Hang them all!” “Electric chair!” Afterward, McIntyre posted a description of the event on Facebook. “I thought I knew Mesa County,” she wrote. “That’s not what I saw yesterday. And it scared me.”

Before Trump took office, people I met in Grand Junction emphasized pragmatic reasons for supporting him. The economy was in trouble, and Trump was a businessman who knew how to make rational, profit-oriented decisions. Supporters almost always complained about some aspect of his character, but they also believed that these flaws were likely to help him succeed in Washington. “I’m not voting for him to be my pastor,” Kathy Rehberg, a local real-estate agent, said. “I’m voting for him to be President. If I have rats in my basement, I’m going to try to find the best rat killer out there. I don’t care if he’s ugly or if he’s sociable. All I care about is if he kills rats.”

After the turbulent first two months of the Administration, I met again with Kathy Rehberg and her husband, Ron. They were satisfied with Trump’s performance, and their complaints about his behavior were mild. “I think some of it is funny, how he doesn’t let people push him around,” Ron Rehberg said. Over time, such remarks became more common. “I hate to say it, but I wake up in the morning looking forward to what else is coming,” Ray Scott, a Republican state senator who had campaigned for Trump, told me in June. One lawyer said bluntly, “I get a kick in the ass out of him.” The calculus seemed to have shifted: Trump’s negative qualities, which once had been described as a means to an end, now had value of their

own. The point wasn’t necessarily to get things done; it was to retaliate against the media and other enemies. This had always seemed fundamental to Trump’s appeal, but people had been less likely to express it so starkly before he entered office. “For those of us who believe that the media has been corrupt for a lot of years, it’s a way of poking at the jellyfish,” Karen Kulp told me in late April. “Just to make them mad.”

In Grand Junction, people wanted Trump to accomplish certain things with the pragmatism of a businessman, but they also wanted him to make them feel a certain way. The assumption has always been that, while emotional appeal might have mattered during the campaign, the practical impact of a Trump Presidency would prove more important. Liberals claimed that Trump would fail because his policies would hurt the people who had voted for him.

But the lack of legislative accomplishment seems only to make supporters take more satisfaction in Trump’s behavior. And thus far the President’s tone, rather than his policies, has had the greatest impact on Grand Junction. This was evident even before the election, with the behavior of supporters at the candidate’s rally, the conflicts within the local Republican Party, and an increased distrust of anything having to do with government.

Sheila Reiner, a Republican who serves as the county clerk, said that during the campaign she had dealt with many allegations of fraud following Trump’s claims that the election could be rigged. “People came in and said, ‘I want to see where

you’re tearing up the ballots!’” Reiner told me. Reiner and her staff gave at least twenty impromptu tours of their office, in an attempt to convince voters that the Republican county clerk wasn’t trying to throw the election to Clinton.

The *Daily Sentinel* publishes editorials from both the right and the left, and it didn’t endorse a Presidential candidate. But supporters picked up on Trump’s obsession with crowd size, repeatedly accusing the *Sentinel* of underestimating attendance at rallies. The paper ran a story about vandalism



of political signs, with examples given from both campaigns, but readers were outraged that the photograph featured only a torn Clinton banner. The *Sentinel* immediately ran a second article with a photograph of a vandalized Trump sign. When Erin McIntyre described the Grand Junction rally on Facebook, online attacks by Trump supporters were so vicious that she feared for her safety. After three days, she deleted the post.

In February, a bill that was intended to give journalists better access to government records was introduced in a Colorado senate committee, which was chaired by Ray Scott, a Republican. The process was delayed for unknown reasons, and the *Sentinel* published an editorial with a mild prompt: "We call on our own Sen. Scott to announce a new committee hearing date and move this bill forward." Scott responded with a series of Trump-style tweets. "We have our own fake news in Grand Junction," he wrote. "The very liberal GJ Sentinel is attempting to apply pressure for me to move a bill."

Jay Seaton, the *Sentinel's* publisher, threatened to sue Scott for defamation. In an editorial, he wrote, "When a state senator accused *The Sentinel* of being fake news, he was deliberately attempting to delegitimize a credible news source in order to avoid being held accountable by it." The Huffington Post and other national outlets mentioned the spat. When I met with Scott, he seemed pleased by the attention. A burly, friendly man who works as a contractor, he told me, "I was kind of Trump-ish before Trump was cool."

"We used to just take it on the chin if somebody said something about us," he said. "The fake-news thing became the popular thing to say, because of Trump." He believed that Trump has performed a service by popularizing the term. "I've seen journalists like yourself doing a better job," Scott told me. He's considering a run for governor, in part because of Trump's example. "People are looking for something different," he said. "They're looking for somebody who means what they say."

In late February, shortly after the exchange between Scott and Seaton, an

entrepreneur named Tyler Riehl started a campaign against the *Sentinel*. He wrote on Facebook, "If I've learned one thing from Donald Trump's election it's that we can ignore the political pundits telling us we must play nice with the press—even when they're crooked and dishonest." Riehl announced a five-hundred-dollar reward for anybody exposing "local media malfeasance," and he fashioned a hundred newspaper delivery boxes decorated with a "Ghostbusters"-style icon that read, "FAKE NEWS." Riehl distributed the boxes at a rally called Toast for Trump, which was dutifully covered by the *Sentinel*, along with a fact-checked head count (a hundred and twenty).

In Grand Junction, I learned to suspend any customary assumptions regarding political identity. I encountered countless strong working women, some of whom believed in abortion rights, who had voted for Trump. Cultural cues could be misleading: I interviewed one gentle, hippieish Trump voter who wore his gray hair in a ponytail. An experience like leaving a small town for an Ivy League college, which might lead some people to embrace more liberal ideas, could inspire in others a deeper conservatism. And so I wasn't entirely surprised to learn that Tyler Riehl, like me, was a former Peace Corps volunteer.

He had served in Slovakia. "Every time you get to look at how somebody else lives, it gives you perspective that's useful," Riehl told me. In 2000,

he was sent to a village in eastern Slovakia, where he advocated for bicyclists' rights. Riehl told me that living in a post-Communist society strengthened his appreciation for freedom, truth, and the virtues of small government. Now he was applying that idealism to his current campaign.

"I do unequivocally state that the *Sentinel* is full of fake news," he said.

Some residents found these attacks deeply misguided. "I think there's a lot of emotion involved, and people are bringing opinions from the national debate into the local arena," Bill Vrettos, a consultant with the Alternative Board, which advises businesses, told me. He described his politics as "radically middle-of-the-road," and he didn't believe

that the *Sentinel* was slanted. In his opinion, a small-town newspaper plays a different role from that of a big publication, and he mentioned a recent incident in which two high-school students had killed themselves within a twenty-four-hour period. Before the *Sentinel* reported anything, Seaton, the publisher, had organized a meeting with school officials, mental-health experts, a suicide task force, and the father of a boy who had killed himself. The experts warned about copycat suicides, so the newspaper kept the deaths off the front page.

I met with Seaton at the *Sentinel's* downtown office, where a conference-room wall is decorated with two framed front pages that reported the news from historically tragic dates: September 11, 2001, and May 2, 1982. The building has a three-level Goss printing press that is capable of turning out a hundred and fifty thousand issues per hour, because it was purchased in the early eighties, when people once again thought the oil-shale industry was about to take off. The current circulation is around twenty-five thousand. Seaton is from a Kansas-based family that owns eight newspapers around the Midwest; in 2009, they acquired the *Sentinel*. "I come from a long line of Republicans," he told me. "My great-uncle served in Eisenhower's Cabinet as Interior Secretary." But he admitted that he finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile himself to today's conservative movement. "The Party is too accommodating of elements that I would consider fringe, bordering on hate groups," he said.

Seaton formerly worked as a corporate lawyer, and he believed that he had a valid case of defamation against Ray Scott. But he had decided not to proceed with a lawsuit. He worried that Trump uses the term "fake news" so often that its interpretation might change by the time a case reached judgment. "Maybe those words have lost their objective meaning," Seaton said.

During the election season, it's common for some people to cancel their subscriptions, but last year the *Sentinel* lost more of them than usual. That's one of the ironies of the age: the New York *Times* and the Washington *Post*, which Trump often attacks by name, have gained subscribers and public standing, while a small institution like the *Sentinel*



THEY SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE

So sorry about the war—we just kind of
wanted to learn how to swear
in another language, and everyone knows

the top method is simply to open
fire and listen to what people yell.

And now here's God again with His hand

crank, lowering the sky to make more room
for Himself. And now here's the high-rise

we build to brace back, this series of holes
for bathing and mending and parboiling

roots and undecorated fucking in the style

of the times: one person half-braying,
the other admonishing KEEP IT
DOWN—I DON'T WANT THE WAR TO HEAR.

—*Natalie Shapero*

has been damaged within its community. Seaton didn't know how to handle the fake-news accusations, although he had considered inviting Tyler Riehl to shadow a reporter for a day. He had also thought about doubling the reward for local media malfeasance. That five hundred dollars still hasn't been claimed.

In the past eight months, I have never heard anybody express regret for voting for Donald Trump. If anything, investigations into the Trump campaign's connections with Russia have made supporters only more faithful. "I'm loving it—I hope they keep going down the Russia rabbit hole," Matt Patterson told me, in June. He believes that Democrats are banking on an impeachment instead of doing the hard work of trying to connect with voters. "They didn't even get rid of their leadership after the election," he said.

But Trump's connection with supporters also involves a great risk. Many Presidential acts that feel satisfying—the unfiltered insults, the attacks on institutions—also make it difficult to achieve anything practical and positive. And the resulting legislative failures typically inspire more emotion. In late June, after the Senate delayed a vote on the health-

care bill, Trump embarked on a Twitter spree, labelling various organizations fake news and claiming that Mika Brzezinski, the MSNBC host, had recently had a facelift that left her bleeding in public. Excuses are naturally built into this toxic cycle. Supporters can always say that Trump was never given a chance, and that the media, the Russia investigation, and other conspiracies have worked against him. In such a climate, it's difficult to prove incompetence: true pragmatism would be quick and dirty, but emotional cycles can be sustained for much longer. I find it easy to imagine myself at a rally in 2020, standing in a pen while people scream at me.

Smaller places may also be particularly vulnerable to the President's negative tone, which makes it harder to find practical solutions to local problems. In Grand Junction, the average age of a school building is forty-four years, and the district is ranked a hundred and seventy-first out of a hundred and seventy-eight in the state, in terms of funding per student. Property taxes, which fund the schools, are among the lowest of Colorado cities. In November, two measures that would increase school funding will be on the ballot, but the

last time such a proposal came to a vote, in 2011, it was rejected.

Voters have also not approved an increase in the sales tax since 1989. The next ballot will propose a rise of about a third of one per cent, in order to fund local law enforcement and public-safety services. Even as crime has risen, resources have dropped; the county currently has 1.15 deputies per thousand residents, in comparison with a state average of 2.28. Police departments are so understaffed that many areas aren't patrolled. "They just bounce from service call to service call," Daniel Rubinstein, the Republican district attorney, told me. Approximately fourteen per cent of the population is Hispanic, although that figure would be higher if it included undocumented immigrants. When I asked Rubinstein about people who don't have legal status, he said, "That's never been a significant proportion of our crime problem." Trump supporters also seemed to understand this. I never heard anybody blame Hispanics for local crime, or make racist remarks about them; it was much more common to encounter Islamophobia, although the nearest mosque is about four hours away.

In a climate of intense distrust of government, it will be particularly difficult to persuade voters to approve new funding. Some residents told me that they want further cuts in education—even in the high desert they were determined to drain the swamp. But there are long-term costs to this mentality. One bright spot in the economy has been the growth of Colorado Mesa University, the largest institution of higher education on the Western Slope, but it's hard to become a true college town when public schools are so badly underfunded. In June, at an economic conference at the university, I met Erik Valk, the founder of Principelle, a Dutch company that manufactures medical devices. Valk was thinking about opening a production center in Grand Junction, because he loved the natural setting, but he was concerned that the culture might be too inward-looking. "I'm trying to discover if there is a trend in this direction—whether they want to open to the world," Valk said. "I spoke with the sheriff this morning and he has a funding problem, and he has a crime problem."

One person told me half in jest that

the best way to get voters to approve new funding would be to blame everything on a lack of support by Denver elites: a tax increase in the guise of rugged self-reliance. “It’s about creating an us-versus-them victim narrative,” he said. He was being cynical, but he was also acknowledging the power of perspective and feeling. This seems to be the weakness of the Democratic Party, which often gives people the impression that they are being informed of their logical best interests. On the other side, people feel ignored or insulted—this was why they responded so strongly to Clinton’s use of the term “deplorables.” “What she said was, ‘If you don’t vote for me, you’re morally unworthy to talk to, to take seriously,’” Patterson told me.

In Grand Junction, it was often dispiriting to see such enthusiasm for a figure who could become the ultimate political boom-and-bust. There was idealism, too, and so many pro-Trump opinions were the fruit of powerful and legitimate life experiences. “We just assume that if someone voted for Trump that they’re racist and uneducated,” Jeriel Brammeier, the twenty-six-year-old chair of the local Democratic Party, told me. “We can’t think about it like that.” People have reasons for the things that they believe, and the intensity of their experiences can’t be taken for granted; it’s not simply a matter of having Fox News on in the background. But perhaps this is a way to distinguish between the President and his supporters. Almost everybody I met in Grand Junction seemed more complex, more interesting, and more decent than the man who inspires them.

During my conversation with Brammeier, I asked why she had entered politics.

“I got pregnant when I was sixteen,” she said. Grand Junction has a high teen-pregnancy rate, and Brammeier had been one of eight girls, out of about two hundred in her twelfth-grade year, who had babies. The town has no Planned Parenthood clinic or designated abortion provider, and in 2015, for reasons both fiscal and ideological, the Republican-controlled state senate voted down a bill that would have provided funding for an effective state-wide contraception program. “Our state senator Ray Scott voted to defund it,” Bram-

meier said. Private funds filled the gap until last year, when it was included in the state budget. Brammeier told me that she wants to improve the community for her daughter: “She was on my back when she was three months old, and I was canvassing for Obama.” Who could stand before this woman and deny the power of her experience? But that was true on both sides; there were many hard-earned faiths in Grand Junction.

In early March, I talked with Governor Hickenlooper, who had just met with Trump in Washington, along with other governors. “He was different from anything I had seen on TV,” Hickenlooper said, mentioning that Trump seemed intent on solving problems. But, since then, Hickenlooper has become sharply critical of the Administration. Last week, he announced that Colorado will join the U.S. Climate Alliance, and he told me that he will be “aggressive” in resisting Trump policies that contradict Colorado’s interests, especially with regard to the environment. “Our goal is not just to meet Paris, but to go beyond Paris,” he said.

In 2014, Hickenlooper was reelected with only forty-nine per cent of the vote, and next year’s election for his replacement will likely be close. In the middle of June, George Brauchler, one of the more conservative candidates in the Republican primary, came to Grand Junction and spoke to local members of the Party. Around sixty people attended, including some Deplorables. Brauchler is a district attorney in the Denver suburbs, where he prosecuted James Holmes, the perpetrator of the mass shooting, in 2012, in a movie theatre in Aurora.

After Brauchler gave a short speech, the first question came from a heavyset man wearing a baseball cap: “What do you think about Sharia?”

Brauchler kept it short—“Not a fan”—and moved on. “You’re from a liberal area,” another man said. “How are you going to handle that kind of media attack? Because you are going to be deluged with that liberal mentality from Boulder and Denver.”

Brauchler said, “I’ve developed great relationships with the local media, and in part that happens through transparency and accountability. These are people who largely just want to report on stories and tell the truth as best they can.”

Not long ago, I might have fixated on certain details of Brauchler’s speech. He complained about the overregulation of fossil fuels, and how the owners of electric Tesla cars don’t pay state gasoline taxes. But why split hairs? He didn’t threaten to throw other candidates into prison, and he didn’t ask people to vote for him while simultaneously telling them that the election might be rigged. His facts were real facts. He had worked in public service. He used the sentence “I’m not a rich guy.” He spoke well, and among his listeners he drew out one of the best qualities of Coloradans—not anger or fear or self-victimhood but a certain quirkiness that is at once direct and slightly off kilter. Afterward, a woman in her sixties approached Brauchler.

“I kinda like you,” she said.

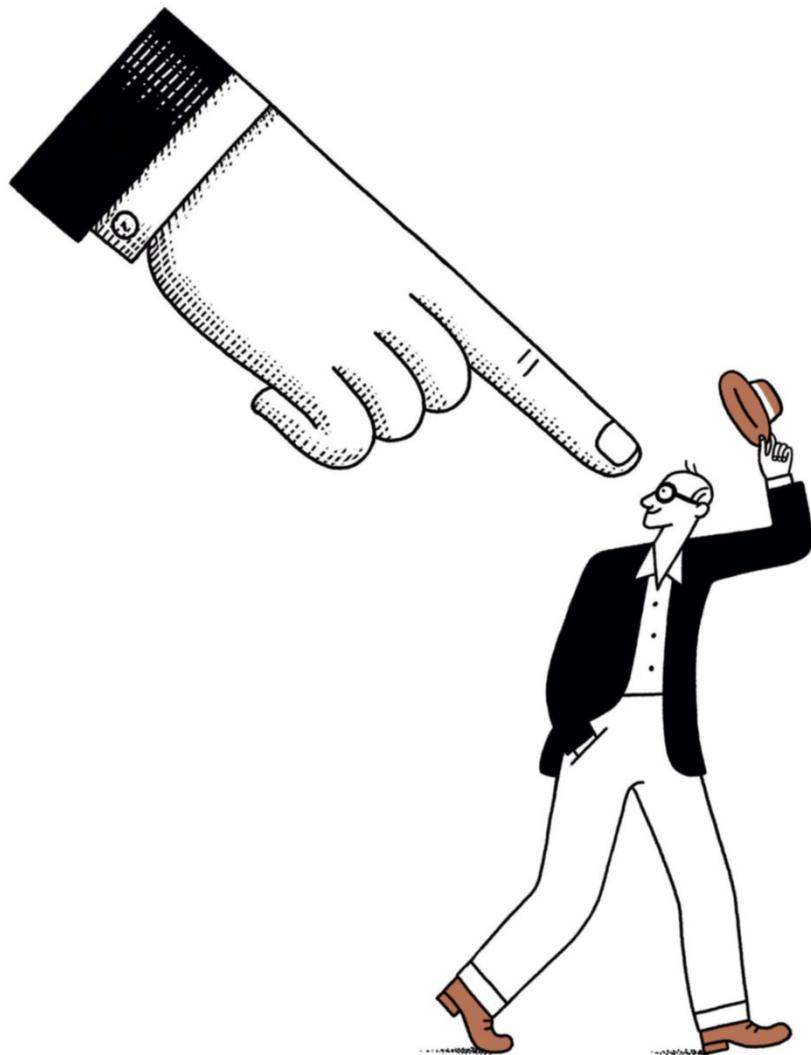
“I’m a Libra,” he replied.

“You remind me of my ex-husband.”

In his speech, Brauchler expressed support for the President, but he separated himself from Trump’s tone. When I asked him about the Administration, he said, “I just would like there to be some deëmphasis on the stylistic stuff and more focus on the substantive stuff.” He mentioned health-care reform and the Republican majorities in the House and the Senate. “If we fail to deliver on those things, there are going to be consequences,” he said.

His comments made me wonder whether another bad few months will lead to more open separation by Republican candidates. This would be the hardest thing for supporters to accept—that the emotional appeal of Donald Trump means far less to professional politicians. During my last meeting with Matt Patterson, I asked whether Trump’s behavior might limit his effectiveness even while appealing to his base. “I see your point,” Patterson said, but he still believed that Trump would accomplish great things. “If Trump turns out to be a failure, I’ll take responsibility for that,” he said. “For my share.”

We were at a coffee shop, and Patterson wore his goth look: silver jewelry, painted nails. “I’ve never been this emotionally invested in a political leader in my life,” he said. “The more they hate him, the more I want him to succeed. Because what they hate about him is what they hate about me.” ♦



DON'T BLAME YOURSELF

BY JACK HANDEY

The first rule of any expedition is that if someone falls behind, you leave him. As Cub Scout leader, you knew that.

A shotgun can go off accidentally, and hit a cuckoo clock, and get reloaded accidentally, and hit the clock again.

In the dark, a container labelled "Smallpox" looks like "Snuff Box," and who wouldn't want some of that flavorful snuff? You tried to close it, but it had weird safety latches.

Seventeen years and four months was long enough for your friend

not to have a big tumbler of Scotch.

Pants fall down. That's a fact of life, whether it's in the privacy of your own home or in front of people at a bus stop. It's not your fault. If you need to blame something, blame gravity.

What is it about fake Congressional Medals of Honor that makes people so mad? You never claimed to have won one in combat; you were just making and selling them. Until you got shut down. And you had to lay off your two employees. Whose fault is *that*?

No, you didn't bring a gift for the

hostess, but at least you made a pass at her.

Had that baby actually been in danger, and had that been a real eagle instead of a stuffed animal, they'd be calling you a hero now.

Your business failed, but not because of you. You were at the beach most of the time.

People got mad at you for shooting Bigfoot, but you just thought it was a man in a big, hairy costume.

No, you didn't achieve your dream of becoming an astronaut. But isn't lying in a hammock drinking beer all day sort of like floating through space?

Your teeth were fine until that dentist said you had a bunch of cavities.

What it looked like to you, and to most people, was not a sand castle but a launching ramp for your dirt bike.

It's natural to blame yourself, as natural as an old lady tripping and tumbling down a flight of stairs. Did your yelling, "Hurry up, Grandma! Hurry up or we're going to leave you!" have anything to do with it? Of course not. Grandma can barely hear.

You can't be all things to all people. You can't be the person who tells other people your problems *and* the one who listens to *their* problems.

Resist self-blame. Don't automatically think you're guilty of something just because someone points you out in a courtroom. Learn to laugh, like you laughed at the judge when he tripped coming into the courtroom.

Self-blame is everywhere. If the sun suddenly stopped shining, the scientists who'd fired a fusion-disrupter missile at it would probably blame themselves. When a dam bursts, is it really because of "bad design" or "poor maintenance"? Maybe the dam's time was just "up."

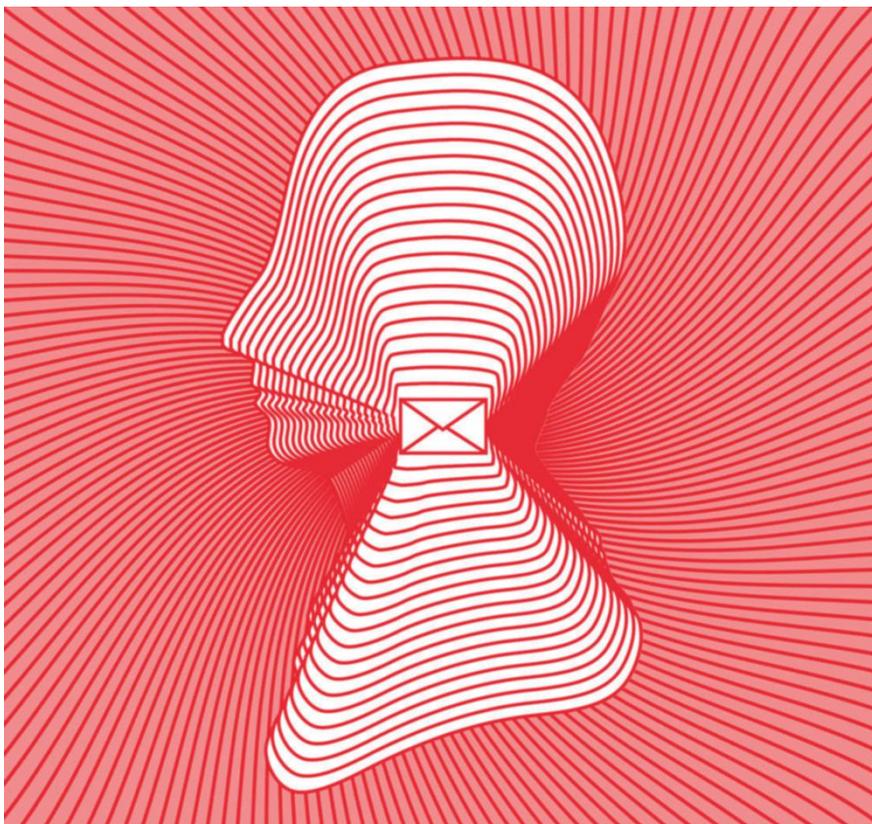
Mankind needs to stop blaming itself. Yes, we've made some bad things, like the atom bomb. But we also made the atomizer, which you can use to spray perfume on your neck.

Oddly enough, the best way to cleanse yourself of blame is to embrace it. Drive to the top of a snow-packed peak and yell, at the top of your lungs, "It's all my fault!" Yell that over and over, to the village below. And, to celebrate, throw a few sticks of dynamite into a big snowdrift. ♦

MARK AS READ

What do we learn when our private e-mail becomes public?

BY NATHAN HELLER

*The Enron corpus provided a data dump of workplace communication styles.*

A measure of industrial progress is the speed with which inventions grow insufferable. The elevator, once a marvel of efficiency, has become a social purgatory from which most of us cannot escape too quickly. The builders of the first commercial airplane couldn't have foreseen the crushed knees and the splattered salad dressings that their machine would visit on the world. "Hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day's toil of any human being," John Stuart Mill wrote in the "Principles of Political Economy" (1848), and the precept holds for recent innovations, too. Think of e-mail. Or, rather, try *not* to think of e-mail, since, chances are, while you floss, steep tea, make love, or read these sentences, new messages are proliferating in your inbox, colonizing your time and

your brain. *Sure thing*, you type back to a needy stranger who seems unable to punctuate. *Sounds good*. Actually, it sounds like death. Once upon a time, you knew that you could log off e-mail and, like Cinderella before midnight, gain a few hours of deliverance from the day's digital scut work. Now your inbox nags you on your smartphone, and the only prince who might help is Nigerian, with a need to stow his fortune somewhere safe.

Add to this the knowledge that your e-mail self is probably your worst. "Exposure of my emails would reveal not only deep fears and worries, but also my shallow personality," the writer Delia Ephron fretted in a comic essay, after Sony, where she'd done business, had its accounts hacked. That was in 2014, and the stakes of inbox security have risen since, even as standards of con-

duct grow vague. By some accounts, it was a popular obsession with Hillary Clinton's inbox which cost her the election. By others, it was WikiLeaks' release of messages from the Democratic National Committee. E-mails from the Vice-President's former account showed up in March (divulging the Second Lady's private contact information), and, in May, hackers delivered a cache from Emmanuel Macron's campaign inboxes in the apparent hope of swaying voters. (The press held back, and the people of France, who appear to prefer their epistolary scandals served blue, shrugged.) E-mail made the news again last week, when the *Times* reported that a message from 2016 offered Donald Trump, Jr., opposition information from Russia. Then Trump *files* released his e-mail thread online.

