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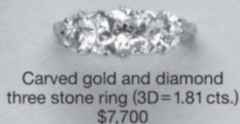
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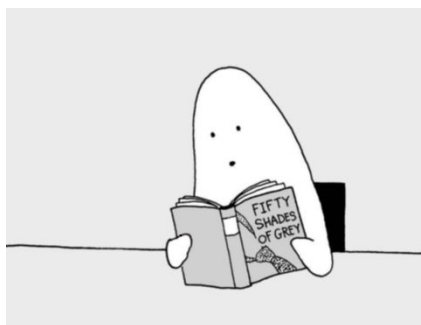
**Ben Marcus** (*Fiction,* p. 56) is the author of, most recently, *"Leaving the Sea: Stories."*

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### DAILY SHOUTS

In a comic by Avi Steinberg, a ghost finally gets around to wrapping up some unfinished business.



### PHOTO BOOTH

The enigmatic photographer behind the creepy cult children's book *"The Lonely Doll."*

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# THE MAIL

## LIFE AFTER DEATH

I was grateful to read Alice Gregory's essay about people who have inadvertently killed others ("Accidental Killers," September 18th). In 1967, on a family vacation in Florida, my father drowned while saving my life. I was fourteen. My mother raised me as best she could, but she never attempted to help me deal with the emotional scars from the incident. I have always felt that I didn't deserve the good things that have come to me in life; for a long time, I hoped that I would die, like my father, at the age of forty-six, so that I would get no more out of life than he did. Fifty years after the accident, I still feel burdened by tremendous guilt and shame. Years ago, I read that if someone saves your life you should save someone else's. Perhaps I've done so: I'm a teacher, and recently a former student said that, many years earlier, my encouragement and support had saved his life. Still, peace is hard to find.

*Dawne Sohn*

*Moon Township, Pa.*

As a physician, I often grapple with the possibility of unintentionally hurting people. My colleagues and I attend to trauma and critical-care patients, and we constantly make judgment calls based on incomplete information and educated guesswork. I am haunted by emergency decisions that, despite my best efforts and intentions, caused a patient harm. It is widely acknowledged that this type of guilt is a contributing factor to burnout, a growing problem in the medical profession. But, beyond resilience training for residents, there is no clear solution. It's comforting to know that this is not just a struggle for those in medicine but an experience shared by all people who have accidentally changed another's life for the worse.

*David J. Berman*

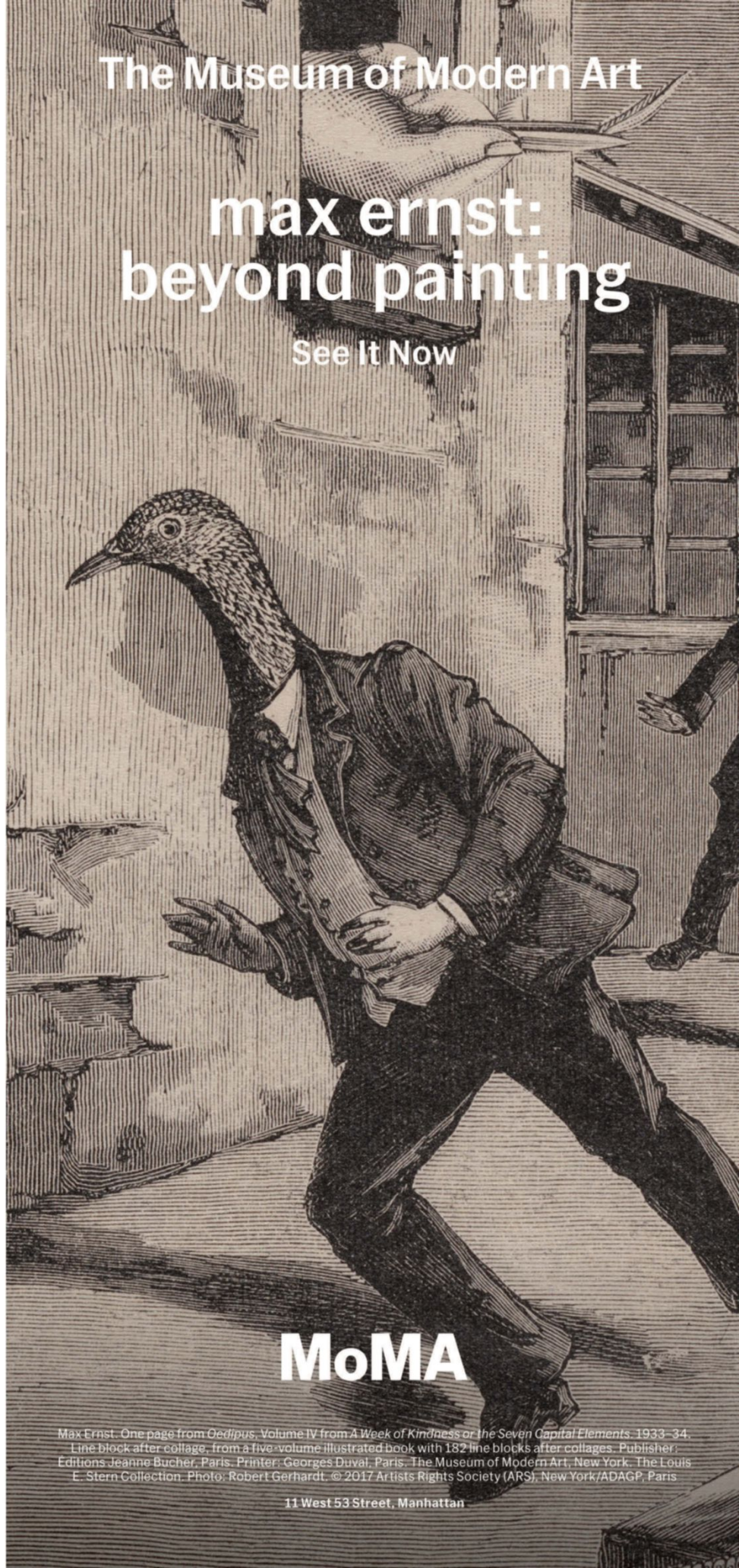
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# The Museum of Modern Art

## max ernst: beyond painting

See It Now



# MoMA

Max Ernst. One page from *Oedipus*, Volume IV from *A Week of Kindness or the Seven Capital Elements*, 1933-34. Line block after collage, from a five-volume illustrated book with 182 line blocks after collages. Publisher: Editions Jeanne Bucher, Paris. Printer: Georges Duval, Paris. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Louis E. Stern Collection. Photo: Robert Gerhardt. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

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SEPTEMBER 27 – OCTOBER 3, 2017

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Centuries before the Internet began worshipping LOLcats, the ancient Egyptians venerated felines as gods, burying their preserved remains in cat-shaped coffins (like the two pictured here, which may date as far back as 664 B.C.E.). Other cat mummies were simply pets—like their dog, monkey, and gazelle counterparts—joining their owners in the forever home of the afterlife. The Brooklyn Museum highlights these rarely seen treasures in **“Soulful Creatures: Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt,”** opening Sept. 29.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF BROWN



# NIGHT LIFE

## ROCK AND POP

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

### Chance the Rapper

Four summers ago, when this quirky young Chicago m.c. (né Chancellor Bennett) played a small venue in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, his energy was infectious, and, as he robo-danced like the second coming of Ian Curtis and spat offbeat lyrics in a nasal register, the packed room responded by whipping itself into a lather. The performance introduced local audiences to his first mixtape, "Acid Rap," made up of thirteen thoughtful, eclectic tracks that aspired to Kanye West's early pluckiness and incorporated Chicago's home-grown juke sound. Since then, Chance's reputation has been cemented; "Surf," his album with Donnie Trumpet & the Social Experiment, was released in 2015, and featured stars like Busta Rhymes, Erykah Badu, and Janelle Monáe. Last year's follow-up, "Coloring Book," raised his profile even further, leading to daytime-television appearances and endorsements from Kit Kat and 1800 Tequila. When he sold out this outdoor arena, a second show was added to accommodate his hungry fans. (*Forest Hills Stadium, 1 Tennis Pl., Forest Hills, Queens. foresthillstadium.com. Sept. 26-27.*)

### Dinosaur Jr.

J. Mascis's latest incarnation of his pivotal alt-rock band has been around longer than the first. A product of Massachusetts, the group helped spark, and was subsequently swept up in, the Seattle grunge scene and the surrounding press storm; by the late eighties, the original lineup had shifted, after releasing just three albums. In 2005, the founding members reunited, and their new music has won over indie nostalgists with clear sound mixes that allow Mascis's guitar theatrics to shine as they should. At a New York gig earlier this year, celebrating their 2016 album, "Give a Glimpse of What Yer Not," Lou Barlow promised, "I swear, next time we're in town, this will sound better." They'll have a chance to make good on their word for two nights at Brooklyn Bowl. (*61 Wythe Ave., Williamsburg, 718-963-3369. Oct. 2-3.*)

### Paul McCartney

McCartney's "One on One" tour has rumbled into its last week in the tristate area. The tour was advertised with billboards featuring a simple image of his signature Höfner bass, devoid of his likeness—a cryptic campaign that few other rock stars could pull off. McCartney has somehow grown from his association with a band that was "bigger than Jesus" to something even larger: a living, breathing time capsule from possibly the richest, most fawned over period in popular music. He's also become cooler with age, and his infrequent collaborations with artists generations his junior (including his sitting in as a drummer on an upcoming Foo Fighters record) only further stoke his legend. (*Nassau Coliseum, 1255 Hempstead Turnpike, Uniondale, N.Y. nycblive.com. Sept. 26-27.*)

### Nosaj Thing

When the rapper Kid Cudi laid out his mission statement on his debut mixtape, in 2008, he leaned on a soft-rattling arrangement that sounded like Brian Eno and the Postal Service playing tic-tac-toe on an MPC machine. Cudi's "Man on the Moon (The Anthem)," set to an instrumental called "Aquarium," by the producer Nosaj Thing, exemplified a period of cross-pollination between the hip-hop and the electronic circles in Los Angeles, notably at venues like the Low End Theory. Nosaj Thing, born Jason Chung, earned his place in the city's dense d.j. scene with a drowsy, tech-sleek touch that offered fans a bit more soul for their buck. He plays this Greenpoint community center alongside **Jacques Greene** and **Jim-E Stack**. (*Warsaw, 261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn. 718-387-0505. Sept. 27.*)

### Sad13

Pop music has historically functioned as an escapist medium, devoid of politics. But Sadie Dupuis, the front woman of the protean rock band Speedy Ortiz, insists that tales about challenging political conversations with relatives over Christmas dinner can fit snugly between choruses that aim for hit-factory sheen. Dupuis, who received her M.F.A. in poetry from UMass Amherst, writes in a distinctively angular way as Sad13; last November, she released her debut solo pop effort, "Slugger," a saccharine set of exploratory love songs that recalibrate such topics as sexual consent ("Get a Yes") and platonic opposite-sex friendships. She opens for the crunch-punk four-piece **Charly Bliss**. (*Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. Sept. 28.*)

### Show Me the Body

Julian Cashwan Pratt, the lead singer of this Queens hardcore outfit, steps on photographers—but only the ones who have it coming. At the ripping gigs that Show Me the Body has played since 2014, the band reserves the pit for fans only, with Pratt giving deadpan directions to his flock between shrieks. He and his bandmates put an original spin on the hardcore sound (banjos and rap verses haven't always had a spot in the genre) and share a refreshing dedication to the punk tenets of inclusivity and bullheaded productivity. They are on the road with the Carol City, Florida, rapper **Denzel Curry**, whose white-knuckle style complements them well, as part of the skate team Illegal Civ's Cinema Tour. (*Highline Ballroom, 431 W. 16th St. 212-414-5994. Oct. 2.*)

### Harry Styles

While recording his self-titled solo album, Styles unearthed an inner rock star—or, at least, buried his past as a member of the boy band One Direction. The result, released in May, was an impressive collection of ballads and bops that aspire to Prince and Bowie, whose shoes no one can be faulted for wanting to fill. Pop has grown more self-consciously tasteful since Justin Timberlake broke out of 'N Sync: the twenty-three-year-old Styles sought out the producer Jeff Bhasker (Kanye West, the Rolling Stones) and holed up in Port Antonio, Jamaica, at the famous Geejam Studios, to make a serious record with several serious musicians whom he recruited as bandmates. "Of course I'm nervous," he told *Rolling Stone*. "I'm still learning . . . but it's my favorite lesson." (*Radio City Music Hall, Sixth Ave. at 50th St. 212-247-4777. Sept. 28.*)

### Thundercat

This Los Angeles bassist, born Stephen Brunner, has been an under-sung treasure for years, emerging occasionally from behind his instrument with a sun-soaked falsetto and a twisted sense of humor: on his recent single "Friend Zone," he blows off an inconsistent date to play Mortal Kombat. He has nestled himself in his city's young jazz scene, which has shed the genre's strict formalities and drawn out its parallels in dance music and hip-hop in refreshing ways. From collaborations with Flying Lotus and Kendrick Lamar to his own adventurous solo albums, Brunner consistently tests the limits of his form with inspired results, offering a brawny alternative to pop R. & B. that never takes itself too seriously. He tours in support of his new album, "Drunk." (*Brooklyn Steel, 319 Frost St., Brooklyn. 888-929-7849. Sept. 30-Oct. 1.*)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### Mary Halvorson

The group Thumbscrew finds the insistently inventive guitarist Halvorson alongside two other forward-thinking players, the bassist Michael Formanek and the drummer Tomas Fujiwara. The trio explores original compositions on the first night and standards on the second. It's tough to say which evening will hold more surprises. (*The Stone at the New School, 55 W. 13th St. thestonenyc.com. Sept. 29-30.*)

### Eddie Henderson

The Henderson of the seventies and the trumpeter of the present day are two different species of jazz player. While the brass man who weaved through the fusion forests of Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi band and his own jazz-funk projects was all Miles-ish jabs and flourishes, today's Henderson is a post-bop classicist eager to exhibit his sharp-edged chops. He's joined by the saxophonist **Donald Harrison** and the drummer **Mike Clark**, another veteran from the Hancock fusion era. (*Smoke, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. Sept. 29-Oct. 1.*)

### Ben Monder

With fresh-faced jazz guitarists sprouting like kudzu, Monder, after decades of new-jazz invention, can seem like a toughened veteran. To his credit, this daring and inquisitive player can give his younger compatriots a run for their money, as evidenced by his recent work on ECM Records. **Matt Brewer**, on bass, and **Ted Poor**, on drums, round out his trio. (*Barbès, 376 9th St., Brooklyn. 347-422-0248. Sept. 30.*)

### Mario Pavone

It's not every bandleader who could launch a burgeoning career after turning seventy, but the bassist Pavone did just that some years ago, and is demonstrating little intention of slowing down. A sharp sextet stocked with adventurous players, including the reedmen **Tony Malaby** and **Oscar Noriega** and the drummer **Michael Sarin**, maintains the edge of this young-at-heart composer's music. (*Cornelia Street Café, 29 Cornelia St. 212-989-9319. Sept. 30.*)

### Pharoah Sanders

Time may have mellowed the formidable free-jazz saxophonist Sanders, but the juice is hardly all drained yet. At seventy-six, this onetime terror can still rattle a bandstand with fervently soulful tones. His quintet includes such committed associates as the pianist **William Henderson** and the bassist **Nat Reeves**. (*Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. Sept. 26-30.*)

# ART

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Jewish Museum

**"Modigliani Unmasked: Drawings from the Paul Alexandre Collection"**  
Amedeo Modigliani, a Sephardic Jew from the Tuscan port city of Livorno, met Paul Alexandre shortly after moving to Paris, in 1906, and the young French doctor soon became the artist's first patron, amassing some four hundred drawings by 1914. Set aside this exhibition's awkward attempts to underscore the specifically Jewish character of Modigliani's work (for example, curators point to his formal fascination with noses); for anyone chiefly familiar with the masklike faces and stylized bodies of Modigliani's later paintings, this trove of early drawings will be a revelation. Many of the works—a serenely confident outline of a circus performer hopping from foot to foot; a precise caricature, made from memory, of a medium the artist had seen at a séance in Vienna; dozens of female nudes—demonstrate that Modigliani's increased stylization can be read as a search for specificity. In the nudes in particular, one can see how exaggerating a body's length allowed Modigliani the emphatic advantages of caricature without its essentializing limitations. Dr. Alexandre himself appears in six taut black-crayon drawings, sporting a pointy little mustache with his coattails thrown back, the very picture of a Gallic rooster. *Through Feb. 4.*

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

### Mira Schendel

The Swiss-born artist, who was raised in Milan, fled fascist persecution during the war, settling

in São Paulo in 1953, an exciting moment for Brazilian modernism. While indebted to the innovations of the austere Concrete and the more playful Neo-Concrete art movements, the poetic economy of Schendel's gestures is hers alone. Six works from her "Sarrafos" series, made in 1987, are the exhibition's main event. In these brusque statements, black-painted wooden bars (one per work) protrude askew from snowy grounds. Simultaneously paintings and sculptures, the works reflect what the artist has described as an "aggressiveness" in response to Brazil's post-dictatorship political climate. Accompanying the "Sarrafos"—and anticipating their stark palette and bare-bones grace—are selections from the series "Brancos e Pretos" (1985-87). *Through Oct. 21. (Hauser & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-794-4970.)*

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Jack Drummer

It's something of a mystery how Drummer, an artist who found some acclaim in New York in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, before skipping town—and the art scene—made the impressive five-foot works in this show. In Buffalo, in the eighties, he started working with discarded rubber "blankets" used to clean printing drums, but he never exhibited the results before he died, in 2013. The process must have involved some kind of rubbing, but the untitled pieces suggest giant photograms of diamond-plate steel, chain-link fence, and other found grids, their patterns apparently bleached into backgrounds of deep colors from the hard-to-figure edges of the rainbow. Ghostly fragments of inverted white text appear here and there. Some of the pieces he also must have painted: pale

angled lines, in one, are laid over what look like long horizontal brushstrokes of stormy green. *Through Oct. 21. (White Columns, 320 W. 13th St. 212-924-4212.)*

### Celeste Dupuy-Spencer

With a wry observation of detail and a near-Fauvist palette, the American figurative painter—a standout in this year's Whitney Biennial—intertwines the personal and the political. She also works fast: in her characteristically small-scale "Durham, August 14, 2017," she commemorates the recent toppling of a Confederate statue in front of a North Carolina courthouse, showing the crumpled metal soldier defeated in sunlit grass, the smudgy legs of protesters in the background. A painting of the Cajun Navy, although made in 2016, feels eerily topical in its depiction of a floodwater rescue. Other canvases are more intimate—and more raucously rendered. In one of her larger paintings, queer lovers spill out of an open window; in another, Dupuy-Spencer offers a transporting view of a busy, ramshackle country hotel on a starry night. *Through Oct. 7. (Marlborough Contemporary, 545 W. 25th St. 212-463-8634.)*

### Kara Walker

Walker produced the first masterpiece of the social-media age, but she doesn't give a damn about likes—she wants our discomfort. In her blistering, beautiful first show in New York since 2014, when her monumental "Sugar Sphinx" sculpture stormed Instagram feeds, the artist reinvents drawing to demand a reckoning with the history and ongoing repercussions of slavery, in works whose ambition and scale are in direct dialogue with art history, too. (One twelve-foot-long piece combines references to Edward Kienholz's 1969 sculpture about lynching, "Five Car Stud," and Delacroix's 1827 painting "The Death of Sardanapalus"; both works, like Walker's own output of the past twenty years, stirred controversy in their day.) The atrocities of Goya's "Black Paintings" come to mind here, but so does the recent Charlottesville rally, as Walker introduces allusions to current events into her work for the first time. *Through Oct. 14. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)*

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

### Petra Cortright

In her new digitally generated paintings, the Los Angeles artist incorporates shout-outs to Monet, with flowers and muted, impressionistic depths. There are also echoes of living painters, from the neither-abstract-nor-figurative compositions of Cecily Brown to the algorithmic swaths of color in David Hockney's iPad landscapes. But Cortright's works are distinguished by their laboriously layered construction, in which she incorporates and recycles found imagery and graphics. "AziLabs b Barclay b c license plate azwan" is a watery vista composed of plant life, scratches, brushstrokes, and unidentifiable online ingredients (as its weird title, culled from search terms and file names, indicates). While Cortright harnesses the aesthetics of Internet overload to surprisingly harmonious effect in these cagey works, the show feels a bit like a swan song for this mode of painting. Her next move is one to watch for. *Through Oct. 8. (Foxy Production, 2 E. Broadway. 212-239-2758.)*



*At the Lisson gallery, the American painter Stanley Whitney takes the grid on a joyride, in radiant drawings he made during the course of three decades. (Above, an untitled example from 1994-95.)*





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# MOVIES



Kim Min-hee stars in two new films by Hong Sang-soo, *"On the Beach at Night Alone"* and *"The Day After,"* both playing in the New York Film Festival.

## Two from the Heart

*Idiosyncratic views of romance emerge in a pair of artistically distinctive films.*

It's rare for the New York Film Festival's main slate to present two films by the same filmmaker; it's happening in this year's edition of the festival (Sept. 28-Oct. 15), which will screen two new films, *"The Day After"* and *"On the Beach at Night Alone,"* by the South Korean director Hong Sang-soo, one of the most prolific and most original directors working today.

The better of the two, *"On the Beach at Night Alone,"* is a drama of rare lyrical exaltation. The actress Kim Min-hee stars as an actress named Young-hee, whose life has been thrown into turmoil by reports about her affair with an older director. Although Hong and Kim have been in a relationship together that is tabloid fodder in Korea, the film isn't directly autobiographical. Hong centers the story on Young-hee's efforts to cope with the unwanted publicity, beginning with her travels in Germany, where she lives out of the spotlight. Returning to Korea, she tentatively renews old friendships and

resumes her career. The natural progress of her life, however, is fragmented in Hong's kaleidoscopic fusion of reality and fantasy. Young-hee is a character of vital insight and inspired impulse, whether she drops to her knees amid the splendors of nature or ardently urges a friend to live adventurously. Hong builds moments of extraordinary romantic power, culminating in a brilliant sequence, constructed from a single ten-minute shot parsed with brisk and assertive zooms and pans, in which Young-hee reflects on her bitter experiences. Kim infuses the scene with a passionate existential resignation reminiscent of Gena Rowlands's work in the films of John Cassavetes.

The French director Claire Denis's new film, *"Let the Sun Shine In,"* about a middle-aged woman's romantic adventures, refracts personal experience in the form of a modernistic screwball comedy. Juliette Binoche brings luminous intensity and wicked humor to the role of Isabelle, who is first seen naked in bed, under a man who's pumping away in vain. From the start, Denis—who co-wrote the script with the novelist Christine Angot—dra-

matizes with audacious wit the physically awkward and emotionally colossal details of sex and romance. Isabelle is a Parisian artist who risks her gallery representation over an intimate misunderstanding. Her struggles with her married lover (Xavier Beauvois), with a friend who hesitates to become a lover (Alex Descas), with a lover who hesitates to become a friend (Nicolas Duvauchelle), and with an ex whom she keeps inviting back (Laurent Grévill) are balanced on the edge of humor and pain. There's a stereotypical Frenchness in the story's emphasis on casual sex and in the intellectual elegance of the dialogue about it, and Denis films her actors in confrontational and vulnerable closeups that give the dialogue a life of its own. Isabelle leaps from encounter to encounter with an ironic abruptness, and her sublime pugnacity gives rise to a riotous tirade during a jaunt in a rich landowner's ample woods. The exquisite turmoil builds to a grand cameo for the sacred monster of modern French cinema, Gérard Depardieu, whose brief but dominating appearance veers from beastly voracity to gruff compassion.

—Richard Brody

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## NOW PLAYING

**Battle of the Sexes**

Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, who made “Little Miss Sunshine,” turn to the tennis court for this drama, set in the early nineteen-seventies. Emma Stone stars as Billie Jean King, a champion in her late twenties who has multiple barriers to contend with. First, there’s unequal pay. The gods of tennis, headed by Jack Kramer (Bill Pullman), still decree that women players are less of a draw—which, as King points out, is untrue—and therefore deserve lesser prizes. Then, there’s her husband, Larry (Austin Stowell), who could surely make a fortune advertising slacks; she loves him, but her heart belongs to her hairdresser, Marilyn (Andrea Riseborough). Last, there’s Bobby Riggs (Steve Carell), a fifty-something former champion and full-time chauvinist, who, having beaten King’s rival Margaret Court (Jessica McNamee), looks forward to trouncing King herself. Some hope. Carell convinces you that Riggs was more of a sad sack than a showman; as for Stone, trailing clouds of wistfulness from “La La Land,” she may seem ill-suited to so combative a role, but, once the match starts, at the Houston Astrodome, she comes into her own, shuts off her smile, and leaves her opponent gasping like a fish. With Sarah Silverman, Elisabeth Shue, and Alan Cumming, as the doyen of tennis fashion.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 9/25/17.) (In wide release.)