Given that e-mail leaks can imperil governments, it seems odd that correspondents spend so little time reviewing basic work before they press send. Writing, along with fire-making and the invention of the wheel, is widely held to be a milestone of human progress. This view will seem naïve to anybody who has read much human writing. In its feral form, prose is unhinged, mystifying, and repetitive. Writers feel moved to "get things down on paper," usually incoherently, and even in guarded moods say alarming stuff because they don't know where to put their commas. ("Time to eat children!") The true wellspring of civilization isn't writing; it is editing. E-mail, produced in haste, rarely receives the requisite attention. That is bad for us but good for posterity—and for students of the literary gestures we imprudently put in pixels. When inboxes are gathered, cracked open, and studied, they become a searchable, sortable atlas for the contours of our social minds.

Not long after the Enron Corporation imploded amid revelations of accounting fraud, in 2001, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission seized the e-mail folders of a hundred and fifty-one mostly high-ranking employees, the better to discover the discoverable. Before long, the commission made a startling announcement: it would release this body of e-mail online, to substantiate its findings. "The release of the information now will enable the public to

understand better the evidentiary record on which the Commission's decisions in those proceedings are grounded," it explained. "The Commission may release the information if the public's right to disclosure outweighs the individual's right to privacy."

The Enron archive came to comprise hundreds of thousands of messages, and remains one of the country's largest private e-mail corpora turned public. Its lasting value is less as an account of Enron's daywork than as a social and linguistic data pool, a record of the way we write online when we're not preening for the public eye. Like a hot-dog bun beset by seagulls, the archive has been pulled apart and pecked up; it has been digested by computers and referred to by more than three thousand academic papers. This makes it, in the annals of scholarship, something strange: a canonic research text that no one has actually read.

Mostly, that's because it is too long, and too boring, for complete human consumption. When the e-mails were released, in 2003, the dump was more jumbled than even computers could handle, so a researcher at M.I.T. purchased the bundle and, with help, began to put it in a processable order. Folder structures were reinstated. Redundancies, automated messages from Listservs, delivery-failure notices, and other pieces of modern detritus were trimmed away.

The resulting corpus, down to a few hundred thousand e-mails, helped to mark a shift in research premise from the cult of authorship (these texts are interesting because a notable mind made them) to the cult of the commons (these texts are interesting because of what, together, they show). The things they show frequently serve the cause of automation. One of the first projects to employ the Enron corpus was a self-described "extensive benchmark study of e-mail foldering." It used seven large accounts to help determine whether people organized their e-mail in ways that might be replicable by machine intelligence. ("Email foldering is a rich and interesting task," the study's lead author, Ron Bekkerman, noted, in what may be the paper's most surprising conclusion.) The answer was not yet: people are too idiosyncratic in the ways they organize their stuff. Another team used the cor-

pus to develop a "compliance bot" that could identify sensitive elements in text and alert writers if a message might get them in trouble.

These endeavors served a basic purpose: protecting users from their foolishness. Other studies focussed on Enron itself. Noting that "a small number of users have sent a large number of messages"—a fact that will shock no one who gets e-mail at work—one research team mapped epistolary ties on a Gower layout (a connect-the-dots plot) to understand who was in contact with whom. They found a tight nest of connections around Enron's president, vice-president, and C.E.O. Angled off to either side were ears with more remote networks of traders, managers, and lawyers. The plot looks like a donkey head.

It also looks more or less like what you'd expect. The corpus rapidly highlights the difference between rich data and useful information. An M.I.T. student working on a compliance bot noted that it seemed nearly impossible to identify evidence of financial misconduct using basic search strings. He had more success tracking down pornography—of which there was, oddly, a lot—with words like "sex." Also, it was easy to find racial slurs.

Computers can do little with a text that humans could not, but they make some laborious work go faster. In 1949, an Italian Jesuit priest named Roberto Busa presented a pitch to Thomas J. Watson, of I.B.M. Busa was trained in philosophy, and had just published his thesis on St. Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic theologian with a famously unmanageable oeuvre. (Work on a multivolume critical edition of Aquinas's philosophy, commissioned by the Vatican, began in 1879 and is nowhere near done.) Busa had begun to wonder whether Watson's computing machines could aid his work. Watson backed him, and, for the next thirty years, Busa encoded sixty-five thousand pages of Thomist text so that it could be word-searched, cross-referenced, and what we now call hyperlinked. The Index Thomisticus was the first corpus to be primed for digital scholarship, no less impressive because it started on punch cards and ended up online. "*Digitus Dei est hic!*" Busa punned in 2004. The finger of God is here.

By then, using computers to assess large bodies of written text had turned to profane projects. Computational linguistics, the study of computer-replicable rules and patterns in real-world language, began in earnest in the nineteen-fifties, originally in the service of Cold War intelligence: the United States wanted to use computers to mass-translate Russian texts into English. (The U.S.S.R., of course, wanted the opposite.) By the late sixties, the endeavor had reached literary commerce. Houghton Mifflin used the so-called Brown corpus, a body of five hundred varied texts from 1961, to produce the first edition of the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, in 1969: one of the earliest reference guides that included descriptive information about the way words were actually deployed in print. Research on so-called corpus linguistics revealed some puzzling properties of usage. In the thirties, the linguist George Kingsley Zipf had posited that a word's frequency is inversely proportional to its rank in the frequency table—the third most common word would show up one-third as often as the most common word, and on—and the Brown corpus and others have appeared to bear this out. Zipfian projections are inexact, especially far down the table, but the curve seems to hold broadly. It is unclear why.

A field known as digital humanities has emerged around text-crunching analysis in its modern form. A key advocate of the method, Willard McCarty, touted computers' virtues as "modelling machines": they can test and discard working theories without years of exploratory work. Textual mapping is a popular function; a recent project, in Denmark, used artificial intelligence to comb through thirty thousand witchy folktales and geographically plot their elements. (It revealed, among other things, that witchcraft allegations in Protestant Denmark tended to arise in the vicinity of Catholic monasteries.) And, because computers are great at searching, they have been a boon for stylistics: the study of the words, phrases, or images that recur across a work. Such analysis, in its eccentric span, includes Robots Reading *Vogue*, a project at Yale's Digital Humanities Lab which, drawing on archived correspondence, gins up memos in the scattered style of Diana

Vreeland. “Also small stones, small straps. It would be interesting, and Diane de Mere, etc., . . . The marvelous summer look,” some computer-generated Vreelandisms read. Although the project is amusing, coming up with nonsense is the one thing with which humans need no help.

Still, these behavior-patterning approaches produce insights when applied to the Enron corpus. A pair of researchers at Queen’s University, in Canada, had some success applying “deception theory”: the idea is that disingenuous e-mailers tend to minimize first-person pronouns, use more negative-emotion and action words, and write with “an excessive blandness.” Their search turned up a number of misconduct-related e-mails, although further analysis was still required as a final filter.

Other projects got more specific. A 2011 study from the University of Washington crawled through the e-mails to see how tonal formality tracked onto the nature of a message, rank difference, social familiarity, and the number of recipients. Most results were unsurprising: people e-mailed more formally when dealing with business, across a gap in rank, with people they scarcely knew, and to a bigger audience. Oddly, though, e-mails grew more informal as the list of addressees expanded beyond ten. The researchers hypothesized that people

like to strike a slouchy pose before big workplace audiences, the better to seem the cool kid in a class of dweebs.

In the way that years have springtimes, most epistolary careers have a swell. Maybe yours came in July, at camp, when 4 P.M. felt like a lonely hour. Maybe it started in the season that arrives after a failure or a death, or in the crisp evening that closes a lucky day. Mine arrived when I was a college exchange student in France: four classes, few friends, and a shared apartment across from a fire station where, most mornings, *pompier*s paraded out onto the sidewalk to unroll, and then reroll, their hoses. I would go to a creaking amphitheatre to watch a lecture by a preening giant of French literary theory. I would continue to a small room where a scholar with a prim, babylike mouth read verbatim from an outline, which the students dutifully copied onto pristine quadrille paper using fountain pens. At lunchtime, I’d sit in the park with a €2.80 sandwich and write letters across the tops, bottoms, and backs of greeting cards, descanting on random but—I believed—revealing details. The French magazines photographed intellectuals in odalisque poses, I’d report. The stations on the Clignancourt-Orléans line smelled like baking yams. When I think back on this period, what strikes me most

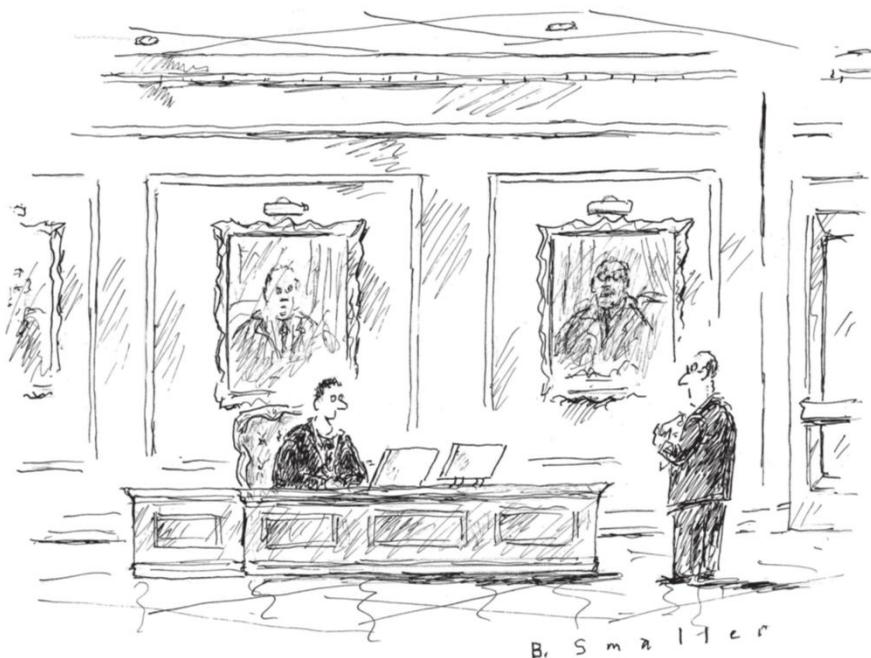
is how fresh my flint was, how the lightest brush with a larger world could scatter sparks, smoke up my eyes, burn through hundreds of words. My e-mails, horrifyingly, would run longer still.

The Enron corpus seems unburdened by such correspondence. “Where are you right now? i am in london,” Greg Whalley, the company’s president after Jeff Skillings’s departure, wrote a colleague inquiring about a meeting. “Congratulations! Keep up the good work,” Teb Lokey, a manager for regulatory affairs, tells an employee. (That is the whole message.) An analyst found about half of the e-mails to be one sentence long, and those that run on aren’t always more substantive.

When the Enron corpus first became available, some people described its catalogue of tics and corporatese as “cliché”—less embarrassing to Enron, possibly, than to the species. (Who among us has not stood atop millennia of human language and, after a moment of reflection, signed an e-mail “Best”?) To the extent that “cliché” is another word for recurring cultural pattern, these platitudes are exactly what computer analysis embraces.

In 2014, an enterprising business-English teacher named Evan Frendo had the idea of using the corpus to locate phrases helpful to the foreign businessperson working with Americans. After what must have been punishing study, he discovered a fixation on “ball” metaphors. “I thought I’d get the ball rolling,” one Enroner wrote. “Sounds like you guys had a ball at dinner,” another said. “I played hard ball and told them that I had to have more time,” a correspondent reported. “Someone REALLY dropped the ball here!” an employee chides. “From June 1, we will be totally on the ball,” reads an e-mail that you don’t believe. “I will pretty much leave it in your ball park about Friday night,” somebody writes (a message that Frendo correctly annotates “???”). All told, the corpus contained six hundred and two instances of ball speech, apparently covering every scenario in modern American business. It is not clear that this compendium eases the task of the Danish banker on a morning flight to Dallas. But perhaps it tells him where to focus his study.

Naomi Lancaster, a graduate student at Ball State University (!), established that Enroners didn’t generally open with



“It’s not nepotism if I’m the best son for the job.”

“Dear,” as most etiquette guides suggest, and favored “Hey,” “Hi,” or “Hello,” leading Lancaster to believe that the etiquette proxy for e-mail wasn’t written letters but speech. Only six per cent of the e-mails she examined had any greeting at all; most began in medias res. The employees most likely to use a friendly greeting were women not in positions of authority, followed by men in subservient positions. Powerful men were the most likely just to open an e-mail window and start typing. In some cases, an e-mail would simply be addressed “Guys.”

The challenge of beginnings is not particular to e-mail—nor are its gender condescensions new. “Strange as it may seem, we continue to receive letters from people interested in the problem—broached by us last June—of the correct salutation to use in a letter to a girls’ school,” E. B. White and Elizabeth Hawes wrote in the Notes and Comment department of this magazine, in 1931:

First there is a communication from Thomas O. Mabbott, Ph.D., assistant professor at Hunter College, who says that the head of his department writes, “Dear Colleagues.” . . . An etiquette writer in the *World-Telegram*, propounding the same problem, by a funny coincidence, advises the use of the French “Mesdames,” followed, the writer goes on, “by the customary dash.” A man in Baltimore writes that the Governor of the Virgin Islands once wrote a letter to Goucher College beginning: “To the director of one group of virgins from another,” which we neither believe nor think funny.

A letter, like the social speech for which it substitutes, is frayed by awkwardness at either end. We spend half of our lives struggling to start conversations and the other half struggling to exit them. In the middle is the thing itself, and here, it turns out, we are slightly better than machines. What is sometimes called “sentiment” or “tone” analysis presents a challenge for computers, which can stumble over simple words. Consider “pretty”: it can intensify some descriptions (“The hot dog was pretty amazing, but the bun was pretty dry”), dial back others (“That Zumba class was pretty good, I guess”), convey beauty (“What a pretty wooden trellis!”), or add irony (“What a pretty kettle of fish”).

The limits of corpus analysis, in other words, are human; in the gap between data and knowledge, we fall back on our social understandings of the world. This recourse can help computers with complex use cases, such as “pretty.” But when

help is supposed to flow from machine to human, we can end up gazing into a mirror, not a clarifying lens. Like the work of the midcentury structuralist anthropologists, corpus analysis purports to pattern-seek dispassionately. The endeavor, though, requires focussing on certain patterns over others, and imbuing them with a relational logic based on what’s already known. We learn as much about our social selves in the act of interpreting the Enron corpus as we do in the e-mails themselves. Behind the meaning of the commons, there’s an author still.

In the iconoclastic 1980 book “Is There a Text in This Class?” Stanley Fish attacked the field of stylistics, and the tendency to equate the work of the humanities researcher with the work of the scientist. The equivalence was false, Fish thought, because the inquiries had different goals. Scientists were trying to zero in on something fixed and unknown: the laws of nature and their potential applications. Humanists were working with something variable and contingent: the way a text produced meaning for a given group of readers. You could turn up patterns in any long piece of writing without showing that such patterns were germane to how the work communicated. The most revealing question about a piece of text was the obvious one: How does it *mean*?

This is the question least scrutinized in the Enron corpus, perhaps because reading two hundred thousand e-mails, let alone finding a unified, intended narrative in them, seems a hopeless project. But it is not until you descend from thirty-seven thousand feet that life starts coming into focus once again.

Personalities turn out to matter; stories, too. Small, sometimes moving dramas unwind in the folders of sent mail. In May, 2001, a trader who is given to enthusiastic, exclamation-laden e-mails tells a friend that it’s already getting hot in Houston, which is a pain, because he’s begun jogging again, to lose 8.5 pounds. He has just been through a breakup. A vice-president is having a custody battle in September, 2001, and sends a legal aide a frenzied, unedited, and wrenching plea: “How can she be aloud to keep me from my son?” Some of the most interesting messages were never meant for anyone else’s eyes. That same jogger, still

romantically at loose ends, e-mails his Hotmail account a link to workouts on fitnessheaven.com. An employee on the legal team sends his personal AOL account a joke he may have found worth mastering. (“Moses, Jesus and an old man are golfing,” it begins.) “Do you know what’s included in Enron’s Code of Ethics?” an e-mail advertising an in-house informational event prompts. “Do you know what policies affect corporate conduct? Ask Sharon Butcher, Assistant General Counsel of Corporate Legal, all your questions about our corporate policies today.” The message was sent on June 5, 2001. Ten weeks later, Jeffrey Skilling resigned as president and C.E.O. A programmed search could find this e-mail, but it wouldn’t be able to locate the irony. For this, we need the same human instrument—faulty, romantic, and duplicitous—that brought Enron to that self-defeating point.

The tendency to weave stories where evidence is missing is the human brain’s sustaining feature, precipitating heroic action, senseless love, and mindless hate. Broadening the data pool has no chance of dissolving these delusions, because people generally deal with huge volumes of information in the same way that they deal with small ones: by sifting and discarding, then connecting dots to make a picture out of what remains. They latch onto results that bear out narrative and hopeful theory. They seek a private order in the chaos of the world.

When the Enron scandal broke, last decade, e-mail was the most wanton kind of media. It is no longer so—people now have indecent texts at home, manic Slack threads in the workplace, and, for just about every venue, crankish, boastful Facebook, filled with babies and bad news. As the scandals of the past few years show, however, indecorum hasn’t left our inboxes, and the lives behind the @ symbol may still have something to hide. For many of us, that seems all right. The urgent project at the moment isn’t adding more information to the cultural file; it is understanding how meaning is produced, how stories wrought from narrow data samples seed and grow in the public imagination. Such work will tell us more about contemporary communication than another e-mail archive. As a sign of twenty-first-century progress, it can’t come too soon. ♦

AMERICAN INFERNO

A crime committed at fifteen derailed my cousin's life. Why couldn't I save him?

BY DANIELLE ALLEN

We, who are in prison, had to answer for our sins and our lives were taken from us. Our bodies became the property of the state of California. We are reduced to numbers and stripped of our identity. To the state of California I am not Michael Alexander Allen but I am K-10033. When they want to know anything about me they do not type my last name in the computer but it is my number that is inputted. My number is my name. . . . Dante was not in hell due to a fatal sin but somewhere in his life he strayed onto the path of error, away from his true self. I, K-10033, strayed away from my true self: Michael Alexander Allen.

What sets the course of a life? Three years before my beloved cousin's murder—before the weeping, before the raging, before the heated self-recriminations and icy reckonings—I awoke with the most glorious sense of anticipation I've ever felt. It was June 29, 2006, the day that Michael was going to be freed. Outside my vacation condo in Hollywood, I climbed into the old white BMW I'd bought from my mother and headed to my aunt's small stucco home, in South Central. On the corner, a fortified drug house stood like a sentry, but her pale cottage seemed serene, aglow in the morning sun. Poverty never looks quite as bad in the City of Angels as it does elsewhere.

Aunt Karen, my father's youngest sister, then drove a crew of us to collect Michael from the California Rehabilitation Center-Norco, which lies on a dusty stretch of Riverside County. Michael, the youngest of her three kids, was born when I was eight years old. I had grown up with him. The baby of a sprawling family, he was also *my* baby, a child of magnetizing energy and good humor. We had lost him eleven years earlier, when he was arrested, at fifteen, for an attempted carjacking. Now we'd get him back. It felt like a resurrection.

At the parking lot for Tower 8, a white van drove up to deposit the prisoners being released. Michael stepped out, saw us, and smiled. His broad, toothy grin took up

half his face, a bright flash of white against his dark skin. He had a little bob in his step, the same natural spring he'd had as a child. His late adolescence and early adulthood had been spent in captivity, yet he bounded toward us like a fawn.

The homecoming party was in the driveway of my aunt's house, next to the postage stamp of a lawn. Uncles and friends, cousins and second cousins, and cousins who knows how many times removed pulled folding chairs up to folding tables, which were covered with paper tablecloths and laden with fried chicken and sweet tea. The merriment continued all afternoon, and seemed to attract some attention from the neighbors. More than once, a glamorous-looking woman drove past, slowly, in a low-slung two-door gold Mercedes sports car. Michael feasted and played Football Manager with the nephews and nieces who had been born while he was in prison.

After the party, we had little time to waste. That summer, I was telecommuting to my job as the dean of the humanities at the University of Chicago. Michael, for his part, was intent on making something of himself. He had spent some time as a firefighter when he was at Norco, and he was ready to rebuild his life. Making that happen, managing his reentry in the months to come, was my job. Not mine alone, but mine consistently, day after day, as the cousin on duty, the one with resources, the one who had been to college and who had become a professional.

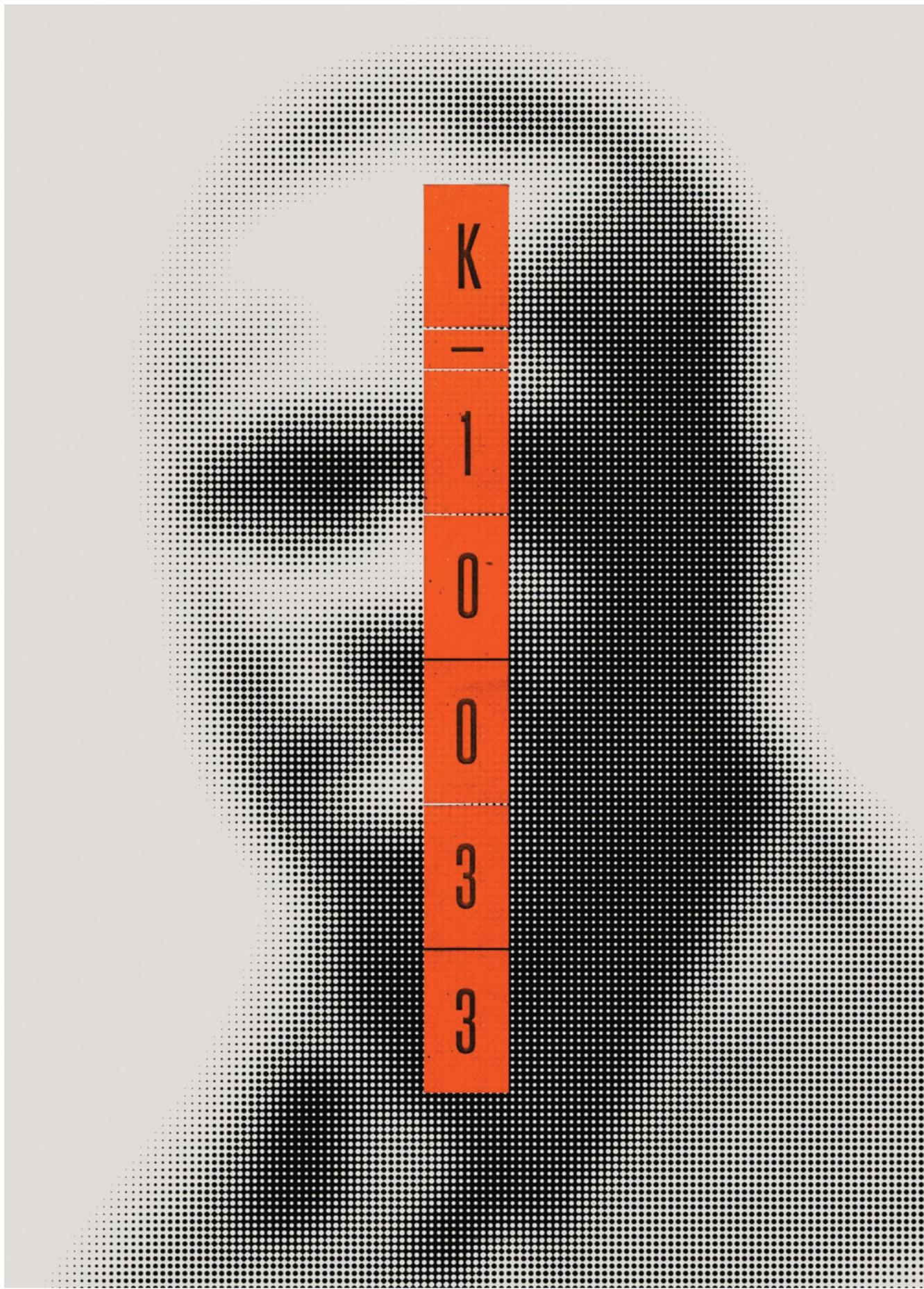
The plans we had were not the plans we had hoped to have. Michael should have been paroled to a fire camp or to a fire station in Riverside County, where we had family who were ready to take him in. He could have lived there and gone to school and kept on beating back wildfires. But the rule was that you had to be paroled to the county where your offense was committed—crime-ridden Los Angeles County, in his case. So we

developed the best alternatives we could. We made task lists, and moved through them efficiently. We met the parole officer, opened a bank account, and went to the library, where Michael got a card and started learning how to use a computer. (Google hadn't existed when he went to prison.) At the D.M.V., he took a test and got his driver's license.

Then, under the scorching sun of the deadliest California heat wave in nearly sixty years, we returned each day to the cool library and scoured Web sites for jobs. We focussed on large chains, which would have room for advancement, and sent out a lot of applications. Most of the time, Michael never got a reply. Then he caught a break: Sears invited him to a job interview. One morning in late July, he donned a new pair of khaki trousers and a button-down shirt, and we headed to Hollywood, to Santa Monica and Western. It was the perfect opportunity—but also, to me, a fraught one. A man who had been imprisoned for more than a decade would have to make the case that he ought to be hired. We had practiced bits and pieces of his story, but never the whole thing. In fact, I never heard Michael recount his own tale from start to finish.

I wonder now whether this was because the full version would have led me to ask questions that Michael did not want to answer. He had so much to give—stories, reflection, engagement—that somehow none of us ever noticed just how much he was withholding. He could love everybody on the terms on which they needed to be loved, give everybody what they needed to receive; and so, in the end, none of us really knew him. I've come to realize that he didn't quite know himself, either.

The trouble began in preadolescence. His mother got married to a man who had kept from her the fact that he had a criminal record, and who soon became abusive. Karen took her children



As a felon behind bars, Michael Allen became a statistic, tagged with a number. Outside, he struggled to make a life of his own.

to Mississippi and then to southern Georgia. There, a few months shy of twelve, Michael stole a jar of coins, amounting to something under ten dollars, from a white family across the street. He was starting to want things, impatiently, and he was also naïve, a California kid transplanted to the Deep South. Only out of naïveté could he have thought to steal from a white family in southern Georgia.

Rather than telling Karen and asking for the money back, the family pressed charges. It was Michael's first encounter with the law, and he went to court with his mother. Karen had by then filed for divorce and bought plane tickets to California. The judge told her the charges would be dropped so long as they got on the plane and never came back.

In the fall of 1991, Michael and his family moved to Claremont, where my father, William, taught, and where my mother, Susan, worked as a college librarian. For my cousins, my parents'

house was a second home, screened with laurel bushes, framed by pink-blossomed crêpe myrtles, and shaded by a spreading loquat tree in front.

William and Karen—children of a Florida fisherman who became a charismatic Baptist preacher—were close, but their courses in life were not. My father, with the encouragement of a grade-school teacher, was academically ambitious, and he turned into a pipe-smoking, NPR-listening professor, a political scientist who chaired the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. He spent much of his days amid heaps of paper in a book-filled study, orchestral harmonies from the radio perfumed by the tweedy, comforting smell of pipe tobacco. Karen's story was different; she worked for a time as a certified nursing assistant, but bringing up three young kids while working full time was a struggle. Her ex-husband wasn't the first abusive man she had been involved with, and plans for furthering her education were often derailed.

Now, with my brother and me away at college, my parents helped Karen find an apartment a few blocks away. Michael took piano lessons from a stern, diminutive woman who had been my own teacher and who taught us how to sit up straight, "like the Queen of England." Michael earned money gardening for her, but resented the hectoring lessons about life that she delivered as he weeded.

He was becoming something of a rule breaker in Claremont. He and his new friend Adam were caught stealing chocolate-chip cookies from the school cafeteria, and sometimes had to be separated after making noise in class. Michael was also caught shoplifting at a nearby mall. Luckily, the store owner delivered Michael to my father, not to the police. But Michael's pattern of petty theft worried his mother, and my father; the weeding job was meant to deal with his need for money.

Then, in early 1993, a fire swept through the family's apartment complex, and they moved again, to the L.A. neighborhood of Inglewood. Although the area was scarred from the ravages of the previous year's riots, the move meant that Karen could be closer to her new job, at an organization called Homeless Health Care Los Angeles. It also meant that Michael started a new school year in yet another district.

We know something about his experiences as a student, because the State of California surveyed its youth during the 1993-94 school year. Forty per cent of ninth graders reported being in a physical fight; nearly sixty per cent reported seeing someone at school with a weapon. Gangs filled in for family; almost one in five ninth graders reported belonging to one at some point. Michael, then just shy of fourteen, seems to have flirted with the Queen Street Bloods, who were active on the west side of Inglewood; later, he started hanging with a friend from the Crips, a rival gang.

Michael was testing out a new world. But in that summer of 1993 he would also return to his old one, riding a bus back to Claremont to hang out with Adam. During one of those visits, Adam's parents were looking after the next-door neighbor's house, and the two boys let themselves in and took a radio and some other items. The



"Everything is dandy—and our intestinal biomes are joyous."

neighbor reported a burglary, and when Karen realized who was responsible she hauled Michael to the police station. The boys returned everything. They were given a two-year juvenile probation, which entailed a curfew but no court date.

The narrative so far is familiar. A kid from a troubled home, trapped in poverty, without a stable world of adults coordinating care for him, starts pilfering, mostly out of an impatience to have things. In Michael's first fourteen years, his story includes not a single incidence of violence, aside from the usual wrestling matches with siblings. It could have had any number of possible endings. But events unfold along a single track. As we make decisions, and decisions are made for us, we shed the lives that might have been. In Michael's fifteenth year, his life accelerated, like a cylinder in one of those pneumatic tubes, whisking off your deposit at a drive-through bank. To understand how that acceleration could happen, though, another story is needed.

Like Dante I am forced to descend lower into hell to achieve a full awakening. I am forced into depression, scarred by obscenities, war after war, but each war that I survive I am a step closer to a full awakening of self. My hell is no longer demonstrating what I am capable of doing in order to survive. It has become what I can tolerate and withstand in order to live.

Consider the visible surface of Los Angeles. Underpasses, bridges, alleyways, delivery trucks, service entrances, corner stores, mailboxes, water towers, exhaust vents, and the streets—in the nineties, at least, all were covered with graffiti. Few can read that graffiti. I couldn't then, and have only now begun to learn how to decipher it. But it's a language that represents a world. It records deaths and transactions, benefactions and trespasses, favors done and owed, vendettas pursued. Laws and punishments. If you can't read that graffiti, you have no conception of the parallel universe, all around you, that is fundamentally at war with the legally recognized state. It's a regime with its own rules and penalties—in effect, a parastate. Michael grew up there.

Behind that parastate's economy and criminal-justice system lies the war on

drugs. In the eighties, as the state sought to break the global drug-supply chain by rounding up low-level peddlers and deterring them with outsized penalties, the wholesalers established their own system of deterrence for gang members who served as retailers. If you didn't do what you were supposed to do, you were shot. Maybe in the knee first. If you riled the gang system again, you or someone you loved might be killed. The drug business, dependent on a well-established witness-suppression program, operates a far more powerful system of deterrence, with far swifter punishment, than any lawful state could ever devise.

In these years, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department created its first gang database. In 1988, after a much publicized drive-by shooting of a bystander, near U.C.L.A., the Los Angeles Police Department used the database to round up no fewer than fourteen hundred African-American youths and detain them in the parking lot of the L.A. Coliseum. More than eighteen thousand people were jailed in six months. Between 1982 and 1995, the African-American prison population in California grew from 12,470 to 42,296; the Latino prison population soared from 9,006 to 46,080. Los Angeles was a city ready to explode when the four police officers who had been caught on video beating Rodney King were acquitted.

When Michael stole the jar of coins in Georgia, and the judge dropped the charges, you might say that Michael met the "forgiving world." The same happened when he shoplifted, and when he stole the radio in Claremont, in 1993. But, back in the City of Angels, Michael met the unforgiving world. Nearly half the black men in Los Angeles between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four were officially identified as gang members, and this simple fact of classification, accurate or not, affected that community profoundly. The angels had turned their backs.

The summer before Michael's junior year, in 1995, he began looking for a job. His cousin Marc—my younger brother—had worked in a grocery store as a bag boy throughout high school, and Michael wanted a similar gig. But,

at fifteen, he needed a work permit, and nobody in his mother's social network could help. He again began to roam the streets, and stayed out past his curfew. In math class, his grades plunged from straight A's to an F. Karen had conferences with Michael and his teachers, who told him that he was smarter than this. He countered, "I don't want to be smarter than this." On those warm summer days, he spent as much time as he could out-of-doors. Sometimes he would stand in front of the house of a kid he'd come to know. Karen spotted him once, lean and muscled, standing shirtless in khaki trousers—gangbanging gear. Although he was only four blocks away from her apartment, it felt like a different neighborhood.

Karen's last day with her boy was Friday, September 15th. Michael didn't have school. He went to work with his mother and hung out in her office. Then she took him to the Los Angeles Public Library, where she planned to meet him when she got off work, to take him shopping. But Michael was gone when she returned. The next time she saw him, he was in handcuffs.

Where were you when you were fifteen? When I close my eyes, I can still see a bedroom with a brass bed topped with a blue-and-white striped Laura Ashley comforter. There were matching valences on my windows, and I had a wooden rolltop desk, with a drawer that locked and held my secrets, including dirty letters that I couldn't at the time translate from a German boy with whom I'd had a minor romance at summer music camp.

I grew up in a college town where everyone knew my parents. They had made a critical decision, early in the lives of their two children, not to move until we had graduated from high school. I was a faculty brat, an insecure and often lonely child; the only time I ever got grounded was when my mother caught me sneaking a ride to French class with a friend. I was younger than most of my classmates at Claremont High School, and, although my friends all had their driver's licenses by the start of our junior year and I didn't, I wasn't allowed



to ride in their cars. Eight years later, in L.A., my fifteen-year-old cousin, who also didn't yet have a driver's license, was arrested, for the first time, for an attempted carjacking.

It was September 17, 1995, a cool and foggy Sunday morning. Larry Smith, a lanky forty-four-year-old, was buffing the dashboard of his blue Cadillac Coupe de Ville in the alley behind his apartment, on Rosecrans Avenue. The street was lined with drab stucco apartment buildings, whose uncovered staircases led down to carports below. Michael appeared holding a chrome Lorcin .380, a cheap pistol prone to malfunction. An older friend, Devonn, a member of the Rollin 60s Crips, was apparently on lookout, but not visible to Smith as he worked in his car. (Both names have been changed.) Michael approached Smith, told him not to move, and demanded his watch. Smith handed it over.

Then Michael asked for his wallet. When he found that it was empty, he tossed it back into the car. Then, as the police report recounted, Michael "tapped Smith's left knee with the gun and said he was going to take the car." According to Smith, Michael kept the gun pointed at the ground. Smith lunged for the weapon. They wrestled. Michael punched him. Smith gained control of the gun and shot Michael through the neck.

As Michael lay bleeding on the ground, Smith hollered to his wife to call 911. When the police arrived, they collected evidence and looked for witnesses, although no one had anything to say. Meanwhile, paramedics took Michael to a hospital, where he was treated for a "through and through" bullet wound that had narrowly missed his spine.

A police officer accompanying Michael in the ambulance reported that, "during transport, Allen made a spontaneous statement that he was robbing a man when he got shot." At the hospital, Michael was read his Miranda rights and additional juvenile admonishments in the presence of a second officer. According to the police report, he waived his rights and said again that he had tried to rob the man, using a gun that he claimed he had found about two and a half weeks earlier. He also confessed that he had robbed three people during the previous two days on the

same block, and that he had robbed someone a week earlier, about ten blocks away. The police had no reports for two of the four robberies he confessed to; in the two that had been reported, Michael had taken twenty dollars from one victim and two dollars from another. In other words, on his way to the hospital, and upon admission, with no adults present other than the officers, a wounded fifteen-year-old talked a blue streak.

By the time Karen got to Michael's bedside, he had wrapped up his confession. The only thing he didn't mention was Devonn's involvement. Did Devonn suggest the crime, or provide the gun? We have no way of knowing. I don't believe that Michael was prepared, that morning, to be violent; he had a gun, but refrained from using it. Still, I was far away, a graduate student in England. Along the banks of the River Cam, I shared poems with friends and debated crime and punishment in ancient Athens. I had gravitated toward the subject upon being struck by how a sophisticated, democratic society had made next to no use of imprisonment. When the news of Michael's arrest came, it was stupefying. My brain raced in endless loops. *How could it be? How could it be?* I now have a sense of an answer. But there were harder questions ahead.

I'm trapped in a hell with whom society decrees to be the worst of living and better off dead. Robbers, rapists, child molesters, carjackers, murderers, and dope fiends who would spend their mother's monthly rent for a quick fix. And here I am, amongst them. As much as the mere thought disgusts me, I am one of them. Just another number, not deserving of a second chance.

Before his arrest, Michael did not have a criminal record. That day, he gained one with a vengeance. For the watch and the wallet, Michael was charged with robbery; for the car, attempted carjacking. Both charges were "enhanced" because of the gun. He was also charged with the two earlier robberies. Four felonies, two from one incident, and all in one week.

Eighteen months earlier, in March, 1994, California's Three Strikes and You're Out law, the nation's first, had gone into effect. Once you were convicted of your third felony, it meant twenty-five years

to life, or a plea deal. If Michael pursued a jury trial, convictions on at least three of his four charges would trigger the law. Worse, this was happening at the high point of L.A.'s panic about carjackings. In Los Angeles County alone, the number of carjackings had nearly doubled between 1991 and 1992, from 3,600 to 6,297. In 1993, the state legislature had unanimously passed a bill that made carjacking an offense for which sixteen-year-olds could be tried as adults. Two years later, the bar was lowered to fourteen. A Los Angeles *Times* article titled "Wave of Fear," which ran the year before Michael's arrest, quoted then Senator Joseph Biden saying, "Name me a person in L.A. who has a fender-bender and doesn't fear an imminent carjacking. Yes, it's still remote, but you're in the statistical pool now. It's like AIDS. Everyone's in the pool now."

California's legislators had given up on the idea of rehabilitation in prison, even for juveniles. This is a point that critics of the penal system make all the time. Here is what they don't say: legislators had also given up on retribution. Anger drives retribution. When the punishment fits the crime, retribution is achieved, and anger is sated; it softens. This is what makes it anger, not hatred, a distinction recognized by philosophers all the way back to antiquity. Retribution limits how much punishment you can impose.

The legislators who voted to try as adults sixteen-year-olds, and then fourteen-year-olds, were not interested in retribution. They had become deterrence theorists. They were designing sentences not for people but for a thing: the aggregate level of crime. They wanted to reduce that level, regardless of what constituted justice for any individual involved. The target of Michael's sentence was not a bright fifteen-year-old boy with a mild proclivity for theft but the thousands of carjackings that occurred in Los Angeles. Deterrence dehumanizes. It directs at the individual the full hatred that society understandably has for an aggregate phenomenon. But no individual should bear that kind of responsibility.

On February 5, 1996, four and a half months after Michael's last night at home, he sat in court, in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs, as the judge told him to choose whether to stand trial and face a

possible conviction of twenty-five years to life or to plead guilty and take a reduced sentence. The judge didn't say how much the sentence would be reduced, but he did say, "Please take the plea."

Michael could not choose. Now sixteen, he asked his mother to decide. Karen went outside the courtroom and prayed. "God told me," she says, "that he would only get seven years, versus risking a trial of twenty-five years to life. I made the decision." So Michael pleaded guilty. A few months later, he learned that his "earliest possible release date" was June 29, 2006. According to Karen, the only time Michael cried in court was when he got sentenced.

When you're sixteen, the farthest back you can remember is about thirteen years, to the age of three. Michael's sentence was almost equivalent, in psychological terms, to the whole of his life. It stretched past what was for him the limit of knowable time. The mind cannot fasten onto this sort of temporality; we are unable to give it concrete meaning in relation to our own lives. The imagination wanders into white space. For Michael, it was, he later wrote, "a

mountain of time" to climb. It would be a steep one. The moment he turned seventeen, he was transferred to adult prison.

"How could it have happened?" is the question everyone asks. Where were the lawyers? What did your family do? I think back to the stolen radio. Michael came from a family who believed that if you did something wrong you admitted it, you fixed it, and you suffered the consequences. Michael was guilty of the attempted carjacking; he was going to have to suffer the consequences. Our family trusted in the fairness of the criminal-justice system. At each turn, we learned too late that this system was no longer what we thought it was, that its grip was mercilessly tightening, that

our son would be but one among many millions soon lost in its vise.

When we read that the point of the Three Strikes law is to lock up repeat offenders, we do not think of the fifteen-year-old who has just been arrested for the first time. An underground nuclear test is conducted, and the land above craters only much later. This, I think,



Danielle Allen was the relative best equipped to guide Michael's reentry.

describes the effect of the Three Strikes law and the slow, constant escalation of penal severity. An explosion occurred underground. The people standing on the surface conducted their lives as usual. They figured out what was really going on only after the earth had collapsed beneath them.

The years between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six are punctuated by familiar milestones: high school, driver's license, college, first love, first job, first serious relationship, perhaps marriage, possibly a child. For those who pass adolescence in prison, some of these rites disappear; the ones that occur take on a distorted shape. And extra milestones get

added. First long-term separation from family. First racial melee. First time in solitary, formally known as "administrative segregation." First time sodomized.

Between his arrest and his sentencing, Michael was mainly in Central, the juvenile prison, where only parents and legal guardians could visit. When Michael and I reconnected properly, in

the late nineties, he was making his way through Chino—a notoriously tough prison—before landing in Norco. Its full name was the California Rehabilitation Center-Norco, but little rehabilitation was on offer. There was the obligatory library, but no classes past the G.E.D. level. In the nineties, college and university classes were scrapped because of budget cuts, and the state and federal governments ceased providing prisoners access to Pell Grants for correspondence courses. Higher education, once seen as an antidote to recidivism, had come to be seen as a privilege that inmates hadn't earned.

After I started teaching at the University of Chicago, in 1998, Michael and I began talking regularly on the phone. Once he was at Norco, I began to visit him,

too, every other week in the summer and during the Christmas holidays. Michael would call at least once a week, sometimes more, except when the prison was on lockdown owing to outbreaks of violence. Then weeks might pass without a word. I was a good phone partner, because I could afford the astronomical collect-call charges. Every call began with a reminder, a robotic voice saying, "This is the California Department of Corrections. Will you accept the charges?" And then, every fifteen seconds, as if we could forget, there was another interruption: "This call has originated from a California state prison."

Michael, who had already completed

his G.E.D., desperately wanted to go to college, and I understood his desire to learn. I believed in education; I believed in Michael. So I researched how Michael might be able to get a college degree. On November 8, 2001, Michael sent me his application to Indiana University's Program in General Studies, and I mailed it with a check nine days later. He would aim for a bachelor's degree. The day he was admitted was as exhilarating as the day I received my fat envelope from Princeton, thirteen years earlier.

There was a catch, however. No hard-cover books were allowed into the prison. Michael could enroll only in classes for which the textbooks had soft covers. I made a round of phone calls. The remaining choices for introductory classes were Intro to Ethics and Intro to Writing and Study of Literature. Michael chose the second, Lit 141. I paid the fees and ordered the books.

New Year's came and so did the Bible, the Odyssey, the Inferno, "The Canterbury Tales," and "Persian Letters." But there was no shortage of distractions, and Michael had trouble completing the assignments. At one point, suspected of participating in a "racial melee," he was transferred to Chino and placed in solitary, until an investigation absolved him. A year later,

he repeated the class. This time he churned out one essay after another, with readings that were full of insight and personal connection to ancient texts. He was finding his voice. "I don't take kindly to seeing myself in Hell but Dante's writing makes it impossible to just read without visualization," he wrote in one essay. "It is the life I live in Prison which to me is Hell. . . . I think of Dante's use of ice as nothing but a mere deception. Ice within itself is enticing to the burning soul. Ice can get so cold that it burns flesh. And it's parallel to any sin committed on earth."

Along the way, Michael fell in love. I remember his words on the phone: "I've met someone, Danielle. She's beautiful." And I remember my sense of confusion. Met someone? How? Where? I was thinking of the female guards whom I'd got to know in the course of my visits. But in a fumbling way we came to understand each other. Michael had fallen in love with a fellow-inmate who had implants or hormone-induced breasts, and who dressed and lived as Bree. (I've changed the name.) She was, he said, unquestionably the most beautiful woman in the prison. He hadn't told his mother, and he made me promise not to say anything. He

knew Karen would be upset and he feared she would judge him, as he trusted I would not.

Like freedom, desire was dizzying to Michael. A month later, he mailed me a piece of writing unlike anything he had ever sent me. "The world has change and brothas far from the same," he rapped, and continued:

Am I losing my mind
No; I think I found it
Realizing greatness in one's self is very
astounding
and truth be told, I recognize a King
cause when I look in the mirror all I see is me
And us, so please trust, we can't be touch
standing together forever is a necessary must.

Soon afterward, he sent me Bree's annual prison shot. She was posed as a woman, lying on the floor like a sports pinup, made up and in colorful clothing. Why did he love her? He loved her because she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He loved her because, of all the men in prison, she had chosen him—and that was a gift of surpassing value. But it was also a gift that came to blind him. When he was finally released from prison, I failed to grasp that he was not yet free.

Upstairs, in the Sears personnel department, everything was beige and brightly lit. I settled into a metal chair and waited while Michael had his interview, in an office down the hall. I did a lot of waiting that summer, but I never questioned why I was there. My brother and I had long ago formed a tight circle with Aunt Karen's three kids—Nicholas, Roslyn, and Michael, each born about two years apart—and, as the oldest, I was always the one in charge. As I waited, I typically spent my time thinking about my task lists, about what had to be done next. Forty-five minutes into this particular wait, the door opened and I learned that the managers had offered Michael a job as an inventory clerk.

It felt as if time had begun. I could imagine a future, even a happy ending. There was still school and housing to be arranged, but we were steadily assembling the pieces of a possible life, as if doing a jigsaw puzzle. The goal was for Michael to work full time and to enroll in one of California's



PAUL
KARASIK

"Mommy and Daddy still love you, but we're going to try living thirteen inches apart for a while."

famed community colleges. No one in his immediate family had a degree, but I was in my element—pretty much my deepest expertise was in going to school.

Los Angeles Valley College, in Valley Glen, was the obvious place, a decent school with good general-education courses and—our goal—a fire-technology program. The subway's Red Line had stops at Santa Monica and Vermont, about a mile from the Sears, and in North Hollywood, not too far from campus. We battled our way through the thicket of federal financial-aid forms, visited the tutoring center, and hungrily collected flyers posting apartments for rent.

We needed a place cheap enough to manage on Michael's wages. Together, we searched the listings, drove by addresses, and made calls and appointments. We landed on a promising place on Ethel Avenue, in Valley Glen, a few blocks north of the college. The advertisement was for a studio apartment in a converted garage behind a modest home. Once again, Michael practiced telling his story, and we scheduled a visit.

The home was impeccable, a white bungalow circled by a white iron fence. Alongside the fence stood some small shrubs, neatly tended, and rosebushes spraying white flowers. I went up to the house by myself. Two women met me at the door, a mother, perhaps in her sixties, and her daughter. Dressed in linen trousers and a black T-shirt, I introduced myself. I was a professor, I told them, and I was helping my cousin, who had recently been released from prison. He had just enrolled at Los Angeles Valley College and been hired at Sears. I would be paying his deposit and guaranteeing his rent. He'd been sentenced as a young person and this was his second chance. Were they willing to meet him and hear him out?

They agreed, and I sat outside while Michael spoke to his prospective landlords. He could charm anyone with that bouncing gait and electric grin. Finally, the three emerged, in good spirits, and the women took us around to the back to see the studio. It was clean and peaceful, and equipped with a hot plate and an electric heater. I could imagine being

comfortable there. And it was walking distance from the school.

Michael said he wanted it; we all shook hands in the gaze of the late-afternoon sun. I was moved by the trust and the generosity of these two women, and I still am. Driving back to South Central, my mood was all melody. I imagined Michael felt the same. Little more than a month out and here he was, with a driver's license, a bank account, a library card, and a job. He was enrolled in college, with a clean, safe, comfortable place to live. This was a starter set for a life, enabling him to defy the pattern of parolees.

I dropped him off in South Central and headed back to Hollywood, expecting to sleep soundly for the first time in a while. But that night Michael called. He wasn't sure he should take the apartment. I felt a stone drop to the bottom of a well.

Why not? I asked.

He couldn't explain, he said. He just didn't feel quite right about it.

I told him to sleep on it, and when we talked in the morning he told me he wanted the apartment after all. Relieved, I headed off to collect a cashier's check for the security deposit, and Michael headed off under yet another cloudless sky to his job at Sears. At midday, he called me again: Had I taken the check over yet? He said that he had changed his mind again.

"Michael, what on earth are you talking about?"

He told me that he wasn't sure what it would be like if his associates came by.

The word surprised me, but I didn't ask him what he meant by "associates." The purpose of the word, somehow, was to insist on his privacy, and it brought me up short. I paused, didn't ask questions. I told him to think about it some more. Disagreement was rare for us.

He called me a few hours later. He said he would take the apartment and asked me to pick him up after work. Then, just before I did so, he called again. "I've made up my mind," he said. "I don't want the apartment."

My memory of the conversation is hazy, but it's likely we exchanged some sharp words. His plan, it emerged, was to live with his mother and to ride the bus the nine miles from there to Sears

and the ten miles from there to Los Angeles Valley College, and then the twenty-two miles home—through the worst of Los Angeles traffic. It was madness, but there was nothing I could do. It was well into August. School would start soon. I would have incoming students to welcome, new faculty to orient, budgets to plan. I bought him more khakis and button-down shirts, spent as much time with him as I could. A few weeks later, I headed back to Chicago.

The root of sin is lust and the desire to satisfy that lust. . . . Lust only creates wanting and wanting creates greed and greed burns Flesh. It is lust that causes us to believe we have to have something at all cost. This is my suffering, this is my hell. 24 hours all night. There is no day. My soul in its entirety is in darkness.

The jigsaw puzzle soon fell apart, and college was the first piece to go. The commute was just too much; I doubt Michael made it through even two weeks of classes. The job, meanwhile, lasted until November, when I got a nearly hysterical call. Michael said he couldn't do it. He was drowning. He wasn't going to make it. When I left L.A., I had promised him that if he ever needed me I would be there. After the call, I went straight to the airport, and arrived in L.A. just in time to take him to dinner.

Michael was teary and despondent. After work, he said, some of his Latino co-workers had called him a nigger. He fought them in the parking lot, and walked away from the job. Never told his bosses or co-workers that he was quitting—just didn't return. So now he was back to square one. Worse than that, really, since he'd proved himself unreliable to an employer. He was mostly spending his time at home, playing video games with his nephews. He no longer saw a future for himself.

I mainly tried to listen; I didn't have much to offer. I could promise to get him into an apartment, if he could get another job. But I was no longer in a position to stay and help him find one. I had too many obligations in Chicago. November was tenure-review time, with mounds of papers to read and unending cycles of meetings that the dean, in particular, was not supposed to miss. My

professional reputation was at stake. Michael would have to make the next push for himself.

When I visited L.A. just before the winter break, it seemed as if Michael had made that push. He had found an apartment, he told me, and was ready to put down a deposit. Could I come and see it? The place was on the fourth floor of a vintage Craftsman-style building overlooking the 101 freeway. It was big and spacious, with gleaming wood floors. As I wound through the rooms, Michael began telling me about how he and Bree wanted to move in.

I had no idea he was still seeing Bree, let alone making plans to move in together. My face must have conveyed surprise, though I tried not to react too strongly. (Learning how to suppress visible emotion is an occupational demand of being a dean.) I told him that I wanted to know what the job situation was. Had he lined up a new gig? What did Bree do—did she have a job? Our voices echoed in the empty apartment. Michael leaned against a windowsill, the sky and the freeway shining behind him.

There was something shamefaced in him as he answered. No, he didn't have a job. Bree was into hair styling, but, no, she didn't have one, either. What, exactly, were they thinking? Michael didn't have much of an answer. Plainly, the plan involved taking advantage of me to some degree.

In that moment, I encountered a different Michael from the one I knew. I saw something calculating, something I'd never seen before. I didn't ask to talk to Bree, whom I'd come to realize was the woman in the gold Mercedes crawling past our homecoming party. All I was able to say was that I couldn't possibly pay the deposit—plus some number of months' rent, plus co-sign a lease—when neither of them had a job.

Michael's face tensed. He said he understood.

This was the day I understood that the idea that I could stand my baby cousin up on his own two feet was a fantasy; it had always had too much of me in it. From this point on, Michael ceased confiding in me. Our phone conversations never burrowed below the surface. I no longer knew how to help.

Michael spent more and more time

with Bree, whose possessiveness was violent. According to Karen, Bree cut Michael three times between December and May, and each time Michael tried to pass the injuries off as the result of someone attempting to rob him. He had also begun to suspect Bree of cheating. Late one night, he sneaked under her window, in the hope—he told me later—that catching her in the act would give him an easy out from the relationship. That night, he got into a fight with a lover of Bree's, and the police were called. Michael went straight to prison for a parole violation, and remained there for around a year.

It was a catastrophic defeat. Despite the fact that we wrote each other letters, I somehow obliterated from my memory all traces of Michael's second stint in prison. When he got out again, just months before the 2008 stock-market crash, he returned to what we hoped would be the comfort of his mother's house. Just a short time later, though, he began living with Bree.

In the months before Michael's parole violation, Karen and Bree had waged a battle rooted in a strong mutual dislike. Now Bree sought a formal treaty. She called Karen to say that Michael would be living with her, and that she didn't want any conflict. This was hard for Karen. She knew that her son's relationship was



violent. As Karen understood it, Bree had been in prison for attempting to kill a boyfriend, and the only time she had seen Michael get physical with anyone was when he fought Bree on her pin-neat front lawn. Bree had been going down the street, breaking car windows and throwing things at Karen's house. Michael had gone outside to warn her away. The two came to blows. Through a window, Karen saw Michael knock Bree out. That night, Karen added to her prayers the hope

that the Lord would liberate Michael from his misery.

By December, Michael's world had fully contracted. While living at Bree's house, he became known on the street as Big Mike. That winter, he revealed to his sister a gun, hidden in a towel, in Bree's Mercedes. By the spring, he was running drugs, including at least one trip to Texas. Later, the detectives investigating his murder found PCP in his room.