**Lucky**

The late Harry Dean Stanton, in one of his last roles, infuses the slightest gesture and inflection with the weight of grave experience, but this maudlin drama mainly renders his grit and wisdom wholesome and cute. Stanton stars as Lucky, a cantankerous ninety-ish Second World War veteran living in a small town on the edge of a desert. Lucky whiles away his time in a fixed routine that starts with yoga at home and breakfast at a diner, moves on to crossword puzzles and TV shows, and ends in a bar among life-worn regulars. (One of them, played by David Lynch, is grieving over the loss of his pet tortoise.) It’s never clear what Lucky has done with his life, but, with the first sign of failing health, he grows reminiscent, dredging up old regrets in gruffly sentimental monologues. His elbows-out rounds of friendly joshing are filled with hardboiled argot, and they only hint at his troubled past as an argumentative and insubordinate cuss. Stanton and the entire cast (including James Darren, Beth Grant, Barry Shabaka Henley, and Yvonne Huff) are delightful to watch, but they don’t stand a chance against the stereotypes. Directed by John Carroll Lynch.—*Richard Brody* (In limited release.)

**Mother!**

Just when you’ve decided that Darren Aronofsky cannot meet his own high standards of extremity, displayed in “Requiem for a Dream” (2000) and “Black Swan” (2010), he proves you spectacularly wrong. In his new movie, most of which is set inside a single secluded house and staffed by characters with no names, Jennifer Lawrence plays the wife of a poet (Javier Bardem) who is having trouble writing. (When he is unblocked, at last, the stuff comes out like a fountain.) Her own hobbies include interior decoration and paranoid hysteria. Alas, the loving couple knows so little peace. It is disturbed first by a fan (Ed Harris) and his wife (Michelle Pfeiffer), then by their warring relations, then by their grieving friends, and finally by a madding crowd of poetry lovers—that old story. The building, meanwhile, acquires a treacherous life of its own, the walls pulsing and peeling in accordance with the heroine’s disintegrating mood. Whether you read the film as an eco-fable, a poisoned fairy tale, a hymn to the insatiable needs of the artist,

or a confession—disguised and agonized—on the part of the director is up to you. It will not prove easy to forget.—*A.L.* (9/25/17) (In wide release.)

**Stronger**

The director David Gordon Green’s frank, perceptive approach to the true story of Jeff Bauman, a victim of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, is often at odds with the movie’s script. Jake Gyllenhaal plays Jeff, a twenty-eight-year-old self-described fuckup from a tough neighborhood who goes to the race to cheer on his ex, Erin (Tatiana Maslany), whom he hopes to win back. He loses both legs as a result of the attack, and he becomes an unwilling symbol of local pride who’s bewildered by celebrations of a heroism that he considers unearned. Green puts an absorbing, quasi-documentary emphasis on the details of Jeff’s recovery—the sheer agony of his wounds, the hardships and indignities that he endures, and the relentless effort of his rehabilitation, which is rendered all the more difficult by his lack of discipline. The film also considers the gap between public images and private lives, but its emotional payoff rests upon Jeff’s willingness to assume his civic role and recognize its healing power. In the process, the movie simplifies and sentimentalizes trauma, avoids questions of therapy, and flattens Jeff’s voice and inner

life. Though Gyllenhaal glowers and rages soulfully, he and most of the cast members are burdened with working-class-Boston clichés.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

**Thirst Street**

Nathan Silver’s new feature, a drama of romantic obsession set mainly in Paris, condenses an entire city into the pathological bounds of a few tight venues—and woe unto his protagonist, Gina (Lindsay Burdge), when she ventures beyond them. Gina, a lonely flight attendant on a layover in Paris, meets Jérôme (Damien Bonnard), a slick bartender at a louche night club. For Jérôme, Gina is a one-night stand; for Gina, Jérôme is the love of her life, and she moves to Paris to pursue him, secretly taking an apartment across the street from his home in order to spy on him. Though there’s something theoretical, almost mathematical, about Gina’s passion (which seems borrowed from other movies), it provokes free and energetic performances from Bonnard and the rest of the supporting cast, headed by such notables as Jacques Nolot, as the club’s owner, and Françoise Lebrun, as Gina’s landlord. Burdge infuses her rigidly and scantily defined role with tremulous vulnerability, and Silver, aided by the splashy palette of Sean Price Williams’s cinematography, evokes derangement with a sardonic wink.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

## THE THEATRE

## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

**As You Like It**

John Doyle’s production of the Shakespeare comedy features Hannah Cabell, Ellen Burstyn, and André de Shields, with original music by Stephen Schwartz. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Sept. 28.)

**The Gospel According to Thomas Jefferson, Charles Dickens and Count Leo Tolstoy: Discord**

Primary Stages presents a comedy by Scott Carter (the executive producer of “Real Time with Bill Maher”), directed by Kimberly Senior, in which the three famous men are trapped in Limbo together. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Oct. 1.)

**The Home Place**

Charlotte Moore directs Brian Friel’s play, in which a Darwin-inspired doctor arrives in Donegal in 1878 to study the craniums of the indigenous Irish population in an attempt to prove their inferiority. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737. In previews.)

**Jesus Hopped the “A” Train**

In Stephen Adly Guirgis’s dark comedy from 2000, directed by Mark Brokaw, a former bike messenger imprisoned at Rikers Island meets a born-again serial killer. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. Previews begin Oct. 3.)

**The Last Match**

Anna Ziegler’s play, directed by Gaye Taylor Upchurch for the Roundabout, follows two tennis champions preparing to face off in a high-stakes match. (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. Previews begin Sept. 28.)

**Lonely Planet**

Keen Company revives Steven Dietz’s 1994 play, featuring Arnie Burton and Matt McGrath as gay men who meet at a map store during the height of the AIDS epidemic. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Previews begin Oct. 3.)

**Measure for Measure**

Elevator Repair Service (“Gatz”) stages a high-tech, slapstick version of Shakespeare’s problem play, about a corrupt official and a nun pleading for her brother’s life. John Collins directs. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. In previews.)

**Oedipus El Rey**

Luis Alfaro wrote this adaptation of the Sophocles tragedy, reset in a South Central L.A. penitentiary. Directed by Chay Yew, in collaboration with the Sol Project. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Previews begin Oct. 3.)

**The Portuguese Kid**

John Patrick Shanley wrote and directs this comedy, at Manhattan Theatre Club, about a lawyer (Jason Alexander) juggling his personal travails with those of a widow settling her husband’s affairs. With Sherie Rene Scott and Mary Testa. (City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. In previews.)

**A Soldier’s Play**

Negro Ensemble Company revives Charles Fuller’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play from 1981, in which a murder at a segregated U.S. Army base brings angry undercurrents to light. (Theatre 80, at 80 St. Marks Pl. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Sept. 29.)

**Springsteen on Broadway**

The Boss performs solo with guitar and piano, tracing his life through songs and storytelling. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. Previews begin Oct. 3.)

### Time and the Conways

Elizabeth McGovern ("Downton Abbey") stars in the Roundabout's revival of J. B. Priestley's play, directed by Rebecca Taichman, which follows the ups and downs of a moneyed English family between 1919 and 1937. (*American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. In previews.*)

### Tiny Beautiful Things

A return engagement of Nia Vardalos's adaptation of the Cheryl Strayed book, drawn from her time writing the advice column Dear Sugar. Directed by Thomas Kail. (*Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. In previews. Opens Oct. 2.*)

### Too Heavy for Your Pocket

Roundabout Underground stages Jiréh Breon Holder's play, about a young man in Nashville who gives up a college scholarship to join the Freedom Riders in the summer of 1961. (*Black Box, Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. In previews.*)

### Torch Song

Michael Urie and Mercedes Ruehl star in a new version of Harvey Fierstein's "Torch Song Trilogy," directed by Moisés Kaufman and set in the New York gay scene of the seventies and early eighties. (*Second Stage, 305 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422. In previews.*)

## NOW PLAYING

### Charm

"I'm not modelling trans behavior," Mama Darleena Andrews says in Philip Dawkins's new play. "I'm modelling good behavior." Inspired by the real-life Miss Gloria Allen, Darleena (Sandra Caldwell), sixtiesomething and transgender, has her work cut out for her teaching etiquette to the young misfits who gather at a Chicago gay-and-lesbian center; yet, to the surprise of exactly no one, she succeeds. This MCC production, directed by Will Davis, does not have the subtlest touch, but its heart is huge, its humor irresistible, and its ensemble absolutely terrific. Darleena, smashing in pastel twin sets, connects with her ragtag crew and with the center's efficient administra-

tor, D (Kelli Simpkins), and learns from them, too. Looking beyond gender and race conflicts, the show sends a hopeful message in our angry, divided times: What if we could actually all get along? (*Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 866-811-4111.*)

### Distant Star

It was always going to be a challenge to adapt for the stage Roberto Bolaño's droll and disorienting short novel, filtered through multiple perspectives and faulty memory, about an elusive fascist poet and serial killer who skywrites in verse. But the theatre company Caborca ups the ante: the script (by Javier Antonio González) shifts incessantly between narration and scene, the actors often play more than one character at a time, and live video projections give the impression that the company is attempting a simultaneous film adaptation. The set design, by Jian Jung, mostly leaves the room as is, all poured concrete and cinder blocks. The result can be hard to follow, tonally inconsistent, digressive, and deliberately primitive in its special effects—all perfectly befitting Bolaño's slippery yarn, which, like this show, reverberates with dread precisely because it leaves so much to the imagination. (*Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-598-0400. Through Oct. 1.*)

### Neighbors: A Fair Trade Agreement

Watch out for that flan—it's been weaponized. In Bernardo Cubría's allegorical comedy, Joe, a white mogul, and José, a Latino laborer, start out trading pleasantries across the creek dividing their properties. They end by attacking each other with emblematic foodstuffs: McDonald's apple pie as suffocation device, avocado as hand grenade. An absurdist portrait of friendship and foeship, the INTAR and In-Violet production is gamely acted by Andrew Blair (Joe) and Gerardo Rodríguez (José). Under Lou Moreno's direction, the play doesn't have much to say about America's liaison with those across its borders (and what it does say merely recapitulates stereotypes). But there's verve to the climactic insult match—"Brownie!" "Whitey!" "Salsa-chugger!" "Hamburger Helper!"—and a wily hat tip to current politics. When the relationship tanks, millionaire Joe can't manage to build a proper wall. (*INTAR, 500 W. 52nd St. 866-811-4111.*)

### Oh My Sweet Land

It's not often you worry about a performer's physical well-being, but it's hard not to flinch as Nadine Malouf quickly chops onions, her eyes fluttering away from fingers that are dangerously close to her knife. The suspense is enhanced by intimacy: this solo show from the Play Company, written and directed by Amir Nizar Zuabi, is performed for tiny audiences in various kitchens around New York City. Malouf's narrator prepares the Syrian dish kibbe while recounting her search for her lover, Ashraf, an exile from that war-torn country. She gets so distracted by the intensity of the storytelling that at one point the onions start burning in the pan—more anxiety! This is as dramatic as the show gets, however. The horror engulfing Syria feels oddly remote, and, after many peregrinations, the narrator's reunion with Ashraf is anticlimactic. (*Various locations. 866-811-4111.*)

### One Night Only (Running as Long as We Can)

The dancer and choreographer Monica Bill Barnes, whose face seems to have been chiselled from the same stone as Buster Keaton's, gives her deadpan a workout in a short but relentless vaudeville-style tribute to athleticism, in tandem with her frequent partner Anna Bass. What first comes across as a lampoon of macho posturing—complete with an incessant patter of absurd sports clichés, courtesy of a quick-witted offstage announcer (Robert Saenz de Viteri)—evolves into a commentary on the stamina of athletes at what's considered the late end of their careers. (Barnes is forty-four; Bass is thirty-nine.) In the show's cleverest conceit, an audience member recites the lifetime inventory of the duo's injuries—broken bones, kidney stones, a concussion—while they dance backward in circles. It's a long list. (*McGinn/Cazale, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 866-811-4111.*)

### The Violin

Terry (Kevin Isola), a simple soul, has found a 1710 Stradivarius in the back seat of his cab. His older brother, Bobby (Peter Bradbury), a small-time hustler, takes charge with a plan to collect a healthy ransom for it. Also involved is Gio (Robert LuPone), a tailor who has kept a watchful eye on the brothers ever since their parents died, one horrible night many years earlier. All the action unfolds in Gio's shop, on Avenue A, in Harry Feiner's cluttered, nicely appointed set. The story is meant to be contemporary, but, except for the expletives and a couple of bizarre incidents thrown in to demonstrate the city's hellish atmosphere, Dan McCormick's play resembles that of a sentimental thirties gangster movie. Under Joseph Discher's direction, the actors gamely summon all the emotional believability they can, but the predictable script defeats them. (*59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.*)

## ALSO NOTABLE

Anastasia Broadhurst. • **A Clockwork Orange** New World Stages. • **Come from Away** Schoenfeld. • **Dear Evan Hansen** Music Box. • **For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday** Playwrights Horizons. *Through Oct. 1.* • **Hello, Dolly!** Shubert. • **In & of Itself** Daryl Roth. • **Inanimate Flea.** • **KPOP A.R.T./New York Theatres.** • **Mary Jane** New York Theatre Workshop. • **1984** Hudson. • **On the Shore of the Wide World** Atlantic Theatre Company. • **The Play That Goes Wrong** Lyceum. • **Prince of Broadway** Samuel J. Friedman. • **The Red Letter Plays: Fucking A & In the Blood** Pershing Square Signature Center. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **The Suitcase Under the Bed** Beckett. *Through Sept. 30.* • **The Terms of My Surrender** Belasco. • **War Paint** Nederlander.