In June, 2009, I got married, in New Jersey, where I had recently accepted an appointment at a distinguished research institute. Michael came to the wedding—his first airplane flight since his release. He was handsome in a beige jacket and crimson shirt, with matching crimson alligator-skin shoes. But there was so much I couldn't see: I couldn't make out the demons chasing Michael as he greeted the other guests at the door to the chapel.

Five weeks after that champagne-filled wedding day, my father called me from Maryland with the news: Michael had been discovered in a car in South Los Angeles, dead from multiple gunshots. I was in England, and I remember my father's voice, the careful, clipped speech of a retired professor, crackling as if through the first transatlantic cables. Heading to the airport, I knew that the police were looking for a woman, and that Bree had disappeared. Two weeks later, she was charged with his murder.

She had, evidently, shot Michael in her kitchen. There had been one witness, a middle-school-age boy. He hadn't seen anything, but he had heard voices and gunshots. With the help of relatives, Bree cleaned Michael up nicely. She then bundled him in a blanket, put him in his little hatchback, and drove him to the street corner where he was found. Three accessories—all members of Bree's family—were also charged. Eventually, Bree pleaded no contest to voluntary manslaughter, and was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison. Having by now undergone gender-reassignment surgery, she was sent to a women's prison.

Michael and Bree had first met and become lovers when they were both inmates at Norco, which she had entered

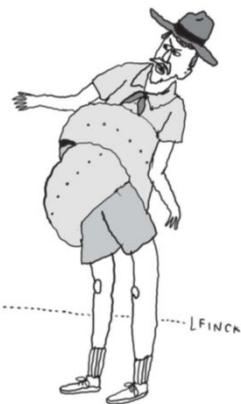
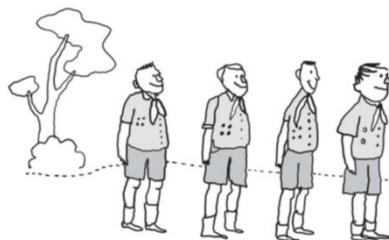
at the age of twenty-five. Bree was a little more than two years older than Michael. She was just his height and just his weight, a transgender woman still early in the process of transitioning. As far as the public record reveals, she'd been convicted for assault with a firearm.

I thought back to Michael's homecoming in 2006, to Bree cruising by in her chariot, coming for to carry Michael home. We all had thought the relationship ended when Bree left prison a year ahead of Michael, and we believed that Michael's home was with us. What Michael himself thought or wanted that homecoming day, I will never know. He hadn't invited Bree to the picnic. Yet she came and would stay.

When Michael contemplated renting that tidy little studio apartment on Ethel Avenue, with its white fence and pearly roses, it was voluptuous Bree in her tight clothes and gold Mercedes whom he was visualizing having to introduce to those kindly landladies. How would it have gone if he had taken this "associate" home with him? When he spent those twenty-four hours dithering over whether to rent the apartment, I see now that his real choice was whether to repudiate the first and only love of his life. He chose Bree, and it would prove to be his life's defining decision.

There are those who await to fulfill their destiny. I see in them a sincere and apologetic heart for their ill misdeeds. They are the one who will change the world positively or positively change someone's world. Hell cannot hold the latter of the two opposites but in time will only spit them back out into society to do what is right. The hell that I live in cannot hold Dante. Hell can test and try one's self but it cannot hold Dante and it will not hold me. In the *Inferno*, the dead are trapped forever. Surely, the biggest and most important difference in the *Inferno* and my hell called prison, is that I have a way out.

Bethlehem Temple, Karen's parish, mounted a funeral service like those from my childhood, when I visited my grandfather the Baptist preacher. There were soul-busting songs and unpainted, teetotalling women; women in hats, with fans, on the verge of fainting. Karen had to be held, and the preacher lifted the roof off. We wept enough to make our own riverside. *Oh, we'll wait till Jesus comes / Down by the riverside.*



"All right, boys, we've had our fun."

The service was followed by a brief lunch back at Karen's house, and then it was onward to a second service, at the church that Michael belonged to. The street had turned out for this service, bringing its jive step. The place was filled with people we didn't recognize. The detectives were here, too, working. They hadn't yet solved the murder of the man they knew as Big Mike, and were watching to see who showed up. The pastor had nothing to say about Michael; instead, he spent the eulogy giving himself credit for the worldly success of this or that parishioner, before descending into an anti-Semitic rant about moneylenders and lawyers.

Where was Michael in all of these remarks? He wasn't there. Not in those words, or, in fact, in his casket. We'd had a viewing a few days earlier. I'd been taken aback, seeing him, his still face so sombre in repose, with a slightly grayish tinge. In the satin-lined casket, he was dressed in the very suit he'd worn to my wedding, a month earlier. I was struck by his solidity. I had never noticed how much he had bulked up. In the casket, there was no smile. The light was gone, and with it, I suppose, the lightness. Later, much later, writing this, I've had to face the fact that on that day I was looking at Big Mike, not at little Michael. The hardest part of my effort to understand what happened to my

cousin has been learning when and how Big Mike replaced Michael.

After the service, we went back to Aunt Karen's house to celebrate what we called Michael's homegoing, his passage to the promised land. Next to that postage stamp of a lawn, we gathered around folding chairs pulled up to folding tables, laden with fried chicken and sweet tea, to commemorate the baby of the family. We had lost him at fifteen to jail; we regained him eleven years later. At twenty-nine, he was lost to us again, gone for good. My cousin's idea of hell was to be reduced to a number; now he became a statistic, joined to the nearly two hundred thousand black Americans who have died violently in the years since his arrest on Rosecrans Avenue.

In my heart's locket, five gangly brown-skinned kids, cousins, will be forever at play beneath a pair of crêpe-myrtle trees bathed in June sunshine. Michael and I loved to climb trees. An arm here, a leg there, juts out from the trees' floral sundress, a delicate skein of pink and purple blooms. When we found unbloomed buds on the dichondra lawn, we would gently press at their nubs until the skins slit and fragile, crinkled blossoms emerged whole. Meanwhile, inside the house, through the living-room picture window, the adults, beloved, pass their time in glancing, distracted talk. ♦

HAT TRICK

How George Strait became the most reliable star in music.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

George Strait has discovered that when he isn't wearing a cowboy hat people often don't realize that he is George Strait. In San Antonio, where he lives, he can usually visit restaurants unmolested, so long as he doesn't smile too widely—he is famous for his smile, which is bright and crooked. One time, in Key West, where he records, he was sitting outside the studio, naked from the neck up, when a woman accosted him. She said, "My husband says that George Strait is in there, cutting a record, and I told him that can't be true. Why would he cut a record in this little place?"

Strait's response was not, strictly speaking, a lie. "Honey," he said, "I was just in there, and I didn't see him."

He is, by some measures, the most popular country-music singer of all time and, by any measure, the most consistent. Since 1981, when he made his debut, he has placed eighty-six singles on *Billboard's* Top 10 country chart, and more than half of them have gone to No. 1. Everywhere that there is a country radio station, there are generations of listeners who regard Strait's music as part of the landscape; they are intimately connected to these songs, even if they can't quite say that they are intimately connected to the man who sings them. When Strait first emerged, he was acclaimed as "the honky-tonk Frank Sinatra," a designation that fits him even better now than it did then. Like Sinatra, Strait is chiefly an interpreter, not a songwriter, and he is committed to the old-fashioned idea that an entertainer's job is to entertain, and not necessarily to bare his soul. He isn't so much a great character as a great narrator, telling a variety of stories instead of returning endlessly to his own. "I don't think there's anything autobiographical about my material, unless it's subconsciously," Strait once said. "I just look for a song I like, and when I hear it I know it right away."

On a Friday night earlier this year, at T-Mobile Arena, a few paces from the Las Vegas Strip, nearly twenty thousand fans came together to hear Strait make his way through more than thirty of his biggest hits—a fraction of the total. "We have a lot of songs to play for you tonight, a whole lot," he said, and then he didn't say much more. Strait prefers to give his audience as few distractions as possible: he likes to play on a stage in the center of the arena floor, with four microphones arranged like compass points; every two songs, he moves, counterclockwise, to the next microphone, so that people in each quadrant of the crowd can feel as if he were singing just to them. Because he was playing in the round, there was no backdrop, and nothing in the way of pyrotechnics, with the important exception of that smile. His onstage outfit, which has barely changed in forty years, includes, along with the cowboy hat and cowboy boots, a button-down shirt and bluejeans, ironed stiff enough to form an exoskeleton. A promotional contract obliges him to wear Wrangler jeans, and decades of ranching and roping inclines him to wear them stacked—that is, long and bunched up, so that he could, if necessary, mount a horse without fear of exposing any extra boot.

Strait doesn't believe in disappointing paying customers, so he endeavors to play every song that anyone wants to hear. Casual listeners may know him best for "All My Ex's Live in Texas," a slightly drunken-sounding novelty song that long ago transcended its novelty status, elevated by countless bleary-eyed sing-alongs: "Texas is the place I'd dearly love to be/But all my ex's live in Texas/And that's why I hang my hat in Tennessee." In this arena, though, people were just as excited for "Check Yes or No," a good-natured radio perennial about a love affair that begins in the third grade and lasts well past

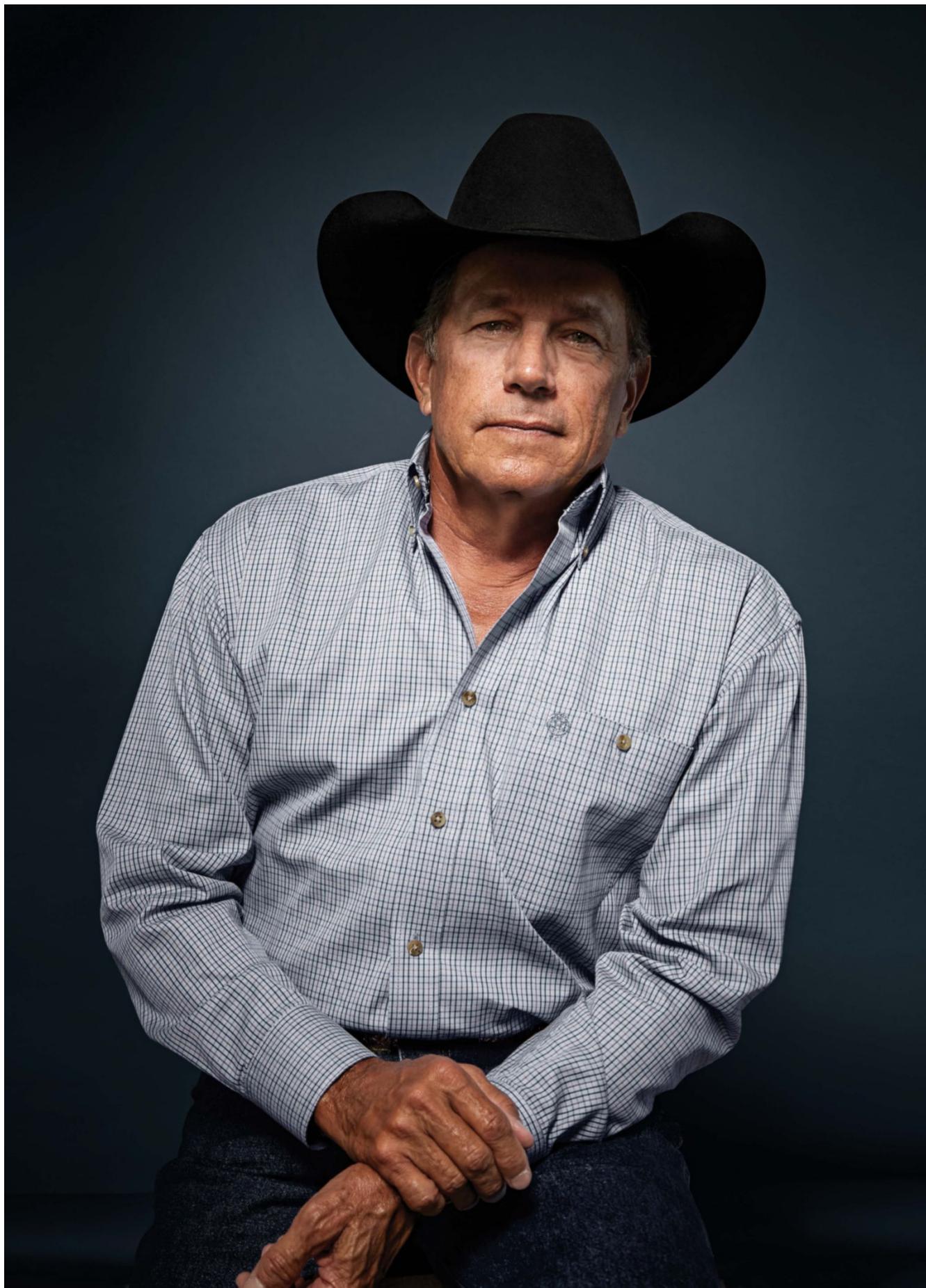
the third chorus. One key to Strait's success is that he is stubborn but not too stubborn. He adores the rough-hewn music and iconography of his native Texas, but he has never been too cool to sing sweeter, softer songs about suburban love gone right. He is a traditionalist, but not a revivalist: instead of evoking a bygone past, he prefers to evoke a familiar, unchanging present. The quintessential George Strait song involves a man who feels something strongly but can express it only winkingly. "If you leave me, I won't miss you," he declares, at the start of "Ocean Front Property," followed by a chorus made up of declarations that are, likewise, lies. "I've got some oceanfront property in Arizona/From my front porch, you can see the sea," he sings. "If you buy that, I'll throw the Golden Gate in, free."

A George Strait concert is a master class in the art of restraint. "He just stands there," an executive once marvelled, "and people go fucking crazy." Strait leans away from the high notes, sways gently with the up-tempo songs, and says just enough to remind fans that they are not, in fact, listening to his records; all night, he strums an acoustic guitar that no one can hear, maybe not even him.

In Las Vegas, he waited until near the end of his set for "Amarillo by Morning." His crowds are generationally diverse, and some of the older fans had begun to sink into their seats by then. But just about everyone stood up at the sound of the fiddle overture that introduces the opening stanza, one of the most memorable in country music:

Amarillo by morning
Up from San Antone
Everything that I got
Is just what I've got on

The song—the stoic lament of a travelling rodeo pro—was originally recorded,



Strait has always been a singles artist; he built his career for maximum longevity, amassing one hit after another.



"First, do no harm. After that, go nuts."

in 1973, by Terry Stafford, a former rock-and-roll singer. Chris LeDoux, a real-life rodeo champion who also built a do-it-yourself career as a country act, cut a version a few years later, which found its way to Strait, who made the song his own. Stafford sang it with a crooner's quaver, and LeDoux intoned the lyrics wistfully, accompanied by a harmonica. By comparison, Strait's version, the only one that most people will ever hear, is masterfully plain. He occasionally approaches a syllable from above, using a mournful grace note, but he has an easy, conversational way of putting a melody across, as if he were singing to keep from talking.

Strait released "Amarillo by Morning" in 1983, and it helped establish him as one of the decade's first new country stars. The song was so popular that he sometimes had to play it twice in a set, back when he was playing as many as four sets a night in Texas roadhouses. "It was probably our most requested song," he says, "but it wasn't a No. 1 record." Like virtually all successful country singers, Strait pays attention to the charts, and he can discuss his place-

ments with the unembarrassed candor of an athlete recalling his career statistics. "Amarillo by Morning" peaked at No. 4. Strait's longtime manager, Erv Woolsey, noticed that some otherwise reliable radio stations declined to put Strait's version into heavy rotation; he suspects that, especially in the Southwest, the modest success of the earlier recordings had made the song too familiar. "It was kind of wore out in certain places," Woolsey says. But it resonated, and it has endured. Last year, a twenty-year-old contestant on "Monte Carlo's Got Talent" became a viral video star because of his uncannily Strait-like rendition of "Amarillo by Morning." And in Las Vegas "Amarillo by Morning" worked as well as it ever did. When it was over, Strait looked out at the crowd and gestured toward the roof with both hands—jokingly asking for more applause, as if he needed it.

Strait recently turned sixty-five, and she is officially semiretired. In 2012, he announced that he was quitting the touring life, and, after a two-year sendoff tour, he played a final show at

AT&T Stadium, the home of the Dallas Cowboys, in front of more than a hundred thousand people. He didn't quit recording, though, and in 2015 he announced a series of weekend concerts in Las Vegas. Louis Messina, Strait's promoter, likes to point out that this is not a traditional Vegas residency: a washed-up star imprisoned in a casino theatre, entertaining a few hundred fans and gamblers, night after night. Strait is an arena headliner, not a lounge act, and every night the pre-show playlist pays subtle tribute to his staying power. Concertgoers hear a selection of recent country hits: "Take a Back Road," by Rodney Atkins; "Girl in a Country Song," by Maddie & Tae; "Rewind," by Rascal Flatts; "Might Get Lucky," by Darius Rucker. What they have in common is that all of them mention Strait. Rucker sings, "Dance around the kitchen to a George Strait song"—hoping, like the others, to borrow some of Strait's unimpeachable country credibility.

When Strait goes to Las Vegas, he flies from Texas in the plane he owns, and stays at the Mansion, a semiprivate hotel hidden next to the MGM Grand. But his bus comes, too, and remains parked behind the arena, allowing him to enjoy, in small doses, the life of a touring musician. It was Saturday afternoon in Las Vegas, and Strait was incognito on his bus, wearing a light-blue baseball cap and lightweight Nike running shoes. In the early decades of his career, he spent his downtime on horseback, turning himself into a decent competitor in the sport of team roping. He is still fit and trim, but these days he prefers fishing and golfing, and he enhances his year-round tan with frequent trips to the Bahamas and Mexico. In person, he is warm but watchful, and surprisingly shy; he seems like a man who does not crave attention, even though he has spent most of his life courting it.

"We had some rough edges last night, and I've already talked to my guys," Strait said. Some members of his band have been playing with him since the nineteen-seventies, and they know him as an easygoing but exacting leader who wants his songs to sound just the way fans remember

them. “A lot of times, maybe I’m the only one that notices,” Strait said. “But sometimes not.”

He has always been a singles artist, and even people who have worked closely with him sometimes struggle to name a favorite album—they like all his songs, especially the hits. Without quite planning it, he built his career for maximum longevity, amassing one hit after another, never allowing himself a year off or a radical musical departure. In the late nineteen-eighties and early nineties, he helped inspire a wave of cowboy-hat-wearing country singers who were known as “hat acts,” including Alan Jackson and Garth Brooks. Strait became a beloved elder statesman without giving up the role he values more: hitmaker. And then, around the beginning of this decade, something happened that was both inevitable and shocking: Strait’s songs stopped making their way up the country chart. “Radio’s not playing me anymore,” he said. “Which is a hard pill to swallow, after all these years.” His last album, “Cold Beer Conversation,” was released in 2015, and it was the first major release of his career that did not spawn a Top 10 hit. “I hung on for dear life, for a lot of years,” Strait said, chuckling softly.

There is, of course, life beyond the *Billboard* charts. Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton, for instance, remain two of the most revered and beloved stars in the country-music galaxy, even though they stopped making hits in the nineteen-eighties. But Strait has always resisted becoming a legacy act—indeed, his legacy is inseparable from his miraculous ability to stay current, reigning as the defining voice of country music throughout the eighties, the nineties, and the aughts. He is, by all accounts, intensely (if quietly) competitive: he wants to win, and radio spins and chart positions are an objective way of keeping score. On that Saturday night in Las Vegas, with those undetectable rough edges smoothed away, Strait and his band cruised through an even longer set, and he permitted himself to take some satisfaction in the fact that, once more, tens of thousands of fans had driven or flown into the desert just to watch him stand

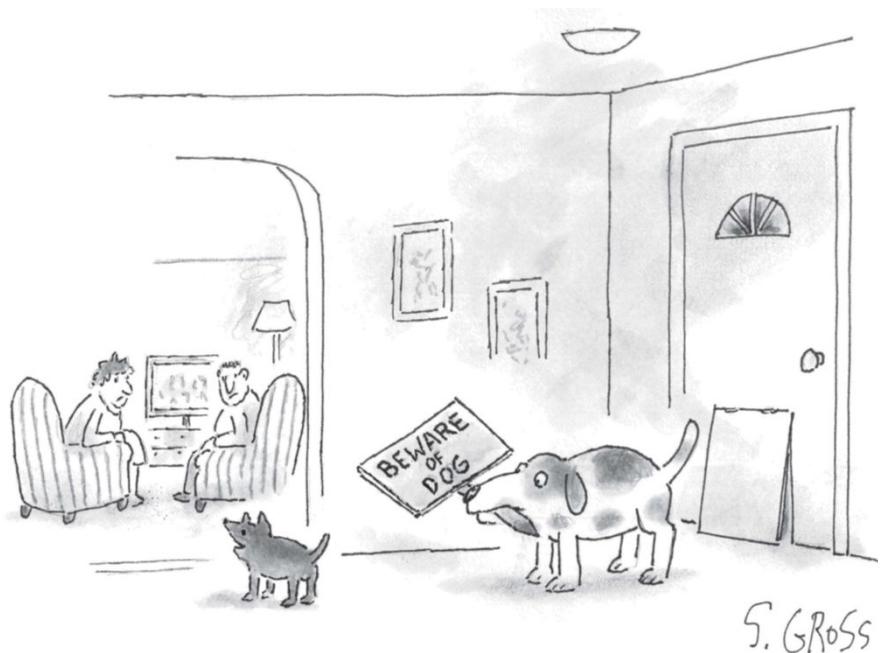
there and sing. “This is our eighth show in this building,” he said. “Sold out every one of ‘em.”

George Strait grew up in Pearsall, Texas, near the interstate that runs south through Laredo to the Mexican border. His parents split when he was young, and Strait was brought up by his father, a math teacher who also became the proprietor of the family’s cattle ranch, down the road in Big Wells. Strait developed a lifelong obsession with ranching, although he also had other interests: after high school, he married his girlfriend, Norma, spent a few semesters in college, and then joined the Army, which assigned him to the 25th Infantry Division, stationed at Schofield Barracks, in Hawaii. The soldiers had to be ready to ship out to Vietnam at a few hours’ notice, but the call never came, and in his downtime—for no good reason that he has ever been able to articulate—Strait bought a battered guitar and some old songbooks and taught himself to play and sing. When the division put together a country band, Strait was chosen to lead it, and by the time he returned to Texas, in 1975, he had resolved to pursue a career in music.

It wasn’t an absurd idea: Texas was full of small bars where unpretentious country bands could bash out a living. Just to be safe, though, Strait enrolled

at Southwest Texas State University, in San Marcos, where he studied agricultural education, and where, one day, he came upon a bulletin-board notice from a group in search of a singer. He auditioned with “Fraulein,” a country classic from the fifties, and was hired as the lead singer of the group, which was called the Ace in the Hole Band. One of the members was a pedal-steel player named Mike Daily, who has performed with Strait ever since. Daily’s grandfather was Pappy Daily, a legendary country impresario who discovered George Jones, and his father ran an independent label, which issued three Ace in the Hole Band singles in the late nineteen-seventies—Strait’s first recordings. Daily remembers that Strait wasn’t planning on staying local forever. “I’m here to try to make it,” Strait told the musicians, and Daily knew that making it would probably entail going to Nashville, where talent scouts typically signed singers, not bands.

In the late seventies, some of the most successful country singers were gentle balladeers like Kenny Rogers and Barbara Mandrell, and the executives who initially heard Strait’s demos thought he would likely remain a local favorite. His prospects may have improved with the release, in 1980, of “Urban Cowboy,” in which John Travolta and Debra Winger do



“We’re in for the night.”

battle with a mechanical bull in a honky-tonk called Gilley's. (The film was not, despite its plot, a comedy.) "Urban Cowboy" glamorized rowdy Texas bars and all the creatures that called them home, and it created a new demand for singing cowboys like Strait. He got a record deal the next year, and had success with his debut single, "Unwound," a brisk drinking song built on a long-winded complaint: "That woman that I had wrapped around my finger just come unwound." He recorded it with session musicians but continued to use the Ace in the Hole Band when he was on tour, as he almost always was. Strait was happy to go around the country promoting "Unwound," but Woolsey, his manager, remembers rebuffing the record executives who wanted Strait to dress up, taking off his cowboy hat and trading his stacked jeans for slacks. "You don't understand," Woolsey told them. "Where he's from, that *is* dressing up."

From the beginning, Strait was marketed—and celebrated—as an avatar of "real" country, at a time of anxiety about country's identity. The genre was getting popular and, not coincidentally, going pop, growing a bit more glamorous and a lot harder to define. In 1981, the year Strait emerged, Mandrell topped the chart with "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool," a charming ode to country authenticity (flannel shirts, the Grand Ole Opry, "puttin' peanuts in my Coke") that seemed both defiant and defensive—its piano-driven arrangement was practically soft rock. Strait, whose music was sometimes described as "hard country," espoused a more uncompromising aesthetic. News accounts invariably mentioned that he was "a real, live cowboy," and headline writers rarely resisted the urge to connect his name

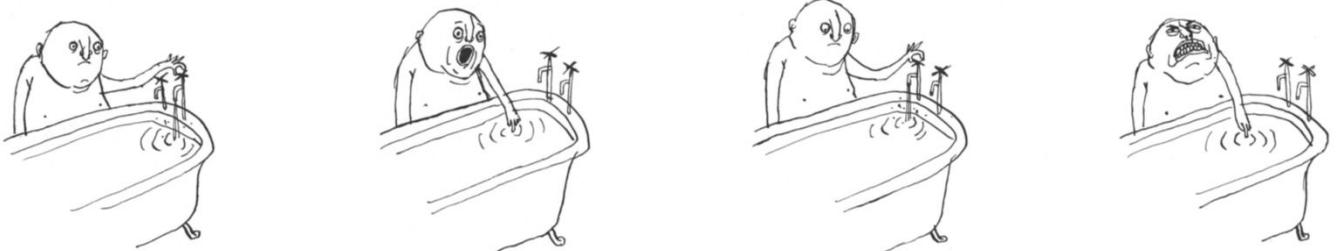
to his style ("SOME REAL STRAIT-FORWARD COUNTRY"; "PLAYING IT STRAIT"; "COUNTRY MUSIC SERVED STRAIT UP"). After a string of hits, Strait parted with his original producer, Blake Mevis, telling one reporter that Mevis "was looking for more mass appeal, middle-of-the-road stuff," while he wanted to record "basic country music."

Many of Strait's early records were produced by Jimmy Bowen, who was smart enough not to interfere too much. "I once told George Strait he might try to liven up his stage act just a touch," Bowen has recalled. (Strait says that he does not remember the conversation.) "He did: he waved his cowboy hat a few times during the show. But George could get away with just standing there looking and sounding terrific." Strait's popularity was driven by his status as a sex symbol. Women deluged the stage with flowers, so many that disposal became a serious problem. At first, the bus would stop by a dumpster on the way out of town; later, the crew devised a system for donating them to local hospitals. Reba McEntire, who was also conquering country music at the time, once recalled a show that she played with Strait in Oklahoma. "The girls was gettin' after him so bad," she said, "that the club had to stack bales of hay in front of the stage." (She added her own honest appraisal: "He's a sexy little rascal.") When Strait toured in the mid-eighties, he brought along, as his opening act, Kathy Mattea, who was then a rising star. Onstage, she made a habit of calling Strait "the Mark Harmon of country music," by way of acknowledging his appeal. "He was handsome, and he was low-key, and he was charming," Mattea says now. For her, the Mark Harmon line was an act of professional self-defense, a way of winning over his

female fans by endorsing their fandom. "I had to relate to those women," she says. "I had to show them that I could feel what they felt."

Strait didn't brag about his heart-throb status. ("I don't know what it is, but I hope it doesn't stop," he told one reporter.) He did, however, find canny ways to capitalize on it. One of his most popular songs is "The Fireman," the sly chronicle of a ladies' man who serves as a kind of first responder in local bars, "making my rounds all over town, puttin' out old flames." And, in 1992, he starred in a feature film, "Pure Country," playing a moodier, more reckless version of himself: a country singer named Dusty, who grows disillusioned with the music business and its compromises. Strait was reluctant to make a movie, but he was persuaded by the producer Jerry Weintraub, and by Colonel Tom Parker, the former manager of Elvis Presley, who was a friend of Weintraub's. After a concert in Las Vegas, Parker told Strait how important Hollywood had been to Presley. "Elvis hated making those movies," he said—but they transformed him from a pop star to an icon. Strait read a script and agreed to make the film, with some caveats. In the part where Dusty, having absconded from his own tour, takes refuge at a ranch, Strait wanted to do his own roping. And although the script had him falling in love with a humble woman from his home town, he thought that a proposed kissing scene was unnecessary (and potentially embarrassing), so he and his co-star, Isabel Glasser, made do with meaningful looks.

"Pure Country" was released in 1992, and attracted middling reviews—"Fans of the star will enjoy it more than dispassionate observers," Roger Ebert said—and worse than middling returns, earning only fifteen million dollars at



the box office. But the movie, which borrowed its plot from an old Presley vehicle, had an easygoing charm that encouraged repeat viewing. (Strait wears a white hat, and on two separate occasions he vanquishes a bad guy wearing a black hat.) “Pure Country” became one of the biggest home-video hits of the nineteen-nineties, and it has been a cable-television staple ever since. Near the end of the film, Dusty rejects sinful pyrotechnics, and recommits himself to the path of musical righteousness. “I’m going to play the guitar and sing,” he tells his manager. “No more smoke, no volcano blasts, and no more light shows.” In other words, Dusty finally sees the wisdom of conducting himself like George Strait. The film’s soundtrack inverted this process. “Heartland,” the movie’s energetic, rock-influenced opening song, marked a modest departure for Strait. “It’s about as rocked up and popped up as you can get and still pass it along to the country market,” he said at the time. At first, he hesitated to record it, until he realized that he could sing it in character, as Dusty. The song went to No. 1, and the soundtrack sold more than six million copies—it is the best-selling album of Strait’s career.

George Strait might be “pure country,” but country music has always been a mixed-up genre. As it happens, Hawaii, where Strait learned to sing, is one of the genre’s many wellsprings: it was there, in the late nineteenth century, that a guitarist named Joseph Kekuku figured out that he could bend pitches by laying the guitar on his lap and sliding a steel bar along the strings. In the early twentieth century, mainland musicians adopted the steel guitar, including Leon McAuliffe, a Texas virtuoso who played with one of the region’s most popular acts: Bob Wills

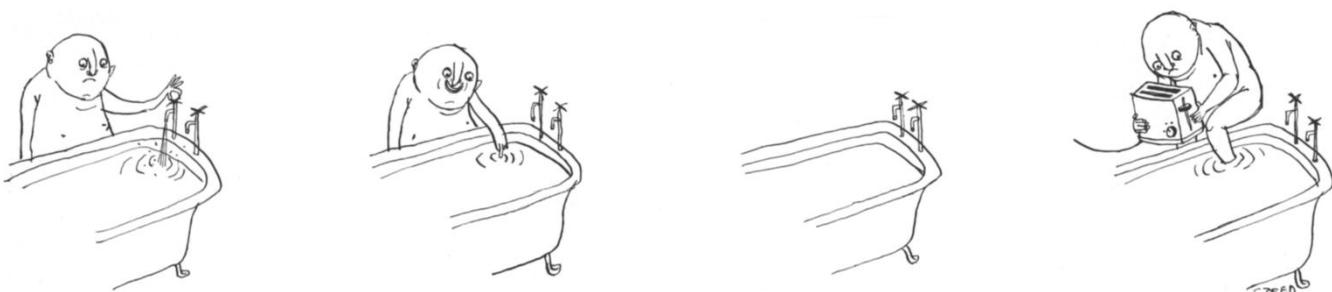
and His Texas Playboys. Wills was a fiddler, and in the nineteen-thirties and forties his group pioneered a style known as Western swing. This was dance music, fusing the lively rhythms of jazz to the lonesome sound of Western ballads, and Wills liked to call his group “the most versatile band in America.” (Among his big hits was “San Antonio Rose,” which was later recorded by Bing Crosby and Patsy Cline.) Wills had begun his career as a blackface minstrel, and most of his musical heroes were black jazz musicians, although his band was all white. His biographer, Charles R. Townsend, reported that Wills once, on a bender in Tulsa, asked a black trumpeter to join the group. “When Bob sobered up,” Townsend wrote, “he decided Oklahoma was not ready for an integrated band.”

By the time Wills died, in 1975, he was esteemed as a founding father of country music, even though he never thought of himself as “country,” in style or in sensibility. The term, as it is now used, is an abbreviation of “country and Western,” a category generally associated with rural white communities and meant to corral a wide range of styles that flourished from Appalachia to the Southwest. These styles were jammed together by a transformative technology: radio, and the “barn dance” variety shows that flourished on the airwaves. The most influential of these was the Grand Ole Opry, a Nashville show that began to be broadcast nationwide in 1939; it was so popular that it altered America’s musical economy, pulling in enough musicians and entrepreneurs to make Nashville the unquestioned home of country music. (Nowadays, hardly anyone stops to wonder why a city not known for ranching is synonymous with cowboy hats.) But a certain amount of tension between Nashville country and Texas

country is built into the relationship, dating back at least as far as 1944, when Wills came to town to play the Opry and was nearly thrown out. The organizers were accustomed to string bands, and Wills insisted on performing with a drummer.

In an odd way, the rise of rock and roll strengthened country music’s sense of identity—after Presley, young people who chose to be country fans were also choosing to resist the hegemony of rock and pop. Strait was born in 1952, and by the time he got to high school he and his friends were listening to the Beatles and other rock-and-roll bands. Although the old country songs were part of the local environment, Strait didn’t start paying close attention until after college, when he encountered some albums by a brilliant and mercurial singer-songwriter from California: Merle Haggard, a country “outlaw” who was also obsessed with the genre’s history. In 1970, the same year as his anti-antiwar hit “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” Haggard released “A Tribute to the Best Damn Fiddle Player in the World (or, My Salute to Bob Wills),” which helped Strait discover the Texas classics that became the foundation of his first live sets. Strait, like many of his peers and most of his successors, is in some sense a convert to the genre: he is country by birth, but also by choice.

The early Ace in the Hole Band recordings featured some songs written by Strait, including a wonderfully mopey lament, “I Just Can’t Go on Dying Like This.” But after Strait got his record deal he decided that he had neither the time nor the inclination to compose. “I was finding what I thought were better songs than what I was writing,” he says now. “Maybe I was intimidated, a little bit.” As Strait grew more successful, he became



especially popular among Nashville songwriters, who like nothing better than a reliable hitmaker who always needs material. When Strait came to town to record, songwriters would lie in wait outside the studio, carrying demo tapes with the most stereotypically George Strait songs they had: songs about cowboys, songs about Texas, songs about the Alamo. What Strait really wanted, though, was memorable and interesting melodies. His string of hits is in large part a result of his ability to identify a great tune. He would review hundreds of demos himself, often deciding within thirty seconds whether a song sounded like something he might want to cut. Occasionally, he asked to alter a word or two; in “All My Ex’s,” a reference to the Brazos River became a reference to the Frio River, which flows closer to his home town. Often, though, Strait learned each song quickly and sang it much the same way it sounded on the demo.

The songwriter whom Strait relied on most was Dean Dillon, who co-wrote his debut single, “Unwound,” and whose songs have appeared on nearly every one of his albums since then. The two met a few years after Strait cut “Unwound.” (The song was originally pitched to Johnny Paycheck, who excelled at both singing and raising hell. “He was in jail, so they gave it to me,” Strait recalls.) Dillon had grown up in Tennessee, in love with country music but also with singer-songwriters like James Taylor and Carole King, who inspired him to experiment with unusual chords and structures. Dillon was once a recording artist, too, but he eventually decided that, since Strait was having so much success with his songs, he might as well become a full-time songwriter. Where Strait is polite and self-effacing, Dillon is a big, ornery personality: when Strait asked Dillon to put out his cigarette during their first meeting, he responded by exhaling a mouthful of smoke. “I didn’t give a shit, and I didn’t care who knew it,” he says. Their partnership has provided Strait’s music with a welcome dose of subversion, helping to keep him from becoming predictable. Dillon co-wrote “Marina Del Rey,” an early hit that up-ended listeners’ expectations of Strait:

MY MOTHER, HEIDEGGER, AND DERRIDA

Educated at a school in Queens
whose slim roster of celebrated alums

boasts Don Rickles number one,
my mother knew little about art,

but she took me to a show
where she withdrew into private air

on seeing “The Potato Eaters”
and “Three Pairs of Shoes”

because the shoes resembled my grandmother’s
high-topped boots my mother knelt before

and laced up every morning
after applying salve

to those diabetes-ulcerated shins.
And the potatoes recalled the fires

it was distinctly unrustic, a piano ballad about a man on an airplane, daydreaming about the woman he left behind on a Los Angeles beach. And “The Chair,” also co-written by Dillon, became one of Strait’s signature hits and a staple of his live sets, despite having nothing that could be considered a chorus. (It is a wry, lilting account of a man chatting up a woman in a bar.) Strait realized that, because his identity was so firmly fixed in fans’ minds, he could permit himself some latitude. “People looked at me as a traditional country singer,” he says. “So those songs were thought of as ‘Well, those are traditional, because George did it.’”

In 1986, Strait’s daughter, Jenifer, was killed in a car accident. She was thirteen, and although Strait resolved to keep working, he couldn’t bear to grieve in public. “I just kind of shut down,” he says. “I just didn’t feel like talking about it, so I quit doing interviews.” In 1988, he released an aching lament called “Baby Blue”: “Like a breath of spring, she came and left, and I still don’t know why/ So here’s to you, and whoever holds my baby blue tonight.” Strait

never explained why he chose to record “Baby Blue”—in the liner notes to his 1995 boxed set, he said only that it was a “pretty song,” and that Aaron Barker, who wrote it, cut such a good demo that Strait was hard-pressed to improve on it. Over the years, Strait’s temporary solution evolved into a permanent way of working, and of living: he stayed productive, and he stayed mum. Friends describe him as kind but quiet, and not easy to get to know. Messina, Strait’s promoter, has been working closely with him since the nineties; their relationship is close, but not overly familiar. “I tried never to cross the line,” Messina says. “We don’t talk about personal things.” Tony Brown produced nineteen of Strait’s albums, beginning with “Pure Country,” and he deserves as much credit as anyone for Strait’s longevity. But in 2014, when Strait decided that he was ready to work with someone else, Brown received the news not from Strait but from Erv Woolsey, his manager.

Successful country singers typically move to Nashville, but Strait never did. He lives outside San Antonio, and although he used to visit Nashville to record, he found that the climate

she and her brothers built
against the curb:

charred skin, raw at the center,
and called “mickeys” in honor of the Irish.

My mother pointed out how the poor
have only potatoes for dinner, their faces

so rough they looked unearthed themselves.
And the shoes, ravaged by labor. Unlike Heidegger,

who said of “Three Pairs of Shoes,”
“From the dark opening of the worn insides

the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth,”
and utterly unlike Derrida, whose note on that painting

questioned what “constitutes a pair of shoes and how
the elements of such combine different forms of reality,”

my mother said they show how hard some people work.

—*John Skoyles*

exacerbated his allergies, which is why he now records in Key West, at a studio that belongs to his friend Jimmy Buffett. In Texas, Strait keeps a low profile; he has adopted the life style of a contented, golf-obsessed businessman without ceasing to represent, for many fans, a connection to an older, more rugged way of living. He emerges once a year for the George Strait Team Roping Classic, which he created in 1982 and has presided over ever since. Team roping is one of the seven events included in a rodeo competition, and, like many sports, it is based on a useful skill honed well past the point of usefulness. A steer—a castrated male—is released from a pen and pursued by two riders on horseback: one, called the header, throws a loop of rope around the steer’s horns, and the other, the heeler, ropes the steer’s hind legs, immobilizing the animal. Strait was a pretty good roper, and he used to compete in his own tournament, although he never won. He sometimes worked in partnership with his son, George, Jr., known as Bubba, who roped full time for several years, until a wayward loop nearly severed his index finger, prompting him to con-

sider anew the sport’s punishing ratio of reward to risk.

This year’s roping event, the thirty-fifth, was held at the San Antonio Rose Palace, a dirt-floor arena on the northern edge of the city, largely untouched by time or technology. (It is down the road from Tapatio Springs, a golf resort that Strait and a partner recently bought and renovated.) A couple of announcers called the action, their voices both amplified and distorted by an antiquated public-address system. In the venders’ area, next to the arena, stands sold T-shirts, cowboy boots, jewelry, cattle feed; near the entrance, some kids were learning to heel by tossing loops at a dummy on wheels. More than five hundred teams competed over two days, creating an agreeably repetitive spectacle. A top roping team can finish its work in less than five seconds, after which the steer is released to trot back to the pen, and the next team gets ready. No less than Nashville, perhaps, the sport rewards perfectionism and patience: everyone is trying to solve the same problem, over and over again.

On Saturday morning, championship day, Strait made his grand arrival

on horseback, taking a ceremonial lap around the arena as fans hung over the railings, angling for selfies. A cowboy preacher asked for protection: “We pray that no harm, in any form or fashion, comes near the horses, the steer, or the cowboys.” (In fact, many of the steer were destined to become steak, just not quite yet.) Strait watched with his family, from a box next to the announcer’s booth, descending when the action was finished to present the prizes—more than a hundred thousand dollars apiece for the two winners, along with new trucks and trailers. All weekend long, the loudspeakers played nothing but George Strait songs, and it is a testament to his legacy that some attendees might not have noticed. His music is so synonymous with the genre that a selection of his hits might simply sound, to the casual listener, like a classic-country playlist.

When Strait first emerged, he was sometimes grouped with other old-fashioned country singers, such as John Anderson and Ricky Skaggs, but he soon became the singular example for a generation to follow: the “hat acts,” they were called, and not always fondly. The most consequential of the hat acts was the one whom the term fit least well: Garth Brooks, who idolized Strait, also managed to succeed by refusing to follow Strait’s example. Where Strait was stoic, Brooks was eager and emotive, straining for high notes, quavering or snarling, amplifying his Oklahoma accent or diminishing it, doing whatever it took to make fans love him. In the nineteen-nineties, Brooks changed the genre, roaming stages with a wireless microphone, singing about ending racism and domestic violence; he also feuded with executives, retired for much of the aughts, and briefly tried to reinvent himself as a brooding rocker named Chris Gaines. Strait, by contrast, instinctively avoided controversy; in fact, he avoided anything that was likely to interrupt the smooth functioning of his hit-making machine. He is friendly with both Bush Presidents, but he has never made a public political statement, and he has gone out of his way not to criticize his fellow-singers, or the industry more generally.

For a long time, the ups and downs of Brooks and other country innovators

only underscored Strait's position as the genre's most dependable act. A wide range of singers, from Martina McBride to Taylor Swift, first faced big crowds by serving as Strait's opening act. When he moved up from arenas to stadiums, in the late nineties, he booked enough opening acts to create daylong mini-festivals, boosting the careers of Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Brooks & Dunn. For the shows earlier this year, in Las Vegas, his opening act was Kacey Musgraves, who is twenty-eight; when she was growing up, in East Texas, Strait was already a well-established star. After her own set, she reappeared with Strait to perform a duet on a song called "Run," dancing a bit and adding some new harmonies while he stood still, singing it just like the record. "He's the steady train," she said, after the show. "And I can flit all around him." Musgraves is a mischievous singer and songwriter, known for tweaking old country traditions. ("It's high time to slow my roll, let the grass just grow," she sings, with a knowing smile.) Even so, she was enjoying the challenge of trying to win over a George Strait crowd, not to mention the challenge of trying to get to know Strait himself. "I've gotten to hang out with him a little," she said. "We mainly just talk about horses."

Strait flew to Nashville recently—not to sing but to promote one of his newest projects, *Código 1530*, a "sippin' tequila," as he calls it, that he grew to love during golf trips to Mexico, and which he is helping to launch in America. (One of his partners is Ron Snyder, the executive behind Crocs.) There was a tasting in RCA Studio A, the same building in which Strait recorded his first album, and, despite having spent decades avoiding publicity events like this one, he seemed cheerful. "I've never been one to like to talk about myself a lot," he said, nursing an añejo-tequila cocktail. By comparison, talking about his favorite drink wasn't so bad.

Ever since 1981, Strait has been recording for the same label, MCA Nashville, outlasting virtually all the executives, to say nothing of his fellow-

artists. The label is now part of Universal Music Group Nashville, whose chairman is Mike Dungan, a wry and garrulous music veteran from Cincinnati. Dungan became chairman in 2012, and one of his first trips was to San Antonio, to meet with Strait and his wife, along with Woolsey. "Let's deal with reality," Dungan told Strait. "There are some key radio guys that are ready to be done with you. It has nothing to do with you as an artist—it has to do with the fact that they played you in the eighties, they played you in the nineties, the two-thousands, and here we are in 2012, and nothing else in culture has held on that long." Dungan remembers that Strait seemed both alarmed and fascinated. "I don't think anyone had ever said those words to him before," he said.

What Dungan proposed was not acquiescence but insurgency. He and his executives put together a campaign called *Sixty for Sixty*, in which they recruited fans and fellow-performers to urge radio programmers to play Strait's latest single, a warm love song called "Give It All We Got Tonight." The idea was to get Strait his sixtieth No. 1 hit before his sixtieth birthday, and, if Strait was too proud to beg, many of his fans were not. Some of the genre's biggest names recorded testimonials: Brad Paisley, Darius Rucker, Eric Church, Little Big Town. The campaign came around the same time



as Strait's announcement that he was retiring from full-time touring, which gave the effort a valedictory aura. No one said that this would be Strait's last No. 1 single, but his music had been growing more wistful over the years. (In 2008, he went to No. 7 with "Troubadour," a late-career statement of purpose: "I was a young troubadour when I rode in on a song / And I'll be an old troubadour when I'm gone.") With *Sixty for Sixty*, the implication was hard to miss: a man who once topped the charts effortlessly now required one last collective push to get to No. 1.

Whether he made it is a matter of some debate. In the old days, when Strait emerged, the *Billboard* country

chart operated according to an unwritten code: record labels pestered and fêted program directors, and program directors helped arrange an orderly succession of No. 1 hits, with a new song claiming the spot just about every week. In the past decade, though, the country chart has decelerated, as hits make slow progress through a big but diffuse musical marketplace. In 1981, when Strait made his debut, there were forty-eight different No. 1 hits on *Billboard's* country chart. Last year, there were nine. *Billboard's* main country chart includes data from online streaming services, which means that crossover hits do especially well. (Country charts traditionally reflected the tastes of the country audience in particular; online, everyone who listens to a country song counts equally.) According to the *Billboard* chart, "Give It All We Got Tonight" was only a No. 7 hit, despite all the special pleading. But, according to the promotional materials, the *Sixty for Sixty* effort was a success: the song topped a different, more radio-oriented chart just after Strait's sixtieth birthday. For his current Las Vegas concerts, Strait is playing these sixty songs over two nights, which required some extra rehearsals: many of these hits had long ago fallen out of his set lists, even though they were once among the most popular country songs in America. "Some of those songs, I forget about," Strait says. "They just kind of go away after so long."

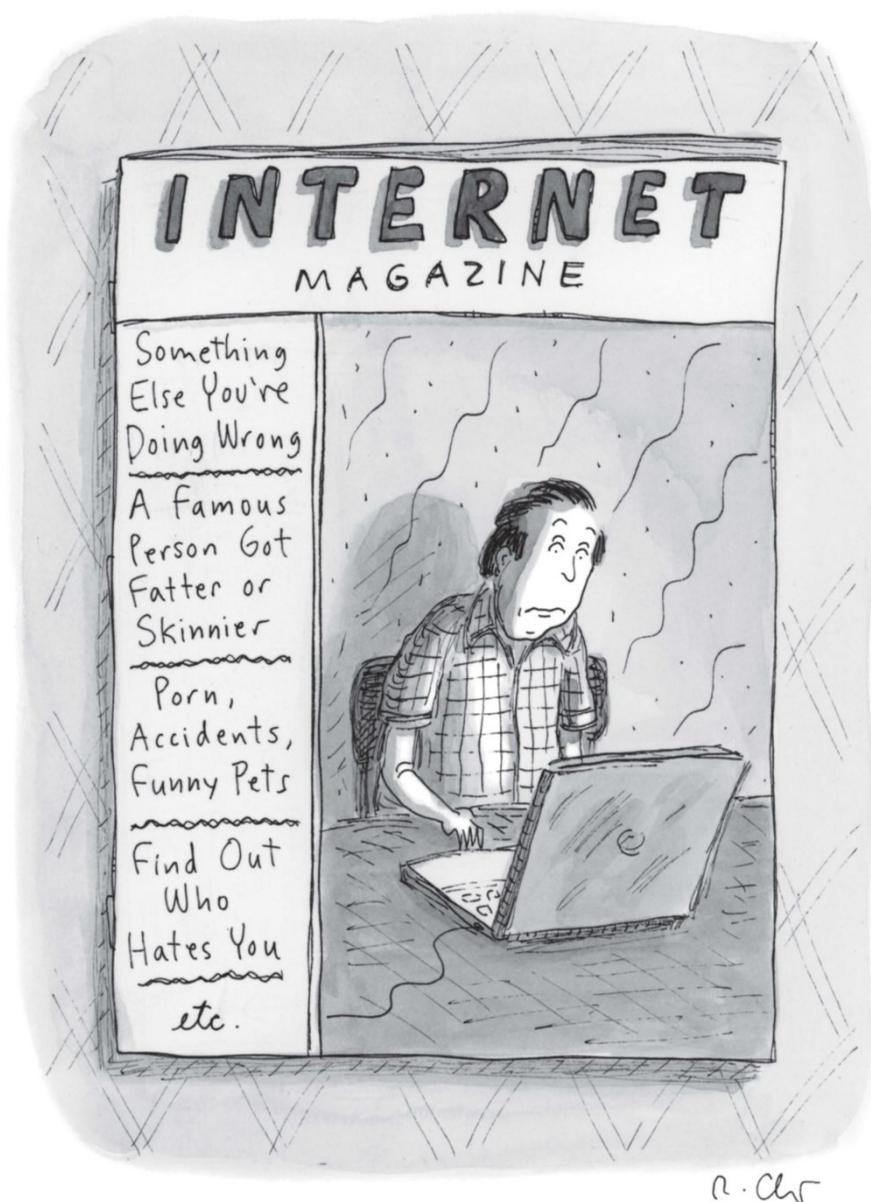
Some people think that Strait's trouble on the radio is simply a function of age. Perhaps his legacy bought him an extra decade or so: Toby Keith and Garth Brooks, who are fifty-five, as well as Alan Jackson, who is fifty-eight, have also largely disappeared from country-radio playlists, with the exception of so-called country-icons stations, which make a point of playing the old stuff. (Earlier this year, when a radio station in Corpus Christi adopted the icons format, it announced itself by broadcasting nothing but George Strait for an entire weekend.) Strait's decision to stop touring was probably a factor, too: radio stations love playing songs by singers who are coming to town.

Among radio executives, conventional wisdom holds that old listeners

have more patience for young singers than young listeners have for old singers. Tony Brown, the producer, thinks that Strait has hit a generational wall. "He could cut 'Amarillo by Morning' today, for the first time, and they wouldn't play it," Brown says. "It's not because of his voice or the song. It's because they want to play a younger demographic." But it's true, too, that the genre has evolved in a way that makes Strait seem like an outlier. Hat acts have given way to what Brown calls "cap acts": younger, more frolicsome singers like Sam Hunt, whose latest single, "Body Like a Back Road," has been *Billboard's* country No. 1 for most of 2017. Many of these songs hint at hip-hop, through thumping beats or added syncopation in the vocal line—the next phase, perhaps, of the country-rhythm revolution begun by Bob Wills, in 1944.

As radio stations have lost interest in Strait, Strait is trying to figure out how he feels about them. He has started writing again, often with his son, Bubba, who quit roping so that he could settle down and join the other family business. Last year, Strait released an unusually acerbic song called "Kicked Outta Country," which he co-wrote. The song pays tribute to George Jones, Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and Johnny Cash, singers whose legends endured even when their radio careers did not: "They lived what they wrote, and they wrote what they sang / And getting kicked outta country didn't hurt a thing." (During concerts, Strait sings it with a smile, as if to reassure fans that the whole thing is just a misunderstanding.)