After four decades of stardom, Bruce Springsteen tries something new: Broadway. His solo show, combining songs and reminiscences, plays five nights a week at the Walter Kerr, starting Oct. 3.





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# DANCE



The Danish choreographer Mette Ingvarthsen's "7 Pleasures" will have its New York premiere at Skirball, Sept. 29-30.

## Naked Nordics

*Danish dancers bare all.*

If you haven't had a chance to see any naked people lately, you might get over to N.Y.U.'s Skirball at the end of the month (Sept. 29-30), when the young Danish choreographer Mette Ingvarthsen will be showing her new "7 Pleasures" (it premiered in Toronto last year), featuring twelve dancers without a stitch on. Though Scandinavian, the show lacks the note of rectitude that from the nineteen-sixties onward tended to accompany artistic events about Nordic sex, as if to say to us that we were a bunch of prudes whereas they were wholesome folk who ate their muesli and then did 69 before getting in their Volvos and going to work. (Ingmar Bergman has a lot to answer for.)

Indeed, Ingvarthsen swerves in the opposite direction: analytic, even scholastic. Sexual pleasure, for her, she has said, is divided into seven dimensions, and she lists them: viscous, vibrational, tactile, visual, contractual, ecstatic, and

collective. But, in the performance I saw, all seven looked pretty unsexy. In what I think was the "vibrational" part, everyone jumped around a lot, so that their breasts and penises bobbed up and down so wildly that you worried they'd fall off. After you got over the initial surprise, you hoped they'd soon go on to something else, but that didn't happen. Nor was there any discernible beginning, middle, or end to the preceding section, "viscous," where the dancers lay down on the floor and smooshed their bodies over each other. But for the absence of police, I felt as if I were watching an end-of-semester student dance project. The performers didn't get any help from costumes, needless to say. Sets were not much in evidence, either. There was a coffee table on the stage—a woman looked under it and found nothing—and a house plant, which another dancer tried to eat. There was also a couch, and, in what I think was supposed to be the production's high point (Ingvarthsen, in an interview, called it the "object-orgy"), all twelve performers

got together, leaned over, and—how shall I say?—fucked the couch, in unison. But this, too, delivered less than might have been hoped for.

The show's big problem, I think, was that of many putatively avant-garde shows: improvisation. I wasn't at rehearsal and therefore I can't swear to this, but I would guess that the dancers were told to do pretty much what humankind in general wants to do, and, because they don't actually know what that is, they don't have a lot of material. In case you're interested, there wasn't much forthright sexual activity. Toward the end, if I'm not mistaken, a few couples went down on each other, but not so's you'd notice.

I have to say, though, that these twelve people had beautiful bodies, and that they seemed truly unashamed. When they leaned over that couch, we looked, yes, right up everybody's butt. I haven't seen that before, I don't expect to see it again, and I was glad to have seen it once.

—Joan Acocella

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIMPIA ZAGNOLI



### New York City Ballet

In this second week of "Swan Lake," there are two notable débuts in the role of the Swan Queen: Tiler Peck and Megan Fairchild, alongside Chase Finlay and Gonzalo García, respectively. (The men, too, are new to their princely duties.) On Thursday, the fall gala features four new works by young choreographers, each of whom has been paired with a different fashion designer. (This idea has produced mixed results in the past.) For his new ballet, Justin Peck is using the "Pulcinella" Suite, a concise version of Stravinsky's *commedia dell'arte* ballet "Pulcinella." It is the second time he has used a famous ballet score; the first, "Rodeo," was a big success. Gianna Reisen, another of the choreographers, is just eighteen, and a recent graduate of the School of American Ballet. The other two pieces are by Troy Schumacher and Lauren Lovette. • Sept. 26-27 at 7:30, Sept. 29 at 8, Sept. 30 at 2 and 8, and Oct. 1 at 3: "Swan Lake." • Sept. 28 at 7: "Not Our Fate," "Pulcinella Variations," "Composer's Holiday," and "The Wind Still Brings." • Oct. 3 at 7:30: "Liturgy," "Polyphonia," "Odessa," and "The Times Are Racing." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through Oct. 15.)

### Twyla Tharp Dance

Tharp and her dancers return to the Joyce for the second year in a row. This time, the program consists of one new piece—a series of vignettes set to Bob Dylan songs (outtakes, perhaps, from her failed Broadway show)—and two works from the seventies. One of the latter, "The Raggedy Dances," hasn't been seen in almost half a century. The quintet, performed in Tharp's characteristically loopy, casual style, proceeds fluently from ragtime to Mozart and back. And "The Fugue," one of Tharp's first grand gestures, is a set of variations on a theme, inspired by the structure of Bach's "Musical Offering"—except that here there's no music but for the sound of the dancers' feet smacking the ground. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Sept. 26-Oct. 1 and Oct. 3. Through Oct. 8.)

### Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker & Salva Sanchis

The Belgian doyenne de Keersmaecker isn't one to shy from ambitious musical choices, but John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" is a doozy—sacred to many jazz fans, and seemingly distant from the choreographer's European aesthetic and analytical approach. "A Love Supreme," which she made with Sanchis, a Spanish acolyte and a former dancer with her troupe, Rosas, is a reworking of a 2005 piece, reconceived for four male dancers. The interplay between the legendary recording and the loose-limbed contemporary choreography is mercurial—now dissonant, now consonant—and unstable enough to engross. (New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Sept. 27-30.)

### "The Principles of Uncertainty"

The choreographer John Heginbotham and the illustrator Maira Kalman have joined forces to create a show loosely inspired by Kalman's illustrated book of the same name. The theme is life, and death, and everything in between. Both collaborators gravitate toward small, offbeat moments that reveal our essential loneliness in the universe. The mood is more quirky than glum, in part owing to the eclectic score by Colin Jacobsen, performed onstage, alongside the dancers. Kalman, too, joins the performers, listening, speaking, and even drawing. Her sketches, enlarged

and projected, become part of the stage designs. (BAM Fishman Space, 321 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Sept. 27-30.)

### Alessandro Sciarroni

This Italian choreographer's last contribution to the French Institute Alliance Française's Crossing the Line Festival, in 2015, was an endurance test for dancers and audience members alike: hours of Bavarian and Tyrolean folk dancing, repeated over and over until the dancers tired out. The surprise of the exercise was how endearing it became. For this year's festival, Sciarroni takes a similar (though less exhaustive) approach to juggling, in "UNTITLED\_I will be there when you die." Four jugglers keep tossing and catching their pins—one, then two, then three, and more—while adding tricks. The stripping away of circus elements exposes the mesmerizing, fragile beauty. (Ellen Stewart, 66 E. 4th St. [crossingthelinefestival.org](http://crossingthelinefestival.org). Sept. 28-30.)

### André M. Zachery/ Renegade Performance Group

Across centuries of slavery in the Americas, slaves escaped and formed hidden colonies of their own. The idea that such communities persisted past emancipation and that they might extend into the present and the future for black Americans is behind "Untamed Space." It's a promising subject for Zachery, a choreographer skilled in preserving and formally heightening the ambiguity of volatile material. The technologically adept composer Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste contributes Afrofuturist sounds, and a trio of striking dancers joins Zachery in translating the ideas into motion. (Danspace Project, St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. Sept. 28-30.)

### Beth Gill

Having established herself as a gifted artist of spare formalism, Gill has lately been applying that compositional sense to experiments in im-

agistic drama, creating pieces as fascinating and frustrating as uneventful dreams. "Brand New Sidewalk" comes in three not obviously related sections, a central duet flanked by two solos. Gill's frequent collaborators—the composer Jon Moyniaci and the lighting designer Thomas Dunn—make customary contributions to the faintly surreal atmosphere, but elaborate costumes by Baille Younkman play a larger-than-usual role, pointing up the tension between human performers and abstract choreography. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-598-0400. Sept. 28-Oct. 1.)

### Bouchra Ouizguen / "Corbeaux (Crows)"

This "living sculpture," involving a large group of women, keening and swaying in a kind of trance dance, is part of the Crossing the Line Festival. The choreographer, Bouchra Ouizguen, is Moroccan, with a strong background in traditional North African dance. The performers are a mixture of professionals and others, members of Ouizguen's Marrakech-based company and local participants. (Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway. [crossingthelinefestival.org](http://crossingthelinefestival.org). Sept. 30-Oct. 1.)

### Fall for Dance

The sprawling dance festival is back, offering five distinct programs, each containing an eclectic mix of companies and styles, for just fifteen bucks a pop. Among the offerings are premières commissioned for the festival, including a solo for the ballet star David Hallberg by Mark Morris, a new tap composition by the innovator Michelle Dorrance, and a new piece by the socially conscious modern-dance choreographer Kyle Abraham. The first program features Christopher Wheeldon's "Polyphonia," performed by Miami City Ballet, as well as an appearance by the Trisha Brown Dance Company, a work by the South African contemporary choreographer Vincent Mantsoe, and Dorrance's new "Myelination." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Oct. 2-3. Through Oct. 14.)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### OPERA

#### Metropolitan Opera

Even though James Levine has stepped down as the company's music director, he is still capable of inspiring the orchestra's players to greatness, particularly in the operas of Wagner, Verdi, and Mozart. His first assignment of the season is Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte," which plays in Julie Taymor's fairy-tale staging. The ensemble cast includes Charles Castronovo, Markus Werba, Kathryn Lewek, Tobias Kehrer, and the South African soprano Golda Schultz (in her company debut, as Pamina). Sept. 27 at 7:30 and Sept. 30 at 8. • After pulling off a hat trick with the operas of Donizetti's so-called Tudor Queens trilogy, in 2015-16, the American soprano Sondra Radvanovsky was rewarded with the title role in Bellini's "Norma," a touchstone of the dramatic coloratura repertory. David McVicar's new production also features Joyce DiDonato and Joseph Calleja; Carlo Rizzi conducts. Sept. 28 at 8 and Oct. 3 at 7:30. • This year's

revival of Franco Zeffirelli's crowd-pleasing production of "La Bohème" offers the house debut of the soprano Angel Blue, a former Miss Hollywood and an Operalia finalist, who has been generating interest with appearances in Europe and with her work as a presenter for the BBC Proms. Her castmates include Brigitta Kele, Dmytro Popov, and Lucas Meachem; Alexander Soddy conducts. Oct. 2 at 7:30. • Susan Froemke's new documentary, "The Opera House," tracks the monumental undertaking to construct and open the Met's home at Lincoln Center, in 1966. It follows the players—Rudolf Bing, Robert Moses, and Wallace Harrison—who fought tooth and nail to make it happen and includes an interview with the legendary Leontyne Price; the premiere marks the first time that the New York Film Festival has held a screening in the Met's auditorium. Oct. 1 at 6:30. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

#### Kronos Quartet: "My Lai"

An ensemble long associated with breaking stylistic boundaries and addressing

sociopolitical concerns, Kronos bands together with the singing actor Rinde Eckert and the Vietnamese multi-instrumentalist Văn-Anh Võ for the New York premiere of a monodrama by the composer Jonathan Berger and the librettist Harriet Scott Chessman. Directed by Eckert and Mark DiChiazza, "My Lai" is based on the story of Hugh Thompson, Jr., the U.S. Army pilot whose conscience forced him to intervene in the notorious Vietnam War massacre of the title. *Sept. 27-30 at 7:30. (BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. bam.org.)*

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### Miller Theatre: "Bach + Glass"

Last week, local audiences took in the New York premiere of Philip Glass's Concerto for Two Pianos; this week, Glass's Piano Concerto No. 3 takes its first bow in Gotham. The occasion is Miller's opening night, an event that emphasizes the theatre's long-standing commitments to both contemporary music and the early-music repertory. Simone Dinnerstein brings guest-star glamour to a program offered by the Boston chamber orchestra A Far Cry, performing the Glass premiere and Bach's Concerto in G Minor, BWV 1058; Bach's joyous Third Brandenburg Concerto rounds out the evening. *Sept. 28 at 8. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. millertheatre.com.)*