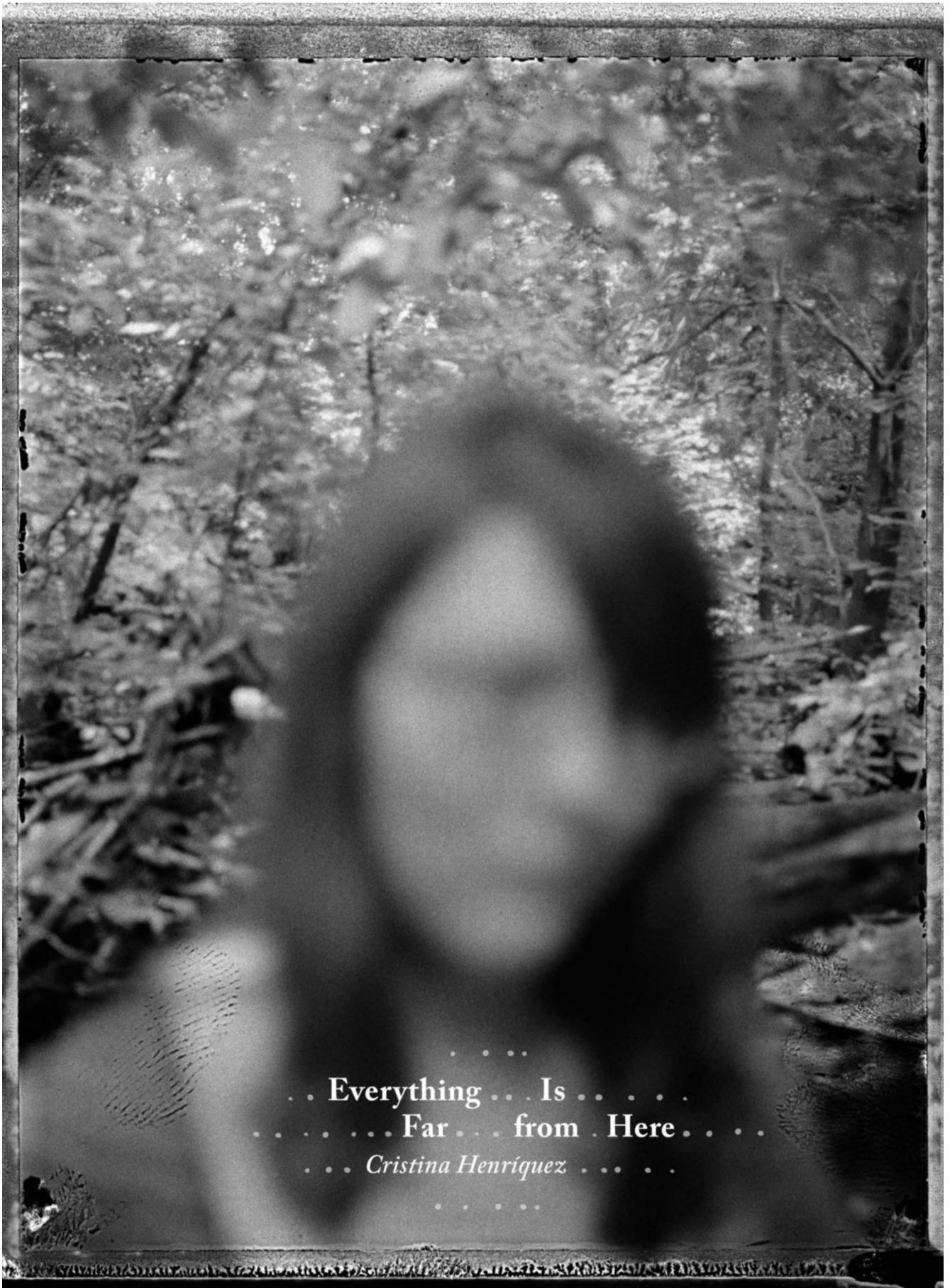
Strait's country heroes were, virtually without exception, outlandish characters, going all the way back to Bob Wills, who once reconciled with one of his many wives in the middle of a court hearing during which they were supposed to be discussing an annulment. "Kicked Outta Country" is in part a chronicle of the kind of bad behavior that captures fans' imaginations. "Cash stomped out the footlights," Strait sings, evoking the famous moment, in 1965, when Cash threw a tantrum on the Grand Ole Opry stage. Nowadays, just about everyone venerates Johnny Cash, even



people who can name only a few of his songs. (If a rodeo played nothing but Johnny Cash for a whole weekend, people would definitely notice—and possibly object.) Strait, by contrast, is beloved both in theory and in practice. His brilliant, steady career was surely enabled by his disciplined disinclination to live out his music, and by his methodical approach to finding and recording great material. The result is a relative paucity of memorable stories, and an absolute surfeit of memorable songs—more, surely, than would exist if Strait had been less single-minded.

When Strait performed in Las Vegas, earlier this year, he made a point of including a recent single, "Goin',

Goin', Gone," a breezy account of how to lose a weekend, which failed to conquer the airwaves. "This next song was actually released on the radio," he said. "I never heard it." It was a complaint, delivered in good humor. But, for anyone skeptical about the abiding power and relevance of radio, this moment provided proof. Most of the people in the arena showed no signs of knowing the words; radio hadn't played it, so they hadn't memorized it. No matter: there were more than a dozen hits left for Strait to sing before he departed the stage, only and inevitably to be brought back for an encore. "Thank you very much," he said, when he returned. "I think we got a few more in us." ♦



. . .
Everything . . . Is
. . . Far . . . from . Here
Cristina Henríquez
. . .

NOOR

On the first day, there's a sense of relief. There are other feelings, too, but relief is among them. She has arrived, at least. After three weeks. After a broken sandal strap, sunburn on her cheeks, mud in her ears, bugs in her hair, blisters around her ankles, bruises on her hips, boiled eggs, bottled water, sour berries, pickup trucks and train cars and footsteps through the dirt, sunrises and sunsets, nagging doubt and crackling hope—she has arrived.

They tell her to sleep, but that can't be right. First she has to find her son, who is supposed to be here, too. They were separated along the way, overnight, a few days ago. The man who was leading them here divided the group. Twelve people drew too much attention, he claimed. He had sectioned off the women, silencing any protest with the back of his hand, swift to the jaw. "Do you want to get there or not?" They did. "Trust me," he said.

He sent a friend to escort them. When she glanced back, she felt a shove between her shoulder blades. "It's only for a few miles," he hissed in her ear. "Walk."

By morning, the men were gone, the children gone. The friend, a man with sunglasses and a chipped front tooth, said, "I am here to take care of you." What he meant was that they were there to take care of him. Four women. Which they did. Which they were made to do.

"Where is my son?" she asks a guard who speaks Spanish. He shrugs in reply. "¿Mi hijo?" she asks anyone who will listen and many who won't. "He's five years old. He has black hair, parted on one side, and a freckle, right here, under his eye. He was wearing a Spider-Man shirt." People just shake their heads.

"There's a family unit," one woman says, pointing down the hall. "They have cribs," she adds, as if that's something.

In the family unit, which is one large room, she searches every crib. She gazes down at infants and eight-year-olds curled against the bars. She scans the faces of the children watching "Dora the Explorer" on a television set mounted to the wall.

"He's coming," a young mother sitting in the corner assures her. She has a child on her lap. "The same thing happened to me. The kids just take longer. They don't walk as fast. Mine got here a whole week after I did. Everyone makes it eventually."

She wants to believe that's true.

The first night, she lies in a bed and listens to the noises of the women in the room with her. Dozens of them. They're stacked neatly in bunk beds, like bodies in a morgue, and she stares at the bowing mattress above her, the straining metal coils, worried that they will not hold. She considers the possibility that the gray-haired woman who clambered up there earlier and who is snoring there now might fall through and crush her to death. She begins to laugh. What if? After everything? What if that's how it ends? The sound of her laughter blooms in the dark. From across the room, a voice asks, "What the fuck is so funny?"

They let her store: her clothes, her broken leather sandals, a plastic comb, an elastic hair band. They let her keep: the silver wedding ring she still wears even though her husband died four years ago. They take: her pocketknife (no weapons), a sleeve of Maria cookies (no food), a tin of Vaseline (no reason).

In the morning, there's a count. In the evening, there will be another. The guards yank the beige sheet off her bed, balloon it dramatically in the air. "Forty-eighteen, clear!" They move down the line.

It's a warehouse, this place: cement floors, fluorescent tube lights in the ceiling, flyers taped to the painted cinder-block walls—ads for phone services, for immigration attorneys, for psychologists. She takes it all in.

After the inspection, she returns to the processing desk, near the front of the facility. Through the windows she can see a chain-link fence topped with a confection of barbed wire and, just beyond it, an open field speckled with wildflowers and long grass and a few broad trees.

"My son?" she asks the woman sit-

ting at the desk. "Gabriel Rivas? Did he get here yet?"

The woman consults her computer. "Sorry," she says. "No one by that name."

She stares at the woman, unsure of what to say.

"Did you check the family area?" the woman asks.

They get one hour to eat. Hash browns and syrup for breakfast. Chicken broth and French fries for lunch. Turkey cutlets and potato dumplings for dinner. So many potatoes. It's a world made of potatoes. There is water to drink, but it tastes like chlorine, and it makes her nauseous.

They take showers in the trailers. The guards control when the water turns on and when it turns off. Soap bubbles skim across the floor.

In the bathroom, which is in a separate trailer, she wads up toilet paper and stuffs it into her underwear. A woman next to her notices.

"Talk to Esme," she says. "She'll hook you up."

She finds Esme in the dayroom, watching TV. Esme offers to sell her a tampon for a dollar, money she doesn't have.

Esme is unsympathetic. She purses her lips. "At least you got your period," she says. "Many of us don't, you know, after what they do. We get pregnant instead."

She marks the days on her arm. A small dot on the inside of her wrist becomes a trail, then a winding chain.

Periodically, new people arrive, escorted by border-patrol agents. A few every week. She watches them with their tattered backpacks, the children with stuffed animals in their arms. When the weather turns cold, people are wrapped in foil blankets as they trudge up the walk.

"Did you see a little boy?" she asks every new arrival. "A boy who looks like me?"

The people glance at her with weary, red-rimmed eyes. Some of them shake their heads. One after the other, none of them him.

What if she's forgotten what he looks like? What if she's gone crazy? What

if he's here, lying in one of those cribs, and she sees him every single day without realizing he's her son? What if it's been too long? What if memory fails? What if everything fails, and getting through life is simply learning to cope with the failure? No, she scolds herself. Don't think like that. Don't let yourself give way.

A woman named Alicia arrives from El Salvador with her six-year-old daughter in tow. They sleep in the bed together. They shower together. The girl won't leave her mother's side.

"She's nervous," Alicia says, as if there's a need to explain. "It was a terrible trip."

"Yes."

"We're going to find her father in Minnesota."

"But this is Texas."

"Is it far?"

And how, she wonders, does she answer a question like that. Is it far? Everything is far from here, even if it's only across the street.

She meets with a lawyer, a man in a stained tan sports coat. She asks him how long she'll be here. She asks him

what happens after this. "*Eso depende*" is his answer to both. Then: "Tell me everything. They'll need to determine if you qualify for asylum, if you have credible fear." And though she doesn't want to relive it, she tells him about the day, a few months ago now, that the boys—boys whose mothers she knew from the neighborhood—pushed her off a moving bus and dragged her across a busy intersection, how she kept scrabbling her legs under her to try to stand, and how they kicked her to keep her down. How nobody helped her, how nobody stopped them because nobody knows how to stop boys like that. How they made her kneel in the alley behind the fruit store while they held a gun to her head and all took turns, how they put the gun in her mouth and made her suck that, too, and how when they were finished they said, "You're in the family now, bitch," and laughed.

"Why do you think they targeted you?" the lawyer asks.

"I was alone."

"You're not married?"

"Not anymore."

"And you're pretty."

She narrows her eyes.

"And men—"

"They were boys."

"Even more so. We have an expression here: Boys will be boys."

She feels a rising anger.

"If we go back," she says evenly, "they will do it again."

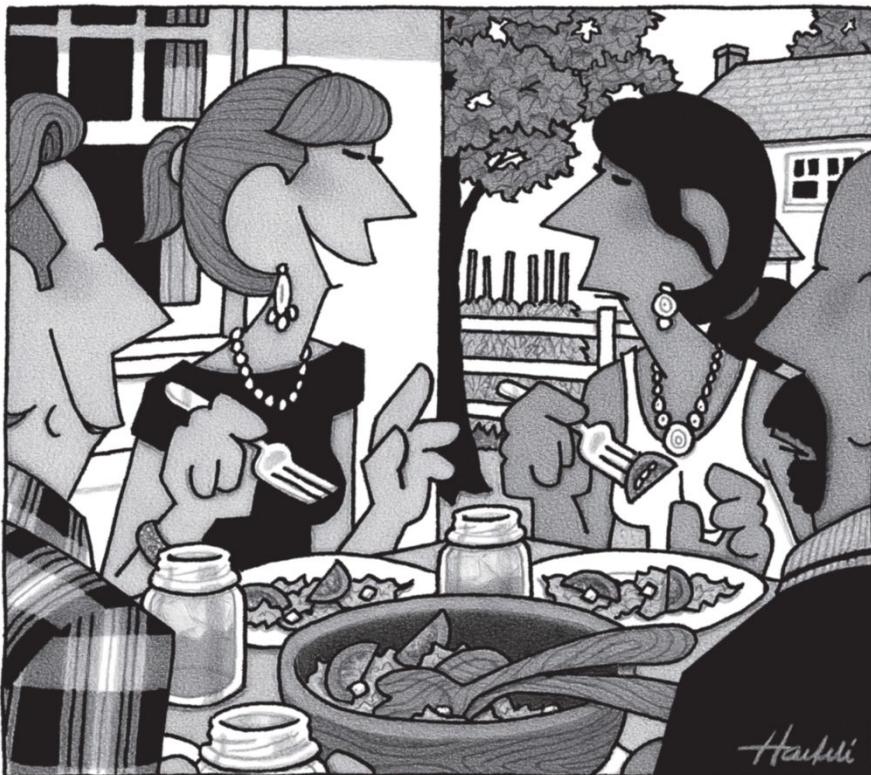
"We?" he asks. "Is there someone else?"

"My son," she starts, but her voice breaks. She clenches her fists. She digs her nails into her palms, determined not to cry.

At night, lying in her bunk atop the beige sheet, she imagines running back the way she came, retracing her steps through the dirt and the weeds until she finds him standing in the overgrowth somewhere, hungry and cold. She wants to gather him up, to hold him close, to smell the apricot-sweetness of his skin, to feel the fuzz of his ear against her cheek, to say I'm sorry I'm sorry—for what? Had she wanted too much? Safety for herself and for him? Was that too much? It hadn't seemed like it at the time, but if she hadn't wanted it they never would have left, and if they had never left she never would have lost him. She wouldn't have lost everything.

Often now, she wants to scream. Sometimes she does, and then the guards come to restrain her. They hold her arms behind her back. They drag her down the hall and put her in a room, a colorless box with spiders in the corners, until she calms down. But that's going in the wrong direction. The scream is for help, not for hindrance. Why don't they understand? The woman in the box next to hers is there because she threw up. To throw up is to disobey orders. You disobey, you get the box. The guards think: The smaller the box, the more we can control them. But everyone else knows: The smaller the box, the more out of control people become.

One day, when the air is damp and the sky is mottled and gray, there's a protest. People outside hold signs that say "ILLEGAL IS A CRIME" and "SEND THEM BACK WITH BIRTH CONTROL." People hold American flags over their shoulders like capes. Superhero Americans.



"The tomatoes came from our neighbor's garden. Please don't tell him."

She imagines them at home in their living rooms, a bowl of dog food by the door, a cup of cold tea that has steeped too long on the counter. She imagines them laying the poster board on the floor, uncapping markers, drawing the letters, coloring them in.

Esme lost her baby. She left that part out.

“She had a miscarriage a few weeks after she got here,” a woman named Marta tells her. “*Gracias a Dios* that she didn’t have to carry it to term. Her body released its own pain.” Marta stops and shakes her head. “They don’t take care of nobody in here, see. They don’t care who we are. It’s easier to fuck somebody than to give a fuck, you know?”

One morning, a woman in a pale-pink T-shirt approaches her in the cafeteria while she’s getting a tray.

“I heard you were looking for your son,” she says quietly.

She looks at the woman—she can’t help it—with delirious hope.

“I might know something,” the woman says.

“Like what?” Her heart pounds. She can hear the echo of it deep in her ears, even amid the clatter and scrape of silverware, the grumble of voices around them.

“Your ring,” the woman says.

For a moment, she’s confused, but then she understands. “Tell me,” she says.

The woman nods at the ring.

“Tell me first.”

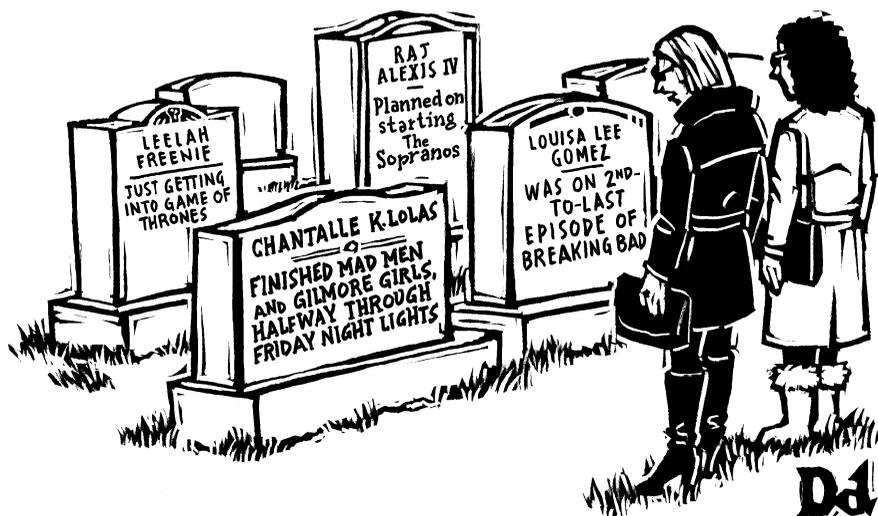
A smile spreads like an oil slick across the woman’s face, but she doesn’t speak.

She keeps her eyes on the woman, her round face and her widow’s peak, as she touches the ring on her finger. It’s looser now than when she arrived. She twists it gently and slides it off. She closes her hand around it. When she gives it to the woman, she feels part of herself go numb.

“Tell me,” she says again.

The woman fits the ring over the tip of her thumb. “I heard about a boy they found on the side of the road,” she says. “They took him to a hospital in Laredo.”

“How old?”



“They still had so much TV ahead of them.”

“Ten?”

She forces herself to swallow. “No,” she says weakly. “My son is younger.”

“Oh, is he?”

She nods.

“Sorry,” the woman says. “I thought maybe it was him.”

She loses track of the dots. She loses track of herself.

Alicia and her daughter are released. Marta is sent back. She doesn’t see Esme again.

And yet. Every day she waits for him by the front door. She sits on the floor, knitting her fingers in her lap.

And then—

“Gabriel!”

She scrambles to her feet. Mixed up in a tangle of people, there he is. His dark, combed hair, the freckle beneath his eye. God in Heaven! It’s him! She lunges forward and wrests him from the crowd. She falls to her knees and pulls him into her arms. She’s so flooded with shock and gratitude that she can hardly breathe. Her nose in his hair, the smell of him almost unbearably sweet. Her hands cupping his shoulders, those same slight shoulders, as small and breakable as eggs. “Gabriel,” she whispers again and again. She can feel him shuddering. “It’s O.K.,” she tells him through tears.

Around her there is cheering. Or

is it shouting? Why is everyone shouting? A woman’s voice saying, “Don’t touch my boy! Mateo!” And why does she feel hands on her now, prying her away, tugging her back as she reaches for him—isn’t it him? isn’t it? but it looked so much like him!—hands that carry her down the hall, hands that shove her into a room, hands that turn the key in the lock.

She crumples to the floor and blinks in the dark. From inside the box, she screams.

And then one day there are leaves on the trees, and wild-magnolia blossoms on the branches, bobbing gently in the breeze. She will stay in this place, she tells herself, until he comes. Through the window in the dayroom, she watches the white petals tremble, and, in a gust, a single blossom is torn off a branch. The petals blow apart, swirling, and drift to the ground.

She closes her eyes. Where has she gone and what has she become? The blisters have healed, the bruises have faded, the evidence has vanished—everything dissolves like sugar in water. It’s easy to let that happen, so much easier to give in, to be who they want you to be: a thing that flares apart in the tumult, a thing that surrenders to the wind. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Cristina Henríquez on missing names.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

STIR IT UP

The battle over Bob Marley.

BY HUA HSU

When Bob Marley died, on May 11, 1981, at the age of thirty-six, he did not leave behind a will. He had known that the end was near. Seven months earlier, he had collapsed while jogging in Central Park. Melanoma, which was first diagnosed in 1977 but left largely untreated, had spread throughout his body. According to Danny Sims, Marley's manager at the time, a doctor at Sloan Kettering said that the singer had "more cancer in him than I've seen with a live human being." As Sims recalled, the doctor estimated that Marley had just a few months to live, and that "he might as well go back out on the road and die there."

Marley played his final show on September 23, 1980, in Pittsburgh. During the sound check, he sang Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" over and over. He asked a close friend to stay near the stage and watch him, in case anything happened. The remaining months of his life were an extended farewell, as he sought treatment, first in Miami and then in New York. Cindy Breakspere, Marley's main companion in the mid-seventies, remembered his famed dreadlocks becoming too heavy for his weakened frame. One night, she and a group of women in Marley's orbit, including his wife, Rita (to whom he had remained married, despite it being years since they were faithful to one another), gathered to light candles, read passages from the Bible, and cut his dreadlocks off.

Drafting a will was probably the last thing on Marley's mind as his body, which he had carefully maintained with

long afternoons of soccer, rapidly broke down. Marley was a Rastafarian, subscribing to a millenarian, Afrocentric interpretation of Scripture that took hold in Jamaica in the nineteen-thirties. By conventional Western standards, the Rastafarian movement can seem both uncompromising (it espouses fairly conservative views on gender and requires a strict, all-natural diet) and appealingly lax (it has a communal ethos, which often involves liberal ritual use of marijuana). For Marley, dealing with his estate probably signified a surrender to the forces of Babylon, the metaphorical site of oppression and Western materialism that Rastas hope to escape. When he died, in Miami, his final words to his son Stephen were "Money can't buy life."

"This will business is a big insult," Marley's mother, Cedella Booker, told a Washington *Post* reporter in 1991, as his estate navigated its latest set of legal challenges. "God never limit nobody! Jah never make no will!" Neville Garrick, a close friend who designed many of Marley's album covers, mused in the 2012 documentary "Marley" that it may have been the singer's final test, one in which "everybody reveal who they really were, you get me? Who really did love him, who fighting over the money." It would have been out of character for Marley to neatly divvy up his property. "Bob left it open."

No one metric captures the scale of Bob Marley's legend except, perhaps, the impressive range of items adorned with his likeness. There are T-shirts, hats, posters, tapestries, skate-

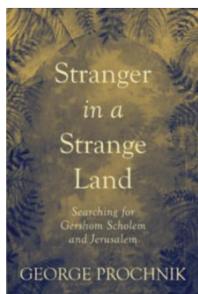
board decks, headphones, speakers, turntables, bags, watches, pipes, lighters, ashtrays, key chains, backpacks, scented candles, room mist, soap, hand cream, lip balm, body wash, coffee, dietary-supplement drinks, and cannabis (whole flower, as well as oil) that bear some official relationship with the Marley estate. There are also lava lamps, iPhone cases, mouse pads, and fragrances that do not. In 2016, *Forbes* calculated that Marley's estate brought in twenty-one million dollars, making him the year's sixth-highest-earning "dead celebrity," and unauthorized sales of Marley music and merchandise have been estimated to generate more than half a billion dollars a year, though the estate disputes this.

Inevitably, the contention over the estate mirrors the larger struggle over the legacy—over the meanings of Marley. The accounting of merchandise and money might feel like a distortion of Marley's legacy, of his capacity to take the lives of those who suffered and struggled and turn them into poetry. But the range of Marley paraphernalia also illustrates the nature of his appeal. He became a way of seeing the world. Although he adhered to an ordered, religious belief system for most of his life, praising Jah, the Rastafarian name for God, whenever he could, he came to embody an alternative to orthodoxy. His lyrics lent themselves to a kind of universalist reading of exodus and liberation. He was one of the first pop stars who could be converted

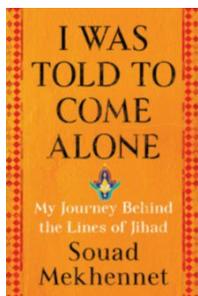
Marley became a symbol of peace and unity; some of his less accommodating bandmates thought justice mattered more.



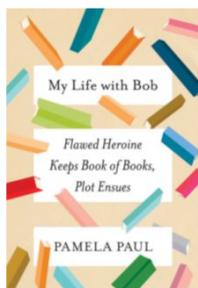
BRIEFLY NOTED



Stranger in a Strange Land, by *George Prochnik (Other)*. Gershom Scholem, the renowned historian and theologian, was instrumental in the formation of twentieth-century Zionism and played a crucial role in revitalizing Jewish mysticism. He was also a fractious man of “unrepentant multiplicity,” and once fancied himself the Messiah. Entwining memoir with biography, Prochnik skillfully chronicles Scholem’s intellectual and personal life, including his passionate friendship with Walter Benjamin; his 1923 emigration from Berlin to Jerusalem; and his ambivalent attitude toward the evolution of Zionism, which eventually, he believed, “triumphed itself to death.” Prochnik’s account of his own sojourn in Jerusalem illuminates the ongoing struggle to reconcile Zionist ideals with political realities and to envision possibilities for breaking “the spell of hopelessness” in a divided land.



I Was Told to Come Alone, by *Souad Mekhennet (Henry Holt)*. This profoundly pessimistic memoir about fifteen years of reporting on global jihad and the war on terror brims with hair-raising, saddening, and often absurd stories. But it is most notable for Mekhennet’s interest in the vexing issue of authorship, and the presumption required to tell someone else’s story. Born in Germany, of Moroccan-Turkish descent, Mekhennet grew up obsessed with the Holocaust and terrified that it could recur, with European Muslims as the victims. Fluent in Arabic, she forged connections with reclusive militant sources, but she detected, among colleagues, mistrust of her loyalties. Hurt and insulted, she identifies with the “alienation and rejection that so many Muslims in Europe were feeling.”



My Life with Bob, by *Pamela Paul (Henry Holt)*. At seventeen, Paul, now the editor of the *Times Book Review*, began listing every book she read in a diary that she nicknamed the “Book of Books”—Bob, for short. (The first entry was Kafka’s “The Trial.”) Bob becomes a memory keeper, not so much of the books—Paul confesses to having trouble remembering details of plot and character—as of the personal associations they hold for her, such as the place where she read them or the people she was with at the time. Paul approaches books with tenderness, desire, insecurity, and, always, ambition. When she meets the sententiously erudite man who will become her first husband, she thinks, “Marrying him would be like uploading an entirely new database to my brain.”



Too Much and Not the Mood, by *Durga Chew-Bose (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. The animating force of this debut essay collection, which takes its title from a line in a 1931 diary entry by Virginia Woolf, is the “sheer, ensorcelled panic of feeling moved.” With prose that revisits and revises itself, Chew-Bose considers daughterhood and female friendship; intimacy and solitude; the tug of ancestry and the experience of being a first-generation Canadian. Sharp visual details—shadows moving across the walls of a room, Sharon Stone’s shoulders, the distribution of votive candles in a restaurant—give structure to essays that seek to evoke “the baggy fit of feelings before they’ve found their purpose.”

into a life style. Bob left that open, too.

In “So Much Things to Say: The Oral History of Bob Marley” (Norton), the reggae historian and collector Roger Steffens estimates that at least five hundred books have been written about Marley. There are books interpreting his lyrics and collecting his favorite Bible passages, parsing his relationship to the Rastafarian religion and his status as a “postcolonial idol,” reconstructing his childhood in Jamaica and investigating the theory that his death was the result of a C.I.A. assassination effort. His mother and his wife have written memoirs about living with him, as have touring musicians who were only briefly proximate to his genius. He has inspired countless works of fiction and poetry, and his later years provided the basic outline for parts of Marlon James’s prize-winning 2014 novel, “A Brief History of Seven Killings.” Steffens’s “So Much Things to Say” isn’t even the first book about Marley to borrow its title from the 1977 song; Don Taylor, one of his former managers, published a book with the same title, in 1995.