### "Music Before 1800" Series: Blue Heron

Scott Metcalfe, the director of this vigorously expressive early-music chorus from Boston, is a well-known figure in New York as well. Louise Basbas's lauded series kicks off its season with "Ma Maistresse," a quintessential Blue Heron program, directed by Metcalfe, that celebrates the genius of the Flemish composer Johannes Ockeghem. *Oct. 1 at 4. (Corpus Christi Church, 529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266.)*

## RECITALS

### David Greilsammer: "Labyrinth"

The outstanding young Israeli pianist, an inventive programmer, would seem to be an ideal musician for the Crypt Sessions series, which offers its concerts in the evocative crypt of the Church of the Intercession, in Hamilton Heights. He'll perform short works by Mozart, C. P. E. Bach, and others in alternation with the movements of Janáček's mysterious masterwork "On an Overgrown Path"; a food-and-wine reception will be held an hour before the concert. *Sept. 27 at 8. (Broadway at 155th St. deathofclassical.com.)*

### Maryanne Amacher: "Adjacencies"

The nomadic concert series Blank Forms continues in its vital quest to preserve and promote works by Amacher, an innovative composer and installation artist concerned with both the physical and the metaphysical aspects of sound. The newest offering is a 1965 work for percussion and electronics as reconstructed by Amy Cimini and Bill Dietz, to be performed by Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg (of the consistently superb quartet Yarn/Wire) with sound diffusion by Daniel Neumann and Woody Sullender. *Sept. 29-30 at 8. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. thekitchen.org.)*

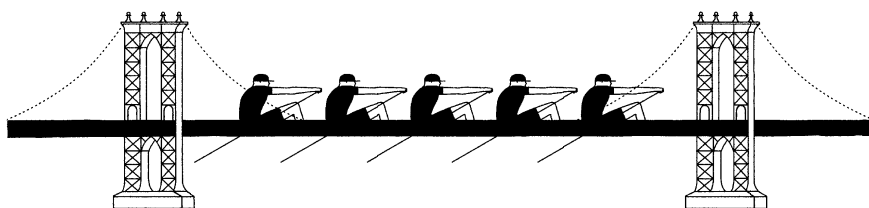
### For/With Festival

What began when the inventive trumpeter Nate Wooley commissioned new pieces from two prominent experimental composers, Christian Wolff and Michael Pisaro, comes to fruition in a two-part festival celebrating iconoclasm and collaboration. Works by those composers, and by Annea Lockwood and Ashley Fure, will span both evenings. On the first night, Wolff and Pisaro will present the public debut of their improvising duo, as heard on their fascinating 2016 CD, "Looking Around"; the second night includes a roundtable discussion. *Sept. 29-30 at 8. (Issue Project Room, 22 Boerum Pl., Brooklyn. issueprojectroom.org.)*

### Momenta Festival III: "Room with a View"

The third of four consecutive concerts from the Momenta Quartet—which strides across the centuries with ease—takes place at the gilded Teatro of Columbia University's Italian Academy, with two distinguished string players, the violinist Samuel Rhodes and the cellist Marcy Rosen, joining the young ensemble in works by three composers enraptured by Italian music and culture: Britten, Claude Baker (a premiere), and Tchaikovsky (the string sextet "Souvenir de Florence"). *Oct. 3 at 7. (Amsterdam Ave. between 116th and 118th Sts. For full schedule, and to reserve free tickets, visit momentaquartet.com.)*

# ABOVE & BEYOND



### Parade of Boats

Since 2000, the Waterfront Alliance, a nonprofit organization, has taken on the noble task of restoring and maintaining New York and New Jersey's various waterways, and also hosting events along shoreline parks and docks. The Parade of Boats, now in its tenth year, will showcase a fleet of historic ships, yachts, sailboats, and fireboats, in various stages of restoration but all fully functional, that together unfurl New York's rich port legacy. A dinner following the parade will honor Donald Capocchia, of the development firm BFC Partners, and Peter Madonna, of the Rockefeller Foundation, among others, and a silent auction will help raise funds for the city's piers and shores. *(Pier 61, Chelsea Piers at W. 21st St. waterfrontalliance.org. Oct. 3 at 6.)*

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The upcoming "Contemporary Curated" sale at Sotheby's—a newish category that homes in on the celebrity status of various tastemakers—is dominated by the collection of Santiago Barberi Gonzalez, a purveyor of fashionable crocodile handbags to the rich and famous, who died earlier this year, at the age of forty. The collection is offered, on Sept. 27, under the header "Neither Appearance nor Illusion," quoting Nietzsche (as rendered by the mid-century Conceptualist Joseph Kosuth, in a 1945 yellow-neon sculpture included in the sale). Postwar and contemporary photographs go on the block the next day. *(York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)* • Before the red-hot contemporary-art sales at which many millions are dropped on a single canvas, the auction houses hold mid-season sales, like the one at Christie's on Sept. 28, that feature more reasonably priced lots. This one includes a hanging neon sculpture ("Sweet Chocolate Nation") by Jason Rhoades and a

cool canvas in pastel colors ("Receptionist") by Wayne Thiebaud. *(20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)* • Phillips holds a day of photography auctions on Oct. 3, with a session devoted to images from the collection of the Joy of Giving Something foundation. This group of works from the foundation—the second to be offered by the house—is particularly rich in early-twentieth-century pieces by such luminaries as Stieglitz, Cunningham, and Moholy-Nagy. *(450 Park Ave. 212-940-1200.)*

## READINGS AND TALKS

### 92nd Street Y

Denis Johnson published numerous volumes of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, the most celebrated of which include his first novel, "Angels," from 1983, and his masterpiece "Jesus' Son," a collection of short stories centered on the lives of American addicts, several of which were woven into the acclaimed 1999 film adaptation, starring Billy Crudup. As a child, Johnson, the son of a State Department official, was shuttled between Eastern Europe, Asia, and the suburbs of Washington, D.C.; he'd settled in northern Idaho before he died, this past May, at the age of sixty-seven. "Denis reminded me of Dostoyevsky, a writer who was willing to plumb the darkest corners of his own psyche in order to honestly report on the nature of humanity," Lawrence Wright, who got to know Johnson at a writing seminar in Russia, recalled, in a piece for this magazine. Many notable admirers from the literature and film worlds, including Crudup, Arthur Bradford, Kevin Corrigan, Michael Cryer, Michael Cunningham, Michael Dickman, Neal Huff, Emily McDonnell, Sam Messer, Deirdre O'Connell, Will Patton, and Michael Shannon, gather to pay tribute to the influential author at this memorial event. *(395 Lexington Ave. 212-415-5500. Oct. 2 at 7:30.)*



# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### La Morada

308 Willis Ave., at 140th St., the Bronx  
(718-292-0235)

The first thing to say about this little Oaxacan restaurant in the South Bronx is that the food is excellent. A woman from Mexico City recently swore that it was some of the best Mexican cuisine she'd had outside her home country. In a city that has long bemoaned a dearth of Oaxacan fare, Natalia Mendez has been serving delicious examples of her native state's cuisine in this heliotrope-painted room for almost a decade. A rainbow of moles—red, green, black, even white, delicately spiced with chiles and chocolate and cinnamon and pine nuts—are served over tender dark chicken meat, and have gained Mendez a legion of fans.

The South Bronx in 2017 is under threat from developers, as marauding downtown execs, armed with glass and steel and concrete, pock its surface with graceless new buildings. Meanwhile, the developer-in-chief and his Republican Party are threatening to deport undocumented immigrants, many of whom live in the area and are the lifeblood of the community and our city. Sitting at the heart of one of these rapidly gentrifying “SoBro” neighborhoods, La Morada is a crucible for the resistance.

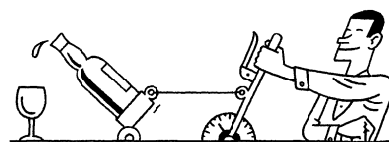
The struggle in the Bronx takes many forms, whether it's spraying “COLONIZERZ” across a sign advertising the new Bagel

Barista Café or organizing and teaching people about their rights. La Morada focusses on education, with weekly information sessions and a small library that includes Mesopotamian myths and Boethius. Hanging by the door is a banner expressing solidarity with the victims of the recent earthquake in Oaxaca. (Mendez said that her relatives there are all right, but she is still worried for them.) Guests are welcomed by Mendez's son, Marco Saavedra, the co-author of “Shadows Then Light,” a book about undocumented youth.

Other members of the family, including Mendez and her daughter Carolina, who recently found fame on the television show “Chopped,” cook behind a long counter. It's hard to find fault with their parade of flavors. Sure, there are the stand-out moles, but to order only these would be to miss the Molcajete, a stone bowl filled with nopal cactus and spongy grilled cheese and topped with two meats (the *pechuga asada* chicken and *cecina* skirt steak are the most popular), a creamy off-menu flan, or a range of mouthwatering tacos, tortas, and enchiladas. And who could forget the tamales? These small, soft parcels of doughy corn goodness taste even better when slathered with some chocolaty mole poblano. Once you start, you want to try everything. The solution is to return often: the neighborhood may be changing, but La Morada isn't going anywhere. (Dishes \$3-\$18.)

—Nicolas Niarchos

## BAR TAB



### Oscar Wilde NYC

45 W. 27th St. (212-213-3066)

Oscar Wilde, the author of “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” “The Importance of Being Earnest,” and infinite witticisms seemingly ready-made for Facebook—“Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes”—is a revered cultural icon. Perhaps for the first time, though, he's being revered in NoMad, where a recently opened bar is named after him. The other night, visitors were greeted by Wilde himself—he sits on a bench outside, dressed in a typically lavish bronze cast. Inspired by the aesthete, the bar's extravagance explodes inside, with a maze of marble objects bearing his quotations, intricate porcelain floor inlays, and an antique piano converted into shelves. A second bronze Wilde leans on the bar, an open hand anticipating a drink and an Instagram post. A server described the intense décor as similar to the owners' other bars (Lillie's Victorian Establishment) but “on crack.” One drinker guessed that the place cost half a million dollars to decorate; actually, it was eight times that. Is it in good taste? While some details might induce wincing (the menu encourages drinkers to “get Wilde”), the whole enterprise is undeniably a sight to behold, and isn't attracting eyeballs the point of being over the top? Cocktails (for fourteen dollars) are mostly solid—the Oscar Wilde's Potent Elixir is a mélange of different alcohols from countries in which the author lived—and the bar food, particularly the Banger in a Blanket, is excellent. How might Wilde feel about being the namesake of a bar? In a letter to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, which Wilde wrote while imprisoned for his sexuality, he said, “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”—Colin Stokes



FROM THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING  
AUTHOR OF *DISGRACED*



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT MADMEN THEORIES

In 1969, Richard Nixon, about eight months into his Presidency, grew frustrated with the North Vietnamese leadership. The President wanted to negotiate an exit from the Vietnam War, but his adversary's terms were unyielding. Nixon thought that he needed the Soviet Union to pressure North Vietnam; he also believed that Leonid Brezhnev would act only if he was convinced that the U.S. was about to do something crazy. In late October, Nixon ordered an operation code-named Giant Lance. B-52 bombers loaded with atomic weapons took off from bases in California and Washington State and headed toward the Soviet Union, then flew in loops above the polar ice cap. Nixon's hope was that Soviet intelligence would interpret the action as an immediate, and utterly insane, threat of nuclear attack. The "madman nuclear alert," as the political scientist Scott D. Sagan and the historian Jeremi Suri called it in a 2003 article, remained secret for years. H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff, recounted in his memoir how his boss described the tactic. "I call it the Madman Theory," Nixon once told him. "We'll just slip the word to them that 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he is angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button.'"

Last week, about eight months into his Presidency, Donald Trump,

while addressing the United Nations General Assembly, denounced Kim Jong Un, the Supreme Leader of North Korea: "Rocket Man is on a suicide mission." The President said that, while the United States has "great strength and patience," if it were "forced to defend itself or its allies" it would "have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." Kim replied in kind. "I will surely and definitely tame the mentally deranged U.S. dotard with fire," he said.

Never before have two leaders in command of nuclear arsenals more closely evoked a professional wrestling match. It is unsettling that with both men it is hard to know where performance ends and personality begins. Trump rages publicly at Kim, but, then, he rages at everyone, from his staff to Meryl Streep. Kim may not be suicidal, but he has executed

his uncle and is reported to have ordered the murder of his half brother.