Steffens was introduced to reggae in 1973, after buying a Bob Marley album. In 1976, he made the first of many trips to Kingston, Jamaica, in search of records and lore, and two years later he co-founded “Reggae Beat,” a long-running radio show on Santa Monica’s KCRW. Being an early adopter paid off. Six weeks after the show’s premiere, Island Records offered him a chance to go on the road with Marley for the “Survival” tour. In 1981, Steffens co-founded a reggae-and-world-music magazine, *The Beat*, which was published for nearly thirty years; in 1984, he was invited to convene the first Grammy committee for reggae music. Steffens has made a career out of being a completist, amassing one of the most impressive collections of reggae ephemera on the planet, overseeing a comprehensive collection of Marley’s early work (the eleven-disk “The Complete Bob Marley & the Wailers 1967-1972”), and co-writing the exhaustive 2005 “Bob Marley and the Wailers: The Definitive Discography.”

At this point, books about Marley

tend to be self-conscious about the risks of further mythologizing him, even if they end up doing so anyway. Steffens tries to avoid this by framing “So Much Things to Say” as four hundred pages of “raw material,” drawing from interviews he conducted over three decades with more than seventy of Marley’s bandmates, family members, lovers, and confidantes, some of whom have rarely spoken on the record. Occasionally, excerpts from interviews and articles from other authors are reprinted, too. What emerges isn’t a different Marley so much as one who feels a bit more human, given to moments of diffidence and whim, whose every decision doesn’t feel freighted with potentially world-historical significance.

Marley was born on February 6, 1945, to Norval and Cedella Marley. Cedella was eighteen at the time, a native of Nine Mile, a rural village with no electricity or running water. Little is known about Norval, an older white man who had come to Cedella’s village to oversee the subdivision of its lands for veterans’ housing. He was, according to a member of the white Marley family, “seriously unstable,” rarely seeing Cedella and Bob before he died, of a heart attack, in 1955, at the age of seventy.

Because of Bob’s mixed blood, he was often teased as “the little yellow boy” or “the German boy.” He was described as shy, resourceful, and clever. In 1957, Marley and his mother moved to Kingston, settling in a dense, ramshackle neighborhood referred to as Trench Town. Marley fell in with a crowd that dreamed of making music. He formed a group with Neville (Bunny Wailer) Livingston, Peter Tosh, Beverley Kelso, and Junior Braithwaite. They eventually called themselves the Wailers, and their sound fused American-style soul harmonies with the island’s jumpy ska rhythms. Under the guidance of Joe Higgs, a singer and producer, the Wailers were a local sensation by the mid-sixties. But island stardom brought little financial security. After moving briefly to Wilmington, Delaware, where his mother had relocated, Marley returned to the Wailers in 1969, just in time for a revolution in Jamaican music: the jolting, horn-inflected styles of ska and rock-



“Quick! Toss me the stalest one you’ve got!”

steady were slowing down. Reggae was the new craze.

The Wailers continued to record and tour in the early nineteen-seventies. A brief but fruitful collaboration with the eccentric producer Lee (Scratch) Perry produced two outstanding albums, “Soul Rebels” (1970) and “Soul Revolution” (1971). Beyond a novelty hit or two, cracking the international market remained a distant dream for reggae artists. The distinctive rhythms had crept into American pop music in other forms, though. The influential American funk drummer Bernard (Pretty) Purdie credits studio sessions he played with the Wailers for the “reggae feel” he brought to early-seventies Aretha Franklin classics—“Rock Steady” and “Daydreaming”—and the American singer Johnny Nash introduced a pop-reggae sensibility in the late sixties and early seventies, with hits like “Hold Me Tight” and “I Can See Clearly Now.”

Nash had gone to Jamaica in search of new sounds and collaborators, and he soon came to recognize it as a hotbed of talent. He took Marley and the Wailers under his wing, bringing them on as an opening act during an English tour in late 1970. But Nash left them stranded there. Unhappy with the direction of their careers, they

sought out Chris Blackwell, the owner of Island Records. Blackwell, who was raised in Jamaica, had started his label as a way of exporting the popular music he had grown up with. He gave the band money to return to Jamaica and to record its next album. A slow-burning masterpiece full of spiritual lyricism and expansive grooves, “Catch a Fire” (1973) marked a turning point for the reggae album—as did the decision to appeal to rock fans by adding guitar solos and synthesizer to the album’s final mix.

There are a few reasons that oral history has become the preferred format for revisiting the recent past. It’s designed to provide open-ended, immersive filibusters, balancing projection with hazy memory, marquee voices with obscure bystanders, a charismatic superstar with the accountant who kept the operation afloat. At a time when quick takes abound, the labor-intensive nature of the form, as well as the seeming lack of a writerly voice or perspective, gives the impression of relating everyone’s side. It’s the perfect approach in the age of the data dump, a way of making room for readers to sift through materials, discover their own resonances, and, in the case of “So Much Things to Say,” decide

which shady, finger-pointing label boss or business manager to trust.

Steffens generally resists hagiography. Kelso, one of Marley's lifelong confidantes, suggested that he was occasionally "rough" toward Rita, and that she nearly divorced him. Joe Higgs, the Wailers' early mentor, contends that Marley's mother—one of his biggest advocates after his death—was largely absent during his formative years as an artist, and wanted him to become a welder. Steffens also reprints Archbishop Abuna Yesheq's oft-repeated but never verified claim to have baptized Marley at the end of his life, which would have been a betrayal of his Rastafarian faith.

In one particularly engrossing section, Steffens confronts Carl Colby, a documentary filmmaker who had surprisingly unfettered access to Marley in the mid-seventies. Colby, whose father was the C.I.A. director William Colby, is at the center of a few far-fetched Marley-related conspiracy theories. Some people believe that Carl Colby dispatched the gunmen who opened fire on Marley's home in 1976, shortly before he was scheduled to play a peace concert organized by the Jamaican prime minister, Michael Manley, who was seen as an enemy of American interests. There are those who think Colby gave Marley a "poisoned boot" that supposedly caused his cancer. Colby denies the allegations.

In contrast to other popular Marley books, in which every detail merely

anticipates the singer's eventual breakthrough, Steffens's contribution is his nerdish monomania. Timothy White's "Catch a Fire," published in 1983, remains the gateway biography for the Marley-curious in part because it reads like a novel, full of high-stakes stand-offs and tense dialogue. In "So Much Things to Say," Steffens fixes on more mundane details: the date and the location of recording sessions, the exact occupation of Marley's estranged father (a "ferro-cement engineer," not a naval officer, as is often reported), the jug of mysterious juice that Marley toured with late in life. Steffens is largely here to direct traffic. But his authority derives from exhausting every possibility. Two people, for example, offer equally vivid memories of Marley writing "I Shot the Sheriff." A former lover claims that the song is an allegory about birth control; one of Marley's white friends describes it as a private joke they had "about him hanging out with this white guy, me."

The book's drama accumulates around the question of what set Marley apart from his bandmates Livingston and Tosh, who many in "So Much Things to Say" thought were at least as talented. Colin Leslie, Marley's business manager, suggests that one advantage Marley had was that "he had spent time in America, in Delaware, and he was exposed to industry and the corporate world." He returned with a sense of "how things should be ordered in business." Perhaps it was Mar-

ley's desire for a broader, more stable platform that allowed him to accept concessions that others rejected. The original Wailers broke up, in 1974, because Livingston balked at Blackwell's suggestion that they begin playing underground "freak clubs." In Livingston's mind, their music was "for children now," not for gays or people who tinkered with synthetic drugs. Though Livingston was ousted from the band, he was at peace with his stance: "I felt good because I wasn't going to wallow in no shit."

Tosh left, too, fed up with Blackwell's relentless "fuckery." (Tosh also accused Marley of siding with Blackwell because he was half white.) In 1974, Marley reemerged with a new album, "Natty Dread," credited to his newly reconfigured band, Bob Marley and the Wailers. In the eyes of many, Blackwell had finally succeeded in breaking apart the band's core; it was easier to promote Marley than Livingston, with his unrelenting faith, or Tosh, a provocateur fond of referring to the owner of Island Records as Chris "Whitewell" or "Whiteworst." As Marley's solo career took off, Higgs, who briefly joined his touring band, came to see him as a bit of a "user." Lee Jaffe, known as "the white Wailer" because he was one of the few white people in the group's inner sanctum, recalls that his friendship with Marley nearly ended when Marley refused to stand up to his label, which changed the spelling of his album title from "Knotty Dread" to "Natty Dread" against his wishes.

There's an argument that the Wailers' true visionary was Peter Tosh, not Bob Marley. Where Marley became a symbol of peace and unity for a troubled nation, Tosh remained combative and politically militant. After the gunmen shot up his home, Marley moved to England in a kind of self-imposed exile. He returned to Jamaica two years later, to headline the One Love concert, which was an attempt to bring the country together while a bloody political war raged in the streets. In the middle of the song "Jammin'," Marley invited the rival party leaders Michael Manley and Edward Seaga onstage, and the three of them



"I'm sorry—I can barely hear you with this goddam ocean behind me."

held their hands up together. It was a powerful image. But for Tosh, who had been onstage hours earlier and blasted both parties, what Jamaicans needed was not peace but justice. “Peace is death,” he later explained. “Your passport to heaven. Most people don’t know that.” Unity was false hope.

In the mid-seventies, Marley found audiences far beyond the “sufferers” of Trench Town. One of his friends contends that the singer drifted “a little to the right of the Jamaican political spectrum as he came closer and closer to the white and brown Jamaican elite.” Don Taylor, his former manager, says that Blackwell turned Marley into “a beggar of the jet set.” Still, Marley was entering spaces unimaginable to previous generations of Jamaicans who, like him, had come from nothing. He lived down the road from the Prime Minister. He had brought Rastafari, long seen as an outlaw cult, into the mainstream. And he gave freely to those in need. Judy Mowatt, a member of the I-Three, Marley’s backing vocalists, explains that he had come to view himself as the reincarnation of the Biblical Joseph, who had provided corn to the children of Israel during the famine. “We see the work that Bob come back to do now, that he has regathered his people, and he’s feeding the people with a more spiritual corn in this time.”

Yet Marley was troubled by the demographics of his growing number of disciples. In September, 1980, he arrived in New York. He was touring “Uprising,” his most religious album yet. He was scheduled to open for the Commodores at Madison Square Garden—a strange booking, given that Marley himself was world famous. He had already played more than thirty dates in Europe, including a concert at Milan’s San Siro stadium that drew a hundred and twenty thousand people—more than the Pope had drawn a week earlier. The Commodores, meanwhile, were on the downside of a career highlighted by the featherweight soul hits “Easy” and “Three Times a Lady.” But they still drew the predominantly African-American audience that Marley craved. His failure to dent the black-radio market in America had been one of the lingering frustrations of his career.

Part of this failure had been by design. In the seventies, Blackwell marketed Marley to white, college-educated rock fans and maturing hippies, who were drawn to reggae as earthy and authentic. But in return for performing with the Commodores, Frankie Crocker, arguably the most powerful black-radio d.j. and programmer of the late seventies, promised that his station would play Marley’s new single, “Could You Be Loved,” every hour on the hour for three months. And Marley, who was sandwiched on the bill between Kurtis Blow and the Commodores, was confident that his live show would eviscerate everyone else’s. He was right. As Alvin (Seeco) Patterson, the Wailers’ drummer, recalls, “I remember when Bob finish, everybody walked out.”

When Marley fell ill a few days later, he was about to sign a monumental new record deal with a ten-million-dollar advance. That didn’t happen. His most famous album was to be “Legend,” a 1984 hits collection released by Island Records, which has become one of the best-selling albums of all time. His role in turning reggae into a worldwide phenomenon is one of the reasons the category of “world music” was invented, in 1987, to help stars break out from beyond America and Europe, many of whom inevitably get described as the Bob Marley of their homeland. And yet much of Marley and the Wailers’ story remains untold. Livingston has never allowed Steffens to turn eighteen hundred pages of interview transcripts into a book. Tosh began committing his life story to audiotape before he was murdered in 1987; the so-called Red X tapes provided the basis for a documentary on Tosh but have otherwise never been released. The struggle over the meanings of Marley remains unresolved, and no doubt unresolvable.

In 1984, just three years after Marley’s death, the Jamaican producer King Jammy and singer Wayne Smith released “Under Mi Sleng Teng,” a groundbreaking dancehall single built on a digital rhythm track. This revo-

lutionary sound, as well as brash new stars like Yellowman, made Marley’s roots-reggae style seem antiquated. In Colin Grant’s “Natural Mystics,” an excellent 2011 book about the Wailers, there’s a scene in which Livingston finds himself on a concert bill alongside Shabba Ranks and Ninjaman, roughneck antiheroes who were known

for their violent, sexually charged lyrics. It’s a world that the Wailers, outlaws in their own day, enabled, but not the one they created. He’s sad and frustrated as the crowd wearies of his slow-burning roots music.

One of the reasons Marley’s life requires the complication Steffens’s book attempts is that the singer became a model for how artistic legacy has turned into an industry of its own. He has become a myth capacious enough to absorb every new revelation. What happened with Marley is what often happens nowadays to charismatic artists who die young: core beliefs are trimmed and edited for accessibility, and a new, simplified consensus forms. A belief system is reduced to a single, strident pose; rebelliousness becomes an untamed essence that travels everywhere, imbuing things, like lighters or headphones, with mystical vibes. Even as the music business shrivels, an artist’s legacy—especially one that is defiant and uplifting—will continue to be a reliable, ever-renewable asset. At least it’s Marley’s family that benefits.

Steffens closes his book with a chapter of friends and collaborators sharing their favorite Marley tunes. It’s a way of creating a “spiritual foundation,” in the words of the Wailers’ guitarist Junior Marvin, that will last for eternity. At the same time, it enables us to imagine Marley’s career as an arc extending through the eighties, the nineties, and beyond. We believe that he wouldn’t have had to change with the times—that he would have resisted whatever was to come, or seen an alternative to it. This is the most intoxicating part of the Marley myth: the dream that someone had the answers; if only he had survived long enough to save us all. ♦



HANDLE WITH CARE

Joshua Cohen's latest novel brings Israeli conflicts to New York.

BY JAMES WOOD



As a form, the novel can never decide quite how stylish it should be. Is it a mirror or a music, a camera or a painting? Is it best designed for the long haul or for fine circular flights? Is it where we make a fetish of the perfect sentence, or a more relaxed religion of the appropriate form? Nabokov liked to dismiss writers who failed the Nabokovian sentence test, such as Camus, Mann, and Stendhal (who indeed likened the novel to a mirror). But the novelist ideally writes in paragraphs and chapters, not in sentences, as Woolf reminded her readers. Novelist form, the accretion of many sentences, must find its own deeper, slower

rhythm. In this regard, Iris Murdoch once divided the twentieth-century novel into the journalistic and the crystalline, and Woolf, the modernist aesthete who also loved Dickens and Scott and Tolstoy, couldn't quite decide whether she liked her novels hospitably journalistic or stylishly crystalline. Like many of us, she wanted different pleasures from different novelists.

Joshua Cohen is an extraordinary prose stylist, surely one of the most prodigious at work in American fiction today. (And he is only thirty-six.) At his best, he resembles Saul Bellow: his sentences are all-season journeyers, able to do everything everywhere at

once. He can be witty, slangy, lyrical, ironic, vivid; he possesses leaping powers of metaphor and analogy. Most writers develop certain talents at the expense of others, but Cohen relishes verbs as much as adjectives, metaphor-making as much as epigram-minting. Style is a patent priority: his fiction displays the stretch marks of its originality. In his new novel, "Moving Kings" (Random House), there are wonderfully strange verbs. In a cab: "The driver rancored away in Arabic, to himself or just a specter." At a party: "A girl brisked over." There are interesting new adjectives (or nouns turned into adjectives): "A hypermarket, a pharmacy, a dun hutish structure topped with a blinking red neon star." And precise metaphorical descriptions, like this one of traffic in Queens: "He turned onto Northern Boulevard heading south. The cars seeped like spread tar and hardened into traffic." Or the heat in Mexico: "The sun was sowing him a migraine." But even when Cohen is not putting out his flags the prose is alert, tense with vitality. Here David King, newly arrived in Israel, prepares to meet his cousins: "The next morning, the second day—the day that God divided the sky from the waters below and so created the conditions for jet-lag—David's cousins were waiting in the lobby."

Cohen is, in fact, a crystalline novelist with a journalistic openness to the world; his stylish sentences are loaded with the refuse of the real, with the facts, social data, and informational surplus of postmodernity. In this will to supreme combination, he resembles Thomas Pynchon (with Joyce the blessed progenitor), or David Foster Wallace. Cohen's previous novel, the massive and massively ambitious "Book of Numbers" (2015), marched, in seven-league boots, over vast terrain: comparative theology, postmodern philosophy, questions of contemporary gender, the monstrous complacencies of the Internet age. As in Wallace's work, there is a recognizable tension between the priority of style and the boisterous claims of the world, a tension as old as realism itself.

There are moments in Cohen's work when his worldly omnivorousness (the desire to cover everything) and his

At thirty-six, Cohen is one of the most prodigious stylists in American fiction.

stylistic talents (the desire to cover everything in the most brilliant style) seem to be running a race with each other. “Book of Numbers” was sometimes hard to read, not because it was incomprehensible or too demanding but because its textures were overwhelming, and because it struggled to find a form that could contain and focus those textures. Cohen’s natural inclination is toward a loquacious, storytelling largesse, but each of his sentences is also a micro-adventure in abundance. Here, in his new novel, he sketches some of the guys who work for David King’s company, King’s Moving. Each brief portrait is a stuffed pantechicon:

 Gyorgi had worked as a mover until he’d touched a female minor who’d clerked at a gypsum sheather in Paterson, served most of a lenient sentence, and was now confined behind a storage cage to be more findable by his parole officer. . . . Ronaldo Rodriguez, AKA Ronriguez, AKA Godriguez, AKA Burrito Ron, earned the last of his nicknames pioneering the technique of taking a customer’s odd loose possessions and rolling them up in a rug for efficiency of transport. He was a squat wide-assed low center of gravity surmounted by a slick pubic moustache. Malcom C, alias Talcum X, powdered his pits to stay dry and his hands to improve his grip. He was bullet bald and jacked, with two additional adductor muscles found in only .006% of the population.

“Moving Kings” also struggles with form, but this may represent a conscious effort on the author’s part at self-contraction. It is relatively brief (two hundred and forty pages), accessible, and more or less conventionally structured; it is highly intelligent but not a novel of ideas, and though its prose does plenty of swaggering, the swagger belongs to the characters—which is to say, most of the novel is written in close third-person or free indirect style, the grammar of everyday contemporary realism. It’s the right style for this novel’s world, which is burly with particularities and vibrant with voice. The atmosphere at times resembles a Jewish “Sopranos,” minus the violence—men, family, moneymaking, muscle. David King, the son of a Jewish immigrant and Holocaust survivor, reared in Queens, owns a successful moving company with storage facilities in all five boroughs. We first encounter him at a fancy fundraiser in the Hamptons, where he stands out like a sweating cart horse among

dry Arabians—bigger, coarser, burdened by work and apprehensions of work: “He moved among the servers who made \$8.75 an hour and so who made about 14 cents, 14.5833 cents, he did the figures in his head, for each minute it took them to carve him primerib or fix him a scotch or direct him and his menthols to a smoking area.”

David King is recognizable enough, if not to the partygoers on Long Island: much less successful at life than at business; cocky, self-reliant, thinly cultured, wounded, comically poor in diet and karma. He has survived a heart attack, a pulverizing divorce from Bonnie, his Christian-convert wife—“Bonnie, the Fordham Road Albanian Orthodox who’d dipped in the mikveh and stepped out dripping for him”—and an affair with Ruth, his office manager. He has witnessed and waited out his daughter Tammy’s drug addiction and recovery, her graduation from N.Y.U. rewarded by the paternal gift of a brownstone in Crown Heights.

Until now, David’s Jewishness has been atavistically reflexive. He has visited Israel from time to time, but hasn’t given the country much concentrated thought, tending to liken its fate to his business prospects: if the core concern is strong, you don’t sweat the smaller stuff, which you can’t do much to influence anyway. That changes in the spring of 2015, after David’s heart attack. His cousin Dina e-mails to ask if he might host (and employ) her son, Yoav, who is finishing his national service in the Israeli Army. David responds from his convalescence in a way that seems forgivably sentimental, if also novelistically convenient. To have Israeli family in America, thinks David, is to have Israel in America: “If he’d stay in touch with Israel, if he’d maintain with Israel, certain responsibilities would devolve on the living after his demise. He was almost sure of it, he almost said it aloud: who among the living was going to shovel the dirt in his grave or say a kaddish? His daughter?”

A certain kind of Jewish novel would proceed to burn this familiar fuel: a father finds a substitute son, a religiously indolent American Jew renovates his ancient inheritance, the tough guy from Queens, getting older and sicker, softens up a bit. Cohen prepares the fire but

proves nicely uninterested in the combustion. Wary of conventional payoffs, or even of conventional rises and falls, he likes to swerve away from a story or a character he has spent many pages establishing, in search of a fresh center of interest. The intermittency can be frustrating. As a novelist, he’s jittery, mobile, always on the prowl for new material, not so much easily distracted as easily consumed, quickly recentered. Once he has set up Yoav’s arrival and David’s soft patriarchal anticipation, he largely moves his focus away from David’s American scene and fills in, at some length, Yoav’s experiences as an Israeli soldier during the 2014 Gaza War.

The maleness of the world remains, but the novel’s energy inevitably changes: instead of Queens and American Jewishness, we get an inspired and troubling account of Yoav’s Army unit. We are introduced to the young men who fought alongside Yoav, in particular his friend Uri Dugri, who saved his life. (Uri eventually joins Yoav in New York, and the two work for King’s Moving.) Cohen writes dispassionately, from within the collective voice of the soldiers, about hardships received and imposed. A tone of defensive cynicism, of macho boredom, brings alive the costs, on both sides of the conflict, of the routinized violence:

 Every once in a while there’d be a midnight run through a village just to light it up. Searching for someone. Or for no one. Finding someone else. Or no one. Going into a house, to surprise the house behind it, to surprise the neighbors nextdoor. Taking the doors off and going room to room. Herding a family into the kitchen and then heading upstairs to ransack the closets and unscrew all the beds nut by bolt. Slashing up the divan in the den and then sitting down on the framed remains to cruise the news on Al Jazeera. . . . Babysitting a son or brother bound to the divan with plasticuffs draining him white and a drenched towel over his face keeping him cool, until the interrogators came. . . . A woman keening in the kitchen to the pitch of boiling water, you shut her up with the butt of your gun. You butted a jug and it sharded apart into archaeology even before it hit the floor.

Yoav and his squad mates are brash, entitled, sardonic. They are also afraid, and tentative about the validity of the very rights they enforce. Assigned to a border checkpoint, Yoav has the uneasy feeling that he has himself become

the border, “dug into the sand along roads rived by rebar and garbled with barbedwire.” The soldiers strive to seem more permanent than they are, always mocked by the drifting sands of the desert, by its burned eternity: “If you convinced yourself, then you convinced the people crossing, and if you convinced the people crossing, then you convinced the wastes. That you were as rooted as the olive trees.”

Cohen convincingly inhabits the life of this Army unit, and in some respects the novel never quite recovers from the heat of his engagement. Some of that failure to recover is probably deliberate. One premise of “Moving Kings” is that when Yoav and Uri start working as movers for David King they bring with them not only a bit of Israel but a bit of the Israeli conflict. They can move (themselves; other people’s things), but they can’t move on. Enacting this post-traumatic return, Cohen’s novel surely needs to find itself repeatedly pulled back to powerful remembered descriptions of the men’s experiences in Israel.

A second premise of the book seems frazier. Cohen wants to suggest parallels between what Yoav and his crew did as soldiers in Israel and Palestine and what Yoav and his crew do as movers for David King. The combat has shifted from the desert to the streets. In New York, Yoav and Uri are nicknamed the Raelis by their co-workers, as if they were an elite squad within the squad. Cohen articulates a connection that probably did not need to be announced, and which barely survives serious scrutiny: “A group of guys go out hard, swarming the houses of strangers, taking the furniture apart, taking the furniture away, breaking shit by accident, and not by accident . . . who would’ve guessed that the army had been training him for moving?”

Perhaps because moving office furniture is clearly not much like smashing up a Palestinian house, Cohen ups the ante. Yoav and his crew get switched from ordinary moving duties to the much grimmer business of eviction. A new section opens with a found epigraph—“LET MY PEOPLE STAY”—and offers the information that this is taken from a sign “on a house facing foreclosure,

Wakefield, Bronx, NY, Christmas 2012.” You understand why the author, in a novel already brimming with Biblical echoes (King David and the like), might seize on this proffered subtlety. But it holds out confusion, not clarity. Evicted Americans are like the ancient Israelites? Or maybe like modern Palestinians? And the mortgage brokers are like Pharaoh? Historically, politically, the differences between the obligations of the Israel Defense Forces and those of an American moving company (however unpleasant the contract) seem more acute than the similarities. “Back under the Occupation, there had been shooting and here in America there was no shooting, or none aimed at them,” Cohen writes. Under the occupation, he continues, channelling Yoav’s voice, they were able to smash things up, or call in a convoy of planes:

Otherwise, the work they were doing wasn’t too different. They were still going into a house and checking the rooms by the floor. Checking for people, checking for possessions. Clearing the people before clearing the possessions. The possessions would stay with them, the people were allowed to go wherever, provided it was always on the other side of the propertyline.

The labor might be similar, but the job certainly isn’t. The reader feels this frailty inscribed into the very form of the novel. The urgency of the descriptions of Israeli combat repeatedly calls out to the weaker urgency of the descriptions of American “combat”—overshadowing them with their higher stakes, and repeatedly summoning the novelist back to Israel and away from more mundane New York.

Again, as if divining such objections, Cohen increases the bid. A long section, about two-thirds into the novel, opens the story of Avery Luter, an African-American and a Vietnam vet who has fallen on hard times. Sacked from his job as a Port Authority toll collector, he stopped paying his bills, and is essentially camping out in the big house he inherited from his mother. He is served with an eviction notice; in a harrowing scene, Yoav and the crew are sent to move his belongings. Avery’s suffering, and above all his race, would seem finally to enable and validate the connections that the novel is keen to make: “Let My People Stay” can be freshly re-inserted into the rich and terrible history of

African-American enslavement, to echo the political and liturgical work that its inversion, “Let My People Go,” has long performed in black music and literature. And how novelistically useful that Avery has also become a Muslim, and has a second name and alter ego, Imamu Nabi! The title page of this section runs, “Avery Luter, Imamu Nabi (Another Occupation).”

I’m still unpersuaded by Cohen’s thematic ambitions, by this stabbing at similitudes. (Whose occupation, by whom? Is Avery Luter somehow closer in anguish and dispossession to the Palestinians, because, like them, he is Muslim?) But an odd thing happens, in this consistently surprising novel. The tale of Avery Luter’s life pulls the book toward yet another narrative center. By this moment in the book, David King has faded in interest and presence, and now Yoav and Uri also fall away from our attention, as we enter the desperately straitened world of Avery Luter. Cohen inhabits Luter’s existence as vitally as he inhabited the Israeli Army unit: it’s a beautiful portrait, utterly engrossing, full of passionate sympathy.