In the history of nuclear diplomacy, no nation-state has ever given up atomic weapons in response to shrill threats. In a number of instances, however, countries have been coaxed to mothball their nuclear programs in exchange for political and economic returns. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus voluntarily gave up their nuclear weapons or abandoned advanced programs. In 2003, Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan dictator, agreed, in exchange for economic opportunities, to surrender his uranium-enrichment equipment. Nearly twelve years later came the landmark accord in which Iran agreed to freeze its nuclear-weapons program and dismantle parts of it, in exchange for relief from sanctions.

Sometimes leaders hold on to nukes because they fear that without them as a deterrent their countries might be invaded or destroyed. (That largely explains why Israel and Pakistan have kept theirs.) Kim Jong Un may well worry that if he gives up his nuclear weapons his regime will be overthrown. In 2011, NATO members and other nations intervened to protect a popular uprising against Qaddafi, which led to his being removed from power and killed. As Evan Osnos heard repeatedly in Pyongyang in his recent reporting for *The New Yorker*, the lesson for North Korea was clear: if you surrender a



nuclear deterrent, you embolden your enemies.

It is not Trump's fault that North Korea has crossed ominous nuclear thresholds this year. Three previous Administrations have tried and failed to alter Pyongyang's calculus. Since North Korea may have the capacity to reach American cities with nuclear-tipped missiles, it is crucial that we deter Kim by warning him that if he strikes first his country will face devastating retaliation. Such understandings have composed the framework for nuclear deterrence for decades. The U.S. may have to live with a nuclear North Korea indefinitely, but history shows that, with sufficient patience, economic pressure, and negotiation, nuclear states will sometimes disarm.

To apply some version of the Madman Theory to the North Korean problem, however, as Trump seems inclined to do, is foolish. The nuclear alert that Nixon attempted in 1969

was "ineffective and dangerous," Sagan and Suri concluded in their article. It is not clear if Brezhnev even understood what Nixon was trying to communicate. Also, the nuclear-armed American planes involved in Giant Lance risked crashing into one another. Trump and his advisers talk loosely about preparing for a "military option" against North Korea. By this they seem to mean a preemptive war, even though military analysts believe that such a conflict would claim more than a million lives in South Korea in its opening phase, while also exposing American cities to the possibility of a nuclear attack. If Kim Jong Un believes that Trump is rash enough to initiate a first strike, he may accelerate his missile and nuclear-bomb tests and deployments. North Korea's missile-testing binge this year has increased the odds of an accident. One of Kim's rockets could veer off course and kill civilians in Japan or elsewhere.

The result of such a calamity could conceivably be a war.

Trump's other gut-instinct foray into global nuclear diplomacy—his apparent intention to tear up or to unilaterally renegotiate the Iran nuclear accord—is no wiser than his strategy in East Asia. Iran is abiding by the agreement's terms. There is no new "crisis" to address. An American withdrawal from the Iran deal would not only encourage the worst elements in Iranian politics; it would also undermine U.S. relations with Russia, China, and European countries just when their cooperation is needed to pressure North Korea. "To overcome the perils of the present," the President said at the U.N. last week, "we must begin with the wisdom of the past." If only there were some evidence that Trump knew what that was, or how to use the power of his office to forge a less dangerous world.

—Steve Coll

## DEPT. OF PERSPIRATION FINNISH LINE



In the sauna, the body asserts itself: Essential, unavoidable, a fleshy fact of being. In the Finnish tradition—the original, Finns will argue—you're naked, sitting near a wood-burning stove in two-hundred-degree heat, in a structure the size of a garden shed, pouring water on hot stones for a scalding hit of *löyly*, sauna steam, like some heat-seeking junkie. Stay long enough, and the mind may clear, the body may melt; then *löyly!* Enlightenment.

Risto Sivula, a Finn from north of Helsinki who now lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, has, for the past eight months, been driving around the country with a portable sauna attached to the back of his pickup truck. "We have about fourteen thousand miles on it so far, and about nine hundred and fifty people have taken a sauna."

On a recent Sunday, Sivula parked the sauna (red-painted wood, with white-trimmed windows) in a yellow-

cab lot near the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal, in Red Hook. He wore shorts and a T-shirt that read "Finland 100," the official slogan of the hundredth anniversary of Finland's independence from Russia. "We knew there was a lot of chatter amongst Finns in America that we will be celebrating the centennial," he said. "So we came up with this idea. If you think about Finland, what's the one thing that comes to mind? A sauna. Can you name anything else that's recognizably Finnish?"

Meatballs? "Swedish," Sivula said. "There are actually a lot of Finnish things, even in your home. Those scissors that have orange handles? Fiskars? That's a Finnish brand." Also, graphic paper cups; Nokia cell phones; various cruise ships; Kone, one of the world's largest elevator companies; and a patented method for smelting copper. "Finnish companies don't really advertise being from Finland," Sivula said. He lowered his voice. "Not like our neighbor to the west. IKEA everybody knows is Swedish. H&M: Swedish. Volvo: Swedish. Finns like to say, 'We got a nice paper cup for you!'" He let out a booming laugh.

It's a question of branding, he said. For Finland, he went on, "you would



have to first define the brand: What is it? Is it 'pure nature'? Is it the one hundred and eighty-eight thousand lakes we have?" He paused. "If you put Minnesota and Iowa together, that's about the size of Finland, and about the shape of it, too. And the Arctic Circle goes in about two-thirds up."

To the sauna ("sow-na," as Finns will tell you), then. In Red Hook, two dozen people in swimsuits were lined up. Mari Lipponen, a Finnish-American, had just emerged. "What Americans don't get about saunas is it's a relaxing, almost spiritual experience," she



said. "My father was born in the sauna. In 1933, it was the cleanest place on the farm."

"It was a place for birth and death," Anu Leinonen, a Finn who moved to New York two years ago, said. "We had a President in the seventies and eighties who used to lead his political meetings in the sauna. Putin would understand the sauna. If Trump wants any hints on how to deal with the Russians, we can advise."

Sivula quoted a popular statistic: "Finland is a country of five and a half million people. We have three million cars over there, and we have two million saunas." (Finland once promoted a sauna emoji as part of a patriotic series.) "You can cook in there," he said. "We used to make sausages all the time."

Finnish saunas are hard to come by in New York City. "So we have tried to be very creative," Saku Nousiainen, who came to the United States from Finland on a Fulbright scholarship to study jazz, said. He ticked off the city's other so-called saunas, which he occasionally patronizes: Mermaid Spa, in Coney Island; the East Village Russian baths; the Wall Street *banya*, on Fulton Street.

Paula Wegman and Jackie Aude M., two non-Finnish Brooklynites in their thirties, hope to launch a mobile sauna startup in Bushwick and Ridgewood, called HotBox. They were introduced to the Finnish practice by a friend. "You feel amazing, like you could hit the sack and have the greatest slumber you've ever had," Wegman said. "New Yorkers work hard, they play hard, but where do they relax?"

"It's probably the truest sense of community," Aude M. said. "Just going in there super vulnerable, sweating your ass off, and really connecting."

Inside the mobile sauna, the temperature approached a hundred and eighty degrees. Sami Marttinen, a transplanted Finn, bent over a bucket of water with a ladle. "Some water?" he asked. "Heat?"

Noora Erkkilä, a Finn who works at the United Nations, said, "Yeah, last round."

Marttinen poured water on the rocks; the steam that burst forth was blistering. A novice admitted that a Swedish iteration hadn't been as hot.

"Ah, Swedish people, they don't know what they're doing," Erkkilä said.

"They're trying very hard, but still," Marttinen said.

—Anna Russell

## FORENSICS DEPT. YOUR OWN BACK YARD



About two and a half years ago, Miriam Sicherman's fourth graders began fishing for treasure beneath the wood-plank floor of their classroom closet, at the Children's Workshop School, on East Twelfth Street. First, they worked surgically, using pencils, chopstick style, to tweeze out objects that they spied through gaps in the boards. Then they used coat hangers as hooks. Now teachers have pried up a number of the planks, creating a full-on dig site, with strata dating back to the building's construction, in 1913. During free periods, the kids can choose between playing dominoes, mucking around in the compost bin, and kneeling beside the opening to sift through the jumble of relics that have fallen out of generations of jacket pockets and backpacks.

They've unearthed a cultural fossil record spanning a century: political buttons, ticket stubs, spelling tests, wheat pennies, flash cards, candy wrappers, and a mummified pet, its species hard to discern. Some of those items are now on display at the City Reliquary, a museum in Williamsburg, cradled by cotton batting in custom-made boxes, or nestled between acid-free backing and clear film, "similar to a large-scale microscope slide," Dave Herman, the museum's founder, explained.

Sicherman, who is forty-five and had her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, said that finding the artifacts has helped the students understand their place in history. "There's nothing about famous people here," she said. "It's the 'them' of fifty or a hundred years ago." To get the kids to appreciate the changes that have occurred in their East Village neighborhood, Sicherman has been tracking down

alumni and inviting them to come visit.

One Friday, David Levy, a sixty-seven-year-old professor at the University of Washington's Information School, sat on a small plastic chair and told the class stories about growing up in Stuyvesant Town and attending the school in the early sixties, when it was called P.S. 61. Levy fiddled with his tortoiseshell glasses and showed a photo from his fourth-grade class play, *Gilbert and Sullivan's "Iolanthe"*; the picture usually hangs in the downtown apartment of his mother, who is a hundred and one.

Levy has written a scholarly book about the value of ephemera, "Scrolling Forward," so he was eager to help the students find meaning in the stuff found beneath the floorboards. The kids' questions were more prosaic.

"Did you have break time and yoga?" one girl asked.

"We didn't even know what yoga was," Levy answered.

A girl in the back of the room raised a hand. "Did you *like* anyone?" The class dissolved into giggles.

"Oh, my God," one boy said. "Don't make me puke."

Sicherman tried to steer them back to archeology. The class had recently uncovered some mid-century movie tickets. Levy tried to remember the films he'd seen at the local movie house.

"'Captain Underpants?'" one kid offered.

Another boy asked, "Did you drop anything in the closet?"

"I don't know," Levy said. "You'll have to tell me."

Then it was time for the day's digging. The children stood on the few remaining floor planks, straddling the gulf where the flotsam had accumulated. Holding flashlights in rubber-gloved hands, they rummaged in the dust, the most common finds being broken plastic forks and workaday pencil stubs.

"I think I found something!" one child yelled. It was a penny—from 2016. Back to work.

"Oh! It's smelly!" a boy named Zion said, shoving floppy hair out of his face. "I hate this."

A girl named Aletheia discovered an old watch, its band as thin as a ribbon. She scratched at the crystal with her fingernail and found it frozen at four o'clock. She gingerly added it to a

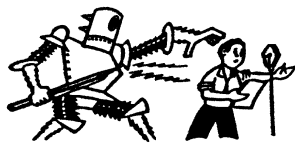
baggie with other recent finds: a ticket to a 1921 ball at Tammany Hall, a rusted tin of watercolors, a sepia-toned snapshot of a woman baking a cake while smoking a cigarette. Also: orphaned puzzle pieces, an empty candy-corn box labelled "Chic'Korn Feed," a blank form issued by the Health Department's Bureau of Dentistry to attest that a pupil had received a required dental exam. Sicherman surveyed the spoils to see if there was anything she wanted to add to the exhibit at the museum. The rumpled Tammany Hall ticket made the cut.

As the kids finished up, Levy recounted how he would buy bialys on Fourteenth Street and Avenue A, back when the neighborhood was predominantly Puerto Rican and Jewish. On hot nights, his family would eat Italian ices out of crinkly paper cups. He would buy model-airplane kits at Jo-Jo's toy shop and construct them with dabs of glue. ("I don't think I knew that anyone sniffed it," he said.)

The children told him about their plans to make a time capsule to stow away in the floor for future students to discover. One boy said, "Probably when they find it, it'll be—" He scrunched up his face, thinking. "Probably it'll be when they knock the building down."

—Jessica Leigh Hester

## INK DOODLES



Demetri Martin is a comedian whose jokes often take the form of one-liners ("Where my verb at?") or rudimentary drawings. "Constraints are big for me," he said recently, over dinner at Bar Pitti, in the West Village. "How simple can I make this and still get a laugh?" He reached into a backpack and took out a spiral-bound notebook—one of two he'd brought on the plane from Los Angeles, where he lives. It was labelled "H-56," in accordance with an idiosyncratic filing system. "Most of this is just nothing," he said, flipping through pages. In one drawing, a judge holds up a scorecard while a diver stands on a diving board. Caption: "Psychic judge." Another drawing showed two beverage coolers—one plain ("Cooler"), the other decorated with lightning bolts ("Cooler cooler"). He continued, "I try to get down every idea I have, no matter how dumb, in case one day it's useful for something."

Martin's drawings have ended up in

his standup specials, in his Comedy Central show, and in "Dean," a recent film that he wrote, directed, and starred in. "Dean" is not entirely autobiographical, but some of its plot points are: a grass-is-greener oscillation between New York and Los Angeles, the use of line drawings as therapy, and the untimely death of a parent. When Martin was a junior at Yale, his father died suddenly, of kidney cancer. "That was twenty-three years ago, and it's still easily the worst day of my life," he said. "There's a line in the movie about how losing a parent is the first thing you never get over. That was my working title for a while—'The First Thing You Never Get Over.' It was too long, so I switched it to 'Free Fall.' But that sounded like a Stallone movie, and I thought it would be a disappointment. 'Dude, have you seen 'Free Fall'?' 'Yeah, it's just a guy being sad and doodling. Don't go.'"

His second book of drawings, out this month, is called "If It's Not Funny It's Art." A few of the topics are timely, more or less—a credit-card-operated wishing well, a couple having sex while gazing at their phones—but, for the most part, Martin avoids observational humor in favor of puns (a strip club with a sign that says "SORRY, WE'RE CLOTHED"), visual gags (skateboarding pallbearers), and a surprising number of fart jokes. "When I started out as a standup, a lot of the other comedians would give me shit for being too verbose—actually, for being the kind of guy who would use a word like 'verbose,'" Martin said. "I remember one night Louis C.K. told me, 'You've got to be able to get laughs in any room.' So I tried to really simplify."

After dinner, Martin walked down West Third Street and pointed out the former location of the Boston Comedy Club, reborn as a low-lit Szechuan restaurant. "The stage was against that wall," he said, peering through the window. In the nineties, Martin went to law school at N.Y.U. "I didn't mind the classes so much—the word-puzzle aspect—but I knew right away that I didn't want to be a lawyer," he said. So he dropped out and started performing at small clubs. He turned away from the Szechuan restaurant and kept walking, toward the Comedy Cellar. In two blocks, he passed three people



*"Do you really care or are you just being a good listener?"*



he knew: a publicist at Comedy Central (“I remember her being really good at her job”), a fellow-comedian and close friend named Lenny Marcus (“One of the few people who was at both of my weddings”), and a woman who greeted him warmly (“I hate to be this guy, but I honestly don’t know who she was”).

At the Comedy Cellar, a doorman recognized Martin and asked him if he wanted to perform. He demurred. “If I



*Demetri Martin*

go up, it feels like work,” he said. “I’d rather hang out.” He made his way to a round table in the back—the comedians’ table.

Rachel Feinstein, a comedian who has known Martin for years, welcomed him with a hug. “You have kids now, right?” she said. “I wanna see pictures.”

Martin took out his phone and scrolled through photos.

“Is that your wife?” Feinstein said. “She’s hot. Nice work, dude.”

Landing on another photo, Martin said, “This is a drawing my son made. I know it’s just scribbles, but I actually think it’s a pretty good composition.”

—Andrew Marantz

## POSTSCRIPT LILLIAN ROSS



Lillian Ross came of age at a time when it was impolite to ask a lady how old she was, and—quaintly, miraculously—that practice, as it pertained to her, was observed well into

the era of full disclosure. For those of us who joined the magazine in the later years of her tenure—which is to say, almost all of us—she was a colleague of indeterminate seniority.

It was not until Lillian witnessed the way in which Nelson Mandela was fêted upon his ninety-fifth birthday, in 2013, that she realized that to have reached her advanced age, with her accomplishments, was, in a way, an accomplishment of its own. Thereafter, her age became an open point of pride: she turned ninety-nine in June.

Lillian joined *The New Yorker* in 1945, and she continued to appear in its pages for the next seventy-odd years, which means that she was not just a contributor but a creator—one of those whose style and tone became a standard to which later writers aspired. That tone—acutely observant, intimate, and very frequently amused—emerged in some of her earliest and best-known pieces, including her Profile of Ernest Hemingway and the five-part series on the making of John Huston’s “The Red Badge of Courage.” (The Xeroxes of her articles made for distribution in the nation’s journalism classes, if piled on top of one another, would reach to the moon.) She was a master of the Talk of the Town form, with its comic distillation of social mores. She was game for anything, but also knew when to turn an assignment down. When she was pitched a Talk piece on the Hope Diamond, in 2010, she said she didn’t see a story in it. “It may be I’m the wrong one to look,” she wrote to her editor. “The memory of the original Harry Winston I wrote about in 1954 is too strong, the way he touched his diamonds and talked about them as his children.”

Ross, who spent decades in a relationship with William Shawn, the second editor of this magazine, who was married, adopted a son, Erik, who was born in 1965. Ebullient in motherhood, she sent a baby photograph to J. D. Salinger, a friend of long standing. “He’s roaring with laughter,” Salinger wrote back. “Oh, if he can only hold on to it.”

It was appropriate that Lillian

defied being defined by her years: her rapport with younger people, especially very young people, was immediate and absolute. She adored babies, insisting on visiting the home of one young colleague the day after his firstborn son came home from the hospital. “I like ’em fresh!” she said.

In 1960, she joined a group of twelfth graders from Bean Blossom Township High School, in Stinesville, Indiana, population three hundred and fifty-five, when they arrived in New York City for a class trip, and deftly chronicled their wary distaste for the ways of the natives, observing, “The three girls who didn’t want to go to Coney Island explained that they firmly believed that the class should ‘have fun’ on its last night in the city, and not before.”

In her fifth decade as a staff writer, in the mid-nineties, she sat down with a bunch of private-school tenth graders on the Upper East Side. Ross always had an ear for the weird rhythms of spoken English, and she captured their profanity-laced, world-weary, sublimely innocent conversation—in a notebook; she didn’t believe in using recorders—for one of her best Talk of the Town stories. “The Shit-Kickers of Madison Avenue” was one of the earliest efforts among reporters to capture uptalk on the page: “You three come to my house you know at five? You bring all your clothes? I take everything out of my closet and spread everything out on the floor? We try on all the stuff?”

She took young people seriously, an art not always cultivated among grownups. (She wrote a Talk story about Lin-Manuel Miranda a decade ago, when he was a mere strippling of twenty-seven.) In so doing, she provided an example of how to be taken seriously by younger people—an objective that, for women especially, becomes more challenging as the years mount. Lillian was a generous champion of younger writers at the magazine, especially younger writers who sought, like her, to chronicle New York’s human comedy. In them—in us—she surely recognized her mischievous, enduring, shit-kicking self.

—Rebecca Mead

LETTER FROM MYANMAR

## FALLEN IDOL

*As a dissident, Aung San Suu Kyi was a champion of human rights. Why won't she defend them as a leader?*

BY HANNAH BEECH

When Myanmar's military regime released Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, in 2010, she had been the world's most famous political prisoner for nearly two decades. Within a few weeks, she received a phone call of congratulation from another former po-

of her leadership of the Burmese pro-democracy movement. When a book of her essays was published, soon afterward, it had an introduction by Havel, who wrote that "she speaks for all of us who search for justice."

Havel and Suu Kyi were among the

from power. In the Philippines, the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos fell after Corazon Aquino, the widow of an assassinated critic of the regime, took up her husband's struggle. Democratic movements did not always triumph—the Chinese government's massacre of student protesters near Tiananmen Square is the grimmest example—but, in the last three decades of the century, the number of democracies in the world increased from thirty-one to eighty-one.

Various fates awaited these reformers. Havel and Mandela weathered the inevitable compromises of office with their reputations intact, whereas Walesa, as Poland's President, became known as an erratic and unreliable leader. But none



*Suu Kyi in 2012, soon after she was elected to parliament. Her rise fuelled humanitarian hopes worldwide.*

litical prisoner—Václav Havel, the dissident Czech playwright who, in 1989, had become his country's first post-Communist leader. The call was the only time they ever spoke directly, but their political relationship had lasted almost as long as her captivity. In 1991, two years into his term as President of Czechoslovakia, Havel had successfully lobbied the Nobel Committee to award its Peace Prize to Suu Kyi in recognition

many dissidents around the world who, from the mid-eighties to the early nineties, emerged as icons of freedom, often toppling the regimes that had oppressed them. In South Africa, after nearly thirty years in prison, Nelson Mandela negotiated an end to apartheid and then assumed his country's Presidency. In Warsaw, a shipyard worker named Lech Walesa and a movement called Solidarity swept the Communist government

of them has undergone the kind of unexpected and alarming metamorphosis that Aung San Suu Kyi has. Her moral clarity and graceful bearing long made her a potent symbol of human rights and nonviolence. (There was a 2011 movie based on her life.) But since she became the country's de-facto leader, in 2016, she has remained impassive in the face of a series of human-rights abuses, most egregiously the brutal oppression

PANOS



of the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority in the west of the country, near the Bangladesh border.

Myanmar is a patchwork of a hundred and thirty-five officially recognized ethnicities, dominated by the Bamar, from the country's heartland, who make up sixty-eight per cent of the population and most of the ruling élite. Armed conflicts have simmered for decades between numerous ethnic groups and Bamar-led governments. In 1947, Suu Kyi's father, Aung San, a Bamar general now regarded as the founder of the modern nation, persuaded several groups to put aside their differences in the interest of ending colonial British rule. But he was assassinated shortly before independence, which went into effect in January, 1948, and tribal conflicts soon consumed the young nation.

These civil wars gave the military an excuse to seize power, which it did, in 1962. (It later changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar; changed the name of the old capital from Rangoon to Yangon; and built a new capital, Naypyidaw.) The junta ruled ineptly and repressively for nearly fifty years, amid growing pressure for democratic reform. In 2015, when it allowed free elections for the first time in a generation, Suu Kyi's popularity propelled her party, the National League for Democracy, to a landslide victory. The N.L.D. and the Army cautiously entered a power-sharing agreement and, in 2016, formed a government that is civilian-led but still substantially dominated by the military.

On taking office, Suu Kyi emulated her father by announcing talks to resolve the ethnic struggles. "Our country is thirsty for peace," she proclaimed. But some conflicts have intensified, and the Army has broken ceasefire agreements. Journalists and activists who are critical of the government have been jailed. Most urgently, the plight of the Rohingya has developed into a humanitarian catastrophe. Attacks on Army and police posts by Rohingya militants last October, and again in August, have unleashed a ferocious crackdown. In the past month, more than four hundred thousand Rohingya refugees have fled across the border into Bangladesh, bringing with them accounts of indiscriminate slaughter and mass rape. Satellite images show

that more than two hundred Rohingya villages have been incinerated.

Within Myanmar, the Rohingya are uniquely despised by almost all other ethnicities. Nearly ninety per cent of the country is Buddhist, and most people regard the Muslim Rohingya as illegal immigrants; they are not included in Myanmar's official tally of ethnicities. Suu Kyi has done nothing to combat this prejudice. Her government has denied visas to a United Nations human-rights team charged with investigating the crisis, and international organizations have been prevented from delivering aid.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has called the security crackdown "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing," and several of Suu Kyi's fellow Peace Prize laureates, including Desmond Tutu and Malala Yousafzai, have urged her to condemn the violence. Instead, she has described the Rohingya insurgents as "terrorists" and dismissed the worldwide condemnation, saying that international outlets have created "a huge iceberg of misinformation." Her office has accused the Rohingya of setting fire to their own homes in order to provoke an outcry. In a speech last week, Suu Kyi refused to criticize the Army and offered a sustained exercise in moral equivalence. "There have been allegations and counter-allegations," she said. "We have to listen to all of them."

Recently, I travelled to Myanmar and interviewed dozens of people to assess what had gone wrong. Many of them pointed out that Suu Kyi's power is sharply limited. She has no authority over the Army, while military officers still control key areas of government and have the power to reverse democratic reforms. Some believe that she has made a political calculation not to risk domestic popularity for the sake of a hated and powerless minority; others regard her as lacking political skills. There are also those who think that she shares the Army's authoritarian reflexes and the anti-Muslim prejudices of the Buddhist Bamar majority. But almost everyone I talked to expressed surprise at the speed and the scale of her transformation. "We never expected that Aung San Suu Kyi would get us this far," a former student activist and political prisoner who once served as her bodyguard told me. "But,

at the same time, we never expected that Aung San Suu Kyi would have changed so much herself once she got into power."

Aung San Suu Kyi was just two years old when, on July 19, 1947, armed men burst in on a meeting convened to oversee Burma's transition to independence and killed her father and eight others. Growing up in the shadow of her father's legend, she was largely shielded from the turmoil of the post-independence years. At the Methodist English High School, in Rangoon, she took classes in morality and geography. Sao Haymar Thaike, a childhood friend and the daughter of Burma's first post-independence President, told me that Suu Kyi was a serious, bookish girl, raised by a "very strong, kindhearted" mother, Khin Kyi. In 1960, Khin Kyi was appointed Ambassador to India and took her daughter with her. Two years later, Burma's coup installed a socialist military regime.