“Moving Kings” is a strange, superbly unsuccessful novel. There’s not a page without some vital charge—a flash of metaphor, an idiomatic originality, a bastard neologism born of nothing. You could say that it is patchworked with successes: David King in the Hamptons, Yoav and Uri in the Israeli Army, the King’s Moving crew at work in New York, Avery Luter flailing in his mother’s house. Yet these stories are more convincing than the connections, thematic and formal, offered to bind them. Cohen never finds that deep novelistic form, that tensile coherence, which Woolf idealized. This is a book of brilliant sentences, brilliant paragraphs, brilliant chapters. Here things flare singly, a succession of lighted matches, and do not cast a more general illumination. But Cohen opened his previous novel with a challenge: “There’s nothing worse than description: hotel room prose. No, characterization is worse. No, dialogue is.” So if his most accessible novel yet, rich in all three despised elements, frustrates conventional satisfactions, is it because he has failed to find the right form or because he is trying to found a new one? ♦

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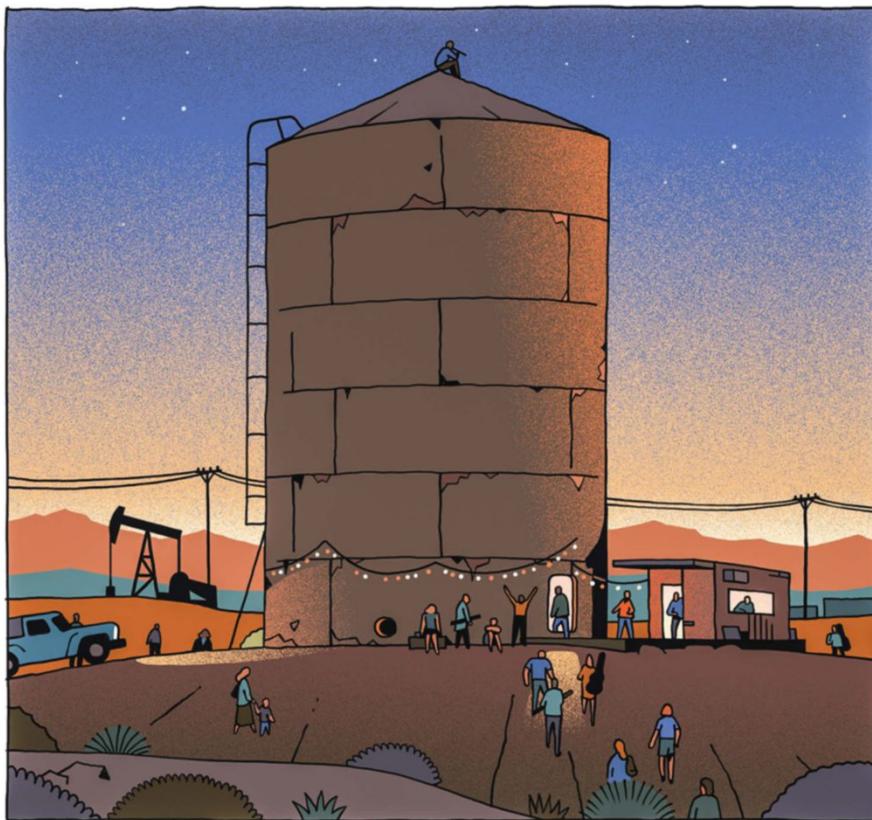
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TANK MUSIC

In Colorado, a uniquely resonant performance space.

BY ALEX ROSS



The Tank, in Rangely, has become a haven for the local music community.

In 1976, the composer and sound artist Bruce Odland participated in an arts festival sponsored by the Colorado Chautauqua, which presented shows across the state. Odland's contribution was to create a sonic collage portraying each place he visited. The last stop was a town called Rangely, in northwestern Colorado, on the high desert that extends into Utah. Odland was outside one day, making recordings of ambient sounds, when a pickup truck pulled up beside him. Two burly oil workers were inside. One asked, "Are you the sound guy?" Odland nodded. "Get in," the worker said. Odland hesitated, then complied. They drove to a sixty-five-foot-tall water tank, on a hillside on the outskirts of town. Odland was told to crawl into it, through a drainage hole. He obeyed, now feeling

distinctly uneasy. The guys instructed him to turn on his equipment, and then commenced throwing rocks at the tank and banging it with two-by-fours. Odland found himself engulfed in the most extraordinary noise he had ever heard: an endlessly booming, ringing roar. It was as if he were in the belfry of an industrial cathedral.

The Tank, as everyone calls it, still looms over Rangely in rusty majesty, looking a bit like Devils Tower. Late one afternoon in June, Odland welcomed me there. He's a wavy-haired sixty-five-year-old, with the sunny manner of an undefeated hippie idealist. In recent years, he and others have renovated the Tank, turning it into a performance venue and a recording studio; it's now called the Tank Center for Sonic Arts, and is outfitted with

a proper door. "Go on, make some noise," Odland told me. When my eyes had adjusted to the gloom—a few portals in the roof provide shafts of light during the day—I picked up a rubber-coated hammer and banged a pipe. The sound rang on and on: the reverberation in the space lasts up to forty seconds. But it's not a cathedral-style resonance, which dissipates in space as it travels. Instead, sound seems to hang in the air, at once diffused and enriched. The combination of a parabolic floor, a high concave roof, and cylindrical walls elicits a dense mass of overtones from even a footfall or a cough. I softly hummed a note and heard pure harmonics spiralling around me, as if I had multiplied into several people who could sing.

A few minutes later, actual singers, in the form of the nine-person vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth, arrived. They had come to the Tank to make a recording and give a concert. They specialize in contemporary music, and gained notice when one of their members, the composer Caroline Shaw, won a 2013 Pulitzer Prize for her piece "Partita for 8 Voices," which she wrote for Roomful. The ensemble exploits a wide range of sounds, from ethereal harmonies to guttural cries and yelps. That evening, the singers laid down tracks and rehearsed for the concert, which would take place the following night. They knew in advance that the Tank would favor slower-moving, more static repertory. Quick chord shifts can create momentary chaos; to compensate, Roomful's director, Brad Wells, slowed the tempo.

During a break, I went outside and found Odland looking nervously at the sky. "The weather was supposed to be clear," he said. "But this red blob just popped up on the radar." As lightning flashed and the wind picked up, he and several colleagues ran around, moving audio equipment to safety. I went back in, and the door clanged shut with a Mahlerian crash. Roomful of Teeth began to sing "my heart comes undone," by the Baltimore-based composer Judah Adashi—a rapt meditation that draws elements from Björk's song "Unravel." A moment later, the storm broke. Gusts buffeting the exterior created an apocalyptic bass rumble; lashes of rain

sounded like a hundred snare drums. The voices bobbed on the welter of noise, sometimes disappearing into it and sometimes riding above. As Adashi's music subsided, the storm subsided in turn. In my experience, music has never seemed closer to nature.

Rangely is dominated by the oil business: Chevron operates a major crude-oil field in the vicinity. The Tank has stood in town for decades, although no one is quite sure where it came from. On its side are the words "Rio Grande," which signify the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, but that line never reached Rangely. The best guess is that the Tank once stood in a railroad town somewhere to the south, providing water for steam locomotives. In the nineteen-sixties, an electric-power association purchased the structure and moved it to Rangely, planning to use it to store water to fight fires. Once it arrived, however, concerns arose that the hillside underneath it might collapse under the weight of so much water. So it stood unused, its ownership passing from one person to another. Eventually, a friend of Odland's bought it, for ten dollars. Musicians ventured inside to play and record; teen-agers used it as a spooky party pad.

Odland was born in Milwaukee in 1952, and studied composition and conducting at Northwestern University. By the mid-seventies, he had detoured into experimental techniques, electronics, and non-Western instruments. His first public installation, "Sun Song," incorporating sounds recorded at the Tank, was broadcast from the clock tower of a Denver high school in 1977. Since the eighties, he has been based in New York, and has worked with the Wooster Group, Laurie Anderson, and Peter Sellars, among others. In 2013, he formed a group called Friends of the Tank to preserve the structure, which was in danger of being demolished. More than a hundred thousand dollars was raised through Kickstarter campaigns. A team of volunteers worked to convert the space and bring it up to code; Odland learned welding in the process.

What Odland didn't want was to create an artsy enclave that had no connection to the community around it.

"This is the anti-Marfa," he told me, referring to the art-world mecca in Texas, which has been gentrified beyond recognition. In Rangely, locals have embraced the scheme. Urie Trucking built an access road into the site. The W. C. Striegel pipeline company supplied raw materials that can be converted into percussion instruments. Giovanni's Italian Grill created a special Tank pizza. Rangely is a conservative town—Trump voters greatly outnumber Clinton voters—but it has welcomed the incursion of avant-gardists bearing didgeridoos, and some of the most dedicated sonic tinkerers are locals. A military veteran finds peace playing violin in the Tank.

"People feel a genuine awe," Odland told me. "They may ascribe it to the Tank, but I ascribe it to the awakening of the ears in a predominantly visual age. Our ears get so abused on a daily basis. Our modern society makes a bad offer to them. We don't use the hearing sense the way we evolved to, as hunter-gatherers interacting with nature. In there, you feel the sound on the skin, you feel it in your gut. What people are in awe of is their own ability to hear properly."

The next day was the summer solstice. The weather stayed clear for that evening's Roomful of Teeth concert, the Tank's most ambitious event to date. The maximum occupancy is forty-nine, but the gift of a set of speakers from Meyer Sound, the wonder-working Bay Area company, allowed for a vivid exterior broadcast. Tables were set up outside, with candles and refreshments. Inside, listeners sat in chairs against the wall. The crowd was a mix of Rangelyites and out-of-town Tank supporters; one couple had driven from Austin, Texas.

I talked to Samantha Wade, who grew up down the hill. She taught herself to sing in the space, and because overtones are so pronounced there she became more accustomed to the pure intervals of the natural harmonic series than to the equal-tempered Western system. She now holds the title of Tank assistant. "It's deeply touching to see all this happen," Wade told me. "Somehow, I always knew it would, but to see it physically manifest is pretty incredible."

At the concert, Roomful of Teeth was joined by several guests: the composer, playwright, and actor Rinde Eckert, who is celebrated for his 2000 Off Broadway show "And God Created Great Whales"; the composer, singer, and violist Jessica Meyer; and the composer Michael Harrison, who employs just intonation—a tuning system that follows the contours of the natural harmonic series, and is therefore perfectly suited to the Tank. Eckert began with a kind of inaugural ritual, chanting while tapping a metal bowl with his fingers. Meyer's fierce-edged playing activated the Tank's awe-inspiring properties. Harrison's glacially beautiful 2015 piece "Just Constellations" made the deepest connection to the place: as luminous chords accumulated, it was difficult to tell which pitches were coming from live singers and which were coming out of the walls.

Afterward, performers and listeners mingled, consuming Giovanni's pizzas and trading impressions. "This is exactly the sound we have always been going for," Wells told me. "It's like a natural microphone in there." Jesse Lewis, a brilliant young producer who was manning the studio, was delighted. "We have more than enough for an album," he said. "I might even be able to extract something from the storm last night—I've never heard anything remotely like that."

Estelí Gomez, a soprano in Roomful of Teeth, found herself buttonholed by two young Rangely critics: Caleb Wiley, who is ten, and Zane Wiley, who is seven. Elizabeth Robinson Wiley, the boys' mother, edits a magazine called *Home on the Rangely*. Caleb said, "I've done sounds inside the Tank, but mostly simple sounds. I've never heard these, um, eerie, combined, terrestrial noises." Zane chimed in: "The first two songs were O.K. for me, then it got super-scary." Gomez asked, "But scary can be fun, right?" The boys nodded cautiously.

Caleb went on to speculate that the Tank had become a portal for the music of aliens: "This is their own type of eerie music that we haven't discovered yet. So you're, like, daring yourself to stay in this alien world." Gomez hugged him. One road to the musical future now runs through Rangely. ♦

THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

A staging of Dominique Morisseau's "Pipeline."

BY HILTON ALS

*Karen Pittman as a mother looking for a better life for her son (Namir Smallwood).*

We all know that theatre is an ephemeral art. Looking back on a given production, we dance around in and then sort out what the critic Arlene Croce called “afterimages,” fragments that are either tied together by the director’s style—by the nuances in the way that he or she set the scenes and had the actors move and speak, by the surprises that he or she managed to draw out of the script—or made dull and forgettable by a lack thereof. In the past decade or so, American theatre has been rethought by a number of serious, original, and deeply ambitious playwrights, including Annie Baker, Thomas Bradshaw, Lucas Hnath, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Richard Maxwell, Sarah Ruhl,

and Young Jean Lee. But their scope and their style have not, unfortunately, been matched by their directorial contemporaries, partly because of financial limitations. Theatre directors coming up today are rarely given the time and the money to develop their voices and, in order to have something approaching a career, they often turn to TV. There are exceptions, though—theatre artists, inspired by legendary directors ranging from José Quintero to JoAnne Akalaitis, Richard Foreman, and Elizabeth LeCompte, who fight to establish and maintain their vision.

I have seen five shows directed by the thirty-three-year-old Lileana Blain-Cruz, a graduate of the Yale School

of the Arts, where she studied with Liz Diamond, an unforgettable directorial force; in each one, I’ve seen and learned things that I want to remember, thanks in large part to Blain-Cruz’s ability to make highly verbal material visual. (She won an Obie for her direction of last year’s revival of Suzan-Lori Parks’s dense work “The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World AKA the Negro Book of the Dead.”) In her current production, “Pipeline,” by Dominique Morisseau (at the Mitzi E. Newhouse), Blain-Cruz pursues another of her fortes, which is to draw us into the playwright’s world and make us understand how a character is fallible and thus worthy of our respect.

Nya (Karen Pittman) is a teacher at an economically disadvantaged urban high school. We see the students in videos that are projected, between scenes, onto the stark white wall of the teachers’ lounge. The images, shot in black-and-white and played at a slow speed, give us a sense of chaos in progress: no matter how glacial its pace, no one can keep it from happening—not Nya, or her friend Laurie (Tasha Lawrence), a white teacher who sometimes gets into it physically with the kids, or Dun (Jaime Lincoln Smith), a security guard who has feelings for Nya and lots of smarts, but no real power.

The thirty-nine-year-old Morisseau, who has had five full-length works produced in New York so far, writes orthodox plays, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, during the course of which her protagonists—often women—undergo a transformation or a catharsis, usually as a result of some political upheaval or change. Indeed, the idea that the political is personal, whether we like it or not, informs some of Morisseau’s best scripts, including “Detroit ’67” (2013); her black female characters are powerful, but powerless when it comes to how they’re treated by black men, who intentionally or unintentionally try to silence or destroy them. How could it be otherwise, given the shit that most black people have to deal with in this often racist society? How can they survive the hatred, let alone love one another? These are questions that

Morisseau asks over and over again.

Nya's son, Omari (Namir Smallwood), attends a boarding school upstate, where he is romantically involved with another "underprivileged" student, Jasmine (Heather Velazquez). Nya wants Omari to find a better path than the one that his father, Xavier (Morocco Omari), followed; she wants him to love his mother—and other women of color—more honestly and fully. Xavier is an upwardly mobile guy who left his family for reasons that are mostly unexplained, but, as staged by Blain-Cruz, he is still a monumental figure in Nya's life. Tall and broad-shouldered, when he visits Nya at work he looms over her as she stands downstage center; she seems diminished in his presence. (This is one of the subtle shifts in perception that are Blain-Cruz's strength.) In one scene, Blain-Cruz has father and son sitting side by side. The two men share space, but are uneasy in an intimacy that Omari may long for and Xavier cannot offer: they have no example of male closeness to draw on.

Omari's parents sent him to a private school in order to give him a better chance in a world that couldn't care less if he prospers or fails. Now he may have blown his future, by showing a white teacher who was condescending to him. Morisseau's interest in the black family isn't theoretical or distanced. She wants us to understand and perhaps experience Nya's pain as Omari slips through the net of her love. No matter how carefully she has tried to maneuver her son through life's treacheries, disaster can't be avoided: Omari is a black man. What must it be like to anticipate your child's slow annihilation, the construction of his tomb, brick by brick, even as he lives?

As played by Pittman—an actress of real wit, who was sensational in Ayad Akhtar's "Disgraced," in 2012—Nya can't afford to be a drama queen. But the drama is there. Because she has to repress so much at work and at home in order to keep herself and her little family together, it's inevitable that when she expresses an emotion in private—she talks directly to the audience from time to time, clueing

us in on what we cannot see—she explodes. She knows that she doesn't have the privilege of doing so in public, unless she wants to be carted off as an insane black woman, just another statistic. Nya is a woman who feels while trying not to feel. She is unable to imagine her son as separate from herself: he is forever a part of her body. In one scene, on her hands and knees she begs Omari to help her understand something; it's a dance of death that moves to the rhythm of life. The scene is overwritten, but Morisseau isn't afraid of melodrama; she knows that highly theatrical emotions can actually be true, on or off the stage.

Blain-Cruz cleverly runs interference by stylizing Pittman's pleading gestures and her collapse. If Pittman played the scene flat—as if the language weren't happening to her—you'd miss the point of Morisseau's script. On the other hand, if she played it as written, the show would degenerate into bathos. Blain-Cruz has Pittman behave as if the world were closing in on her, because it is: she wants to throw herself into the grave that is being dug for her son, and while this may look, partly, ridiculous, it's real to the director and she endeavors to make it real to us.

The challenge of staging truths that are dramatic is what Blain-Cruz struggles with throughout "Pipeline." Morisseau is an energetic storyteller; the telling of a tale transports her. But her scripts can sound like those water bowls that produce musical tones—full but thin. She wants the narrative to be carried along by the propulsive drive of her monologues, by the deep need and injury of her female characters. But, by accentuating only their hurt, she pushes them toward stereotype—you know, black women feel more, so they must emote more. In "Pipeline," Pittman has had to put aside what she does best, which is maintaining a rueful distance from the proceedings. Blain-Cruz tries to compensate for that by finessing the comedic bits, but she can't quite overcome the curse of a flawed script, by a talented writer who is too taken with the cliché of the black mother as a symbol of oppression and then redemption. ♦

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THE
NEW YORKER

ANIMAL SPIRITS

"War for the Planet of the Apes" and "Lady Macbeth."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Three years after the passing of Charlton Heston, a franchise was reborn. First, we had "Rise of the Planet of the Apes" (2011). Then came "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes" (2014). Chronologically speaking, we should now be enjoying "Breakfast on the Planet of the Apes," with the low-calorie fruit-and-berries option very much to the fore. Instead of which, along comes "War

Right away, in other words, this becomes an Andy Serkis film. It is directed by Matt Reeves, as was its predecessor, but what has summoned audiences to these movies, above all, is Serkis's computerized presence in the part of Caesar. And Serkis *is* present—not visible but intensely apprehensible, in every twitch, snarl, and downcast gaze of his animal avatar. To maintain that Caesar

for abandoned humans, urge Caesar to lead his loyal apes to a promised land, away from strife, but he spurns that perfectly sensible suggestion for the sake of revenge. And why? Because his family has come to grief at the hands of *Homo sapiens*—specifically, a nutty colonel (Woody Harrelson) with a God complex. (He was forced, he claims, "to sacrifice my only son so that humanity would be saved.") As the final credits rolled, I waited for the words "Mr. Harrelson's rank, war paint, and megalomania courtesy of Marlon Brando," but in vain.

The main problem with "War for the Planet of the Apes" is that, although it rouses and overwhelms, it ain't much fun. Not content with taking itself extremely seriously, it asks that we accord it the same respect, and this presents a diplomatic challenge for those of us who believe that there is something intrinsically funny about an orangutan riding a horse. Still, there is much to relish. The script, by Reeves and Mark Bomback, comes up with a pair of finely matched conceits: first, that people might get sick and lose their gifts of speech and higher reasoning; and, second, conversely, that a chimp raised in a zoo (Steve Zahn) might *only* talk, forgetting how to howl or to hoot. As for the special effects, by now they are so accomplished that they no longer feel like effects at all; we accept, as quite normal, the notion that apes can weep, self-analyze, and, when imprisoned, hatch an elaborate escape plan. Such is the digital sovereignty, indeed, that they sometimes appear all too human, and one wonders how much further they can evolve. In the next film, presumably, they will be forming subcommittees on road safety, going to church in hats, and trying to stop their kids from watching monkey porn after dark. "You look tired," Caesar is told, as if he's just had a crappy day at the office. What happened to messing about in trees?

The setting of "Lady Macbeth" is not Scotland, sunk in medieval mist, but northern England, in 1865. Nor does the heroine bear the name Macbeth. She is called Katherine (Florence Pugh), and, though she is a lady, with servants at her command, she spends the movie fighting to unlace



In Matt Reeves's extension of the franchise, the apes seem more human than ever.

for the Planet of the Apes," the harshest installment so far. Whether the poor creatures will ever make it to dusk and bedtime is open to debate.

The hero, as before, is Caesar, whom we have known since he was a chimplet. He is a pacific soul, and the irony that has tolled through the trilogy is that, though averse to conflict, he keeps being wrenched into it, either by more truculent apes or by the dumbness of man. We are reminded of that reluctance at the outset of the new movie, which finds him in a forest, marshalling troops against an onslaught of hostile humans. Having taken a few prisoners, he lets them go, saying, "I did not start this war"—speaking not with a petulant snap but in the slow and measured tones of grim regret.

is merely played by Serkis, or voiced by him, does paltry justice to his skills, and, in truth, we need a new vocabulary to cope with such innovation. I would say that, through his mastery of motion capture, the character is *released*.

Not that he has far to roam, in moral terms. The Caesar of the first film was a household pet who wound up as a commander of simian troops, on the Golden Gate Bridge, whereas the new movie dumps him directly into battle and scarcely lets up; by the end, he is chucking grenades and setting off fireballs, like any old hunk of muscle in an action flick. His comrades, including Maurice (Karin Konoval), the orangutan so tender of heart that he should really be running an orphanage

the ties of social custom, and to hold the ideal of the ladylike up to scorn. When we first meet her, she has recently married Alexander (Paul Hilton), who, on their wedding night, tells her to strip, climbs into bed, and turns his back on her. They inhabit a grand house, sparsely furnished but crammed with echoes and creaks. Life, for Katherine, is wadded together from boredom, frustration, and insult. You can feel her ticking like a bomb.

Much of the time, she is left in the company of her maid Anna (Naomi Ackie) and her father-in-law, the unbearable Boris (Christopher Fairbank). He is the kind of brute who makes Katherine sit silently at table while the menfolk converse, and Anna, whom he wrongly accuses of stealing, crawl on her hands and knees. In case we are not sufficiently repelled, the film's director, William Oldroyd, allows clots of food to cling to Boris's lips while he eats. It seems only fitting that, when he chokes on his breakfast one day, Katherine should make no move to help. She needs him to suffer.

One of the workmen on the estate is Sebastian (Cosmo Jarvis), whose jobs include walking the dogs and smoldering in the direction of his mistress. (Some of the dialogue, which is the least subtle aspect of the film, combines his various interests: "Bitch'll get restless if she's tied up too long.") Katherine responds to his advances with alacrity. Downstairs, she may go through the motions of good conduct, but upstairs is another matter; we cut straight from the couple's rutting, with Katherine gripping the bedstead, to a stream of tea being poured into a porcelain cup. So divided

a life cannot be hushed up for long, and rumors reach the ears of her husband, who is away on business. "So, you have become a whore in my absence," he says on his return.

It's no accident that the film unfolds in 1865. That was when its source, Nikolai Leskov's "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District," was published. There was a vogue for the transplanting of Shakespearean tragic motifs into Russian soil, exemplified by Turgenev's "Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District" (1849) and "A Lear of the Steppes" (1870), although Leskov's novella-length tale claws deeper than Turgenev, beyond his lyricism and ennui, and enters an elemental wildness that seems touched by the witchery of Shakespeare's original. It's worth pointing out what Oldroyd does *not* take from Leskov: the novella concludes with a forced march and an act of mad revenge in a swollen river, whereas the movie stops short of all that, sticking close to home. For a more comprehensive tribute to Leskov, listen to the opera that Shostakovich forged from the story, in 1934, earning him the dangerous displeasure of the Stalin regime.

Oldroyd is a theatre director by trade, and "Lady Macbeth," remarkably, is his first full-length feature. It is a lean and forbidding affair—more Jacobean than Victorian, perhaps, in its ominous tread, and in its certainty that blood must spill. Few movies this year will be more likely to molest your sleep. We get a number of deaths, none of them natural, and one, a smothering, is all the ghastlier for being imposed with such determined calm. What draws the camera, and governs its movements, is not

animal passion so much as the efforts that are made to trap it. Katherine is often photographed head on, her face dominating the middle of the frame, as if she were about to be interrogated. Only when her husband and his father leave the house do we switch to a handheld shot of her, walking down a passageway and out into the open, toward the moorlands that are her proper habitat. If anything, the movie is mapped out with such controlling care that it occasionally feels airless and unpeopled, leaving us with practical objections: Why do we so rarely see the rest of the staff? Would they not notice a body being hauled away, on horseback, in the still of the night?

Luckily, we have Florence Pugh to balance things out. She has the spontaneity that the tale demands, and the punch of her performance lies in its sheer nerve; even though her character has our sympathy from the start, she keeps asking for more, tugging at us like a querulous child until our patience cracks. Her love for Sebastian—a lusty dolt, and little else—is out of all proportion, and when she tells him, "I'd rather stop you breathing than have you doubt how I feel," we sense the clutch of something cold and mad in her, and we flinch. As she eliminates the obstacles to her desire, one by one, the center of the fable's monstrous gravity begins to shift. We like to think that, in a tyrannizing world, the best and the bravest thing is to beat the despots down. The worst thing, though, is that you become a tyrant yourself. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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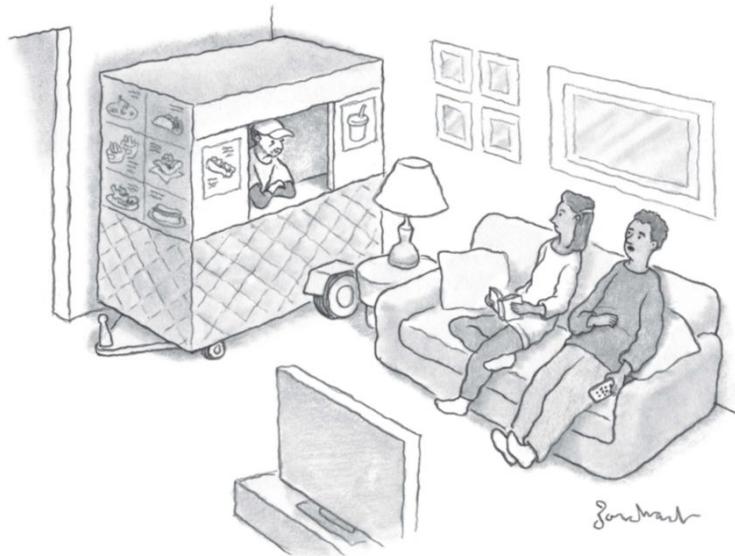
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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by David Borchart, must be received by Sunday, July 23rd. The finalists in the July 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 7th & 14th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



“We sue at dawn.”
Jeff Sawyer, Franconia, N.H.

“Hostile takeovers ain't what they used to be.”
Stephen Everhart, Tyrone, Pa.

“The streets will run red with tape.”
Michael Sapko, Rockville, Md.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“I was just transferred to the fraternity ward.”
Trevor Baine, Washington, D.C.



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