Suu Kyi was fifteen when she left Burma, and she did not return, apart from occasional visits, for twenty-eight years. After attending school in New Delhi, she went to Oxford and studied philosophy, politics, and economics—she was an undistinguished student—and then worked briefly for the U.N., in New York. In 1972, she married Michael Aris, a young British academic who became an expert in Tibetan Buddhism. The couple had two sons and eventually settled in Oxford, where Suu Kyi assumed a domestic role, cycling to the market and sewing name tags on the boys' clothes. But her father's legacy had instilled in her a sense of destiny. She researched his life and published a short biography, enumerating his accomplishments. Before she married Aris, she sent him a letter making it clear that her country came first. "I only ask one thing, that should my people need me, you would help me to do my duty by them," she wrote. "Would you mind very much should such a situation ever arise? How probable it is I do not know, but the possibility is there."

The moment came in 1988. In March, Suu Kyi's mother had a stroke, and Suu Kyi rushed back to Burma to be with her. The years of military rule had caused widespread decay. A country that had

once had a robust education system and some of the most fertile rice paddies in Asia had become one of the world's poorest, thanks to the regime's disastrous nationalization of the economy. While she was there, student protests against the junta flared up. Soldiers fired on crowds, and hundreds of people were killed in a matter of months. A group of disaffected Army officers, lawyers, students, and writers asked Suu Kyi to be the leader of a new political party, the National League for Democracy.

Suu Kyi had been out of the country for three decades and had no political experience. But the N.L.D.'s founders wanted a member of Aung San's family to sanctify their mission, and Suu Kyi did not hesitate to accept. She made her first major speech on August 26th, at Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's holiest Buddhist site. In a clear, confident voice, she invoked her father's memory and called the uprising against the military "the second struggle for national independence."

Suu Kyi threw herself into activism. In May, 1989, giving in to public pressure, the junta announced that general elections would be held the next year. But soon afterward Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest, without trial, for "endangering the state," and most of the N.L.D.'s leadership was imprisoned. It still won an overwhelming majority, but the regime refused to hand over power. Suu Kyi spent fifteen of the next twenty-one years confined to her family's lakeside villa in Yangon; the military released her twice, only to confine her again. Hoping to neutralize her as a politician, the generals inadvertently turned her into an emblem of the struggle against them.

In 1999, Suu Kyi was faced with an agonizing decision. Her husband had received a diagnosis of terminal cancer and asked the regime to let him visit her. Repeated requests were denied, but the generals offered to release Suu Kyi, so that she could visit him, in Oxford. She and Aris knew that, if she

left the country, she would never be allowed back. She chose to stay in Myanmar and never saw him again.

In January, 2012, a little more than a year after Aung San Suu Kyi's final release from house arrest, another female prisoner of conscience was freed. Her name was Wai Wai Nu, and she, too, was from a political family. Her father, a former headmaster, had won a seat in parliament in the thwarted 1990 elections. In 2005, when she was an eighteen-year-old law student, Wai Wai Nu was convicted of various trumped-up charges—the judge didn't even bother to take any notes—and sentenced to seventeen years. Along with her sister, brother, mother, and father, she was held in Yangon's notorious Insein Prison. To wash, she was given three cups of water, which was later upped to five, for good behavior.

But, whereas Suu Kyi is a patrician Bamar, Wai Wai Nu is a Rohingya. I first met her three years ago, in Yangon, at the office of an N.G.O. she had set up, Women Peace Network Arakan. (Arakan is the old name for Rakhine State, a low-lying coastal area in western Myanmar that is home to the Rohingya.) I climbed five flights of stairs, each shabbier than the last, and saw, through an opening in the stairwell, an empty basket being lowered down the side of the building on a long rope. A minute later, the basket went back up, filled with onions, ginger, and other ingredients for a curry—an improvised dumbwaiter in a city whose tropical swelter makes stairs a trial.

At the entrance to the office was a scattering of sandals, rhinestone-studded wedges, and frayed straw slippers. The workplace hummed with a kind of righteous energy. In careful cursive, young women covered a whiteboard with snippets of N.G.O.-speak English: "capacity building," "women's empowerment," "vocational training." Wai Wai Nu, who is thirty, and has an effervescent smile and animated eyes, told me that she grew up steeped in politics—"a little girl listening to old guys talk." Her earliest role model was Aung San Suu Kyi. "My father used to show me her picture, hidden in his diary," she said. In the mid-nineties, it was still possible to think that Suu Kyi's fight for human rights included



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*Endowment support for the White Light Festival presentation of Mark Morris Dance Group is provided by Blavatnik Family Foundation Fund for Dance.*

rights for the Rohingya. It had been decades since Rohingya had imagined that any national political figure would do anything other than oppress them.

Evidence of the presence of Rohingya in Rakhine State—and of Muslims generally—stretches back centuries. But Myanmar's other groups regard them instead as a vestige of the colonial era, when the country was incorporated into British India and the British brought non-Buddhists from elsewhere in the colony to work in Burma. The Myanmar government forbids the use of the name Rohingya and most people call them Bengali. Generally South Asian in appearance, they are easily identifiable to other ethnic groups. They have a long-standing conflict with the Buddhist Rakhine people, who have themselves been marginalized and oppressed by the Bamar elite.

At the time of independence, in 1948, the Rohingya could still, by and large, consider themselves just one of many ethnic groups scrambling to find their place in the new nation. Rohingya served in parliament, and the ethnicity was included in a 1961 census. But the military junta espoused a xenophobic, Bamar-supremacist ideology, and, in the following decades, the Rohingya were systematically demonized, many of them stripped of basic rights. In 1982, a new citizenship law began to recategorize them as Bengali aliens. Although Rohingya politicians like Wai Wai Nu's father could still run for parliament, institutional discrimination became more overt. Rohingya could no longer attend the best schools, and those who could not afford to pay off local officials found their freedom to move around the country curtailed. Desperate for work and increasingly stateless, the Rohingya began turning to traffickers to smuggle them out of the country. They boarded barely seaworthy boats to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia; hundreds died along the way. In recent years, the government has confined around a hundred thousand displaced Rohingya to internment camps, where they have little access to food or medicine.

Wai Wai Nu is not a typical Rohingya. She is well-educated and cos-

opolitan, lighter-skinned, and does not wear the veil. When we first met, she was still fairly hopeful about what might happen if Suu Kyi and the N.L.D. came to power. She could overlook Suu Kyi's refusal to use the word "Rohingya" and her evasiveness about the status of Muslims, assuming that she was simply tailoring her campaign tactics to an electorate in the grip of growing religious tensions. "Of course, we are disappointed," Wai Wai Nu told me. "But I believe we have no choice but to support her. Once a democratic party is in power, then we will have more chances and more hope."



Last week, I met with Wai Wai Nu again, but outside Myanmar. She now believed that her people might be facing extinction. She told me she worried that there was a plan to drive the entire Rohingya community from the country. She had been monitoring Burmese social media, and was horrified by what she read. Burmese officials were saying that mass rape couldn't have occurred because Rohingya women were too filthy. "Because the civilian government is saying these things, people are becoming more and more full of hate," Wai Wai Nu said. "Before, it was a military dictatorship, so no one believed them when they said awful things. But now it's the civilian government of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi saying these ignorant things and that legitimizes the hate."

Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, thinks that it is naïve to be disappointed in Aung San Suu Kyi. He noted that, as early as 2012, she had gone out of her way to avoid meeting him, despite his organization's decades of support for her cause. "We were already beginning to criticize her on the Rohingya issue," he said. "I guess she didn't want to be in the company of someone who dared to criticize her." Roth sees Suu Kyi's refusal to speak out against the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya as a political calculation. "She's thinking, It's not worth it, these people are too unpopular for me to bother defending," he said.

The charged atmosphere is also perilous for Myanmar's substantial popu-

lation of non-Rohingya Muslims, many of whom make up a prosperous mercantile class. Since 2012, there have been outbreaks of violence against Muslims in trading towns in central Myanmar. Islamophobia is deep-seated, and it has recently been fanned by extremist monks, who point to the eclipse of Buddhism by Islam in Afghanistan and Indonesia, and warn that Myanmar may be next. Monks command great respect, and even university-educated Burmese have told me, in complete seriousness, that the high birth rate among some Muslim groups is a form of jihad.

I met a long-standing spiritual adviser to Suu Kyi, Dhamma Piya, at a monastery in Yangon, where he is the abbot. He deplored the influence of Buddhist extremists and spoke proudly of the role that monks had played in every freedom movement since colonial times. "Young people don't understand anything except hating Muslims," he complained. However, he went on to say, "The truth is that many *kalar*"—a pejorative epithet for Muslims—"don't know how to act well, because they don't have good education. Their behavior can be a little aggressive." When I asked what kind of behavior he was referring to, he said that they often blocked traffic.

Buddhist ultranationalism has eroded the center ground of Burmese politics. In the 2015 elections, the N.L.D., anxious to avoid accusations that it was a "Muslim party," refused to field a single Muslim candidate. For the first time since independence, no Muslims currently serve in parliament. And Suu Kyi's government has made no attempt to revoke laws that limit the number of children Muslims can have and that create obstacles for marriages between Muslim men and Buddhist women.

On a rainy day in Yangon, I visited a retired oil engineer named Tin Myint, whose father, a Muslim, had been in Aung San's cabinet and was assassinated alongside him. It was the beginning of Ramadan, and I felt self-conscious nibbling on the toddy-palm cake his housekeeper had set out for me. But Tin Myint sipped tea with me, the need to put a guest at ease apparently outweighing strict observance of the fast. "We cannot flaunt our religion, have different dress, different foods," he said. "I tell my community this always." He expressed





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no particular concern for the Rohingya. “Muslims in Yangon have little connection with them,” he said.

We spoke about the assassination, in January, of Ko Ni, a prominent Muslim lawyer who was a friend of his. Ko Ni had been a legal adviser to the N.L.D. and, like several other Muslims in the Party, was close to Suu Kyi. The killing, which was attributed to a group of renegade ex-Army officers, horrified Yangon, and thousands of people, of many faiths, flocked to the funeral. Suu Kyi, however, did not attend. Nor did she send flowers or condolences to his family, and, for a month, she made no public comment. In the months since Ko Ni’s death, I asked more than a dozen Burmese Muslims how her silence made them feel, and they all hesitated to criticize her. Each of them said something similar to what Tin Myint said as we sat drinking tea: “She must have had her reasons.”

Among the millions who cast their votes for Suu Kyi’s party in 2015 was a pale, bespectacled former general named Khin Nyunt, who used to be the most feared man in Myanmar. In the mid-eighties, he became the chief of intelligence, establishing a Stasi-like spy network and overseeing the arrests of thousands of people. He was also in charge of a forced-labor scheme, which compelled people in ethnic areas, many of them children, to work on the Army’s infrastructure projects. In 2003, he became Prime Minister and experimented with reform. He signed ceasefires with ethnic militias and business deals with neighboring countries. Whereas Than Shwe, the longtime junta chief, so loathed Suu Kyi that he forbade all mention of her name in his presence, Khin Nyunt arranged a dialogue with her.

After only a year in office, he was ousted by rival factions in the regime, and he spent more than seven years under house arrest. I met him at the compound where he had been confined. On its grounds, he runs an art gallery and handicrafts store, which sells gaudy photographs of tourist sites, chunks of petrified wood, and cheap jade bracelets. A coffee-shop venture failed for lack of customers. “People are afraid to come here,” he told me, shrugging in

mock surprise. “I don’t know why.” My interpreter (a friend who is at work translating George Orwell into Burmese) understood why: as a child in Rakhine State, he had been forced to work on one of Khin Nyunt’s road crews. He told me later that sitting so close to the man made him tremble inside.

“I thought the N.L.D.’s slogan, ‘Time for Change,’ was very good,” Khin Nyunt told me, holding my hand in a fleshy grip. “Daw Aung San Suu Kyi knows the importance of discipline, so I have a lot of hope for this country.”

He saw Suu Kyi’s expediency as a positive development. “Before, she confronted the military, so it was not harmonious,” he said. “Now she is trying to be good with Min Aung Hlaing,” the head of the armed forces. “It seems like she has realized that she has to negotiate.”

He was right that Suu Kyi has little alternative but to work with the people she once campaigned against. The euphoria that surrounded her ascent obscured how extensive the military’s power remains. The Army controls the ministries for defense, home affairs, and border affairs, and a quarter of the seats in parliament are reserved for men in uniform. Even ministries that are in civilian hands, such as finance, are full of holdovers from the previous regime, and much of the country’s budget is reserved for military use. Myanmar’s constitution, written by the military in 2008, presents additional difficulties. It allows the Army to declare a state of emergency and seize power, and it also contains a clause that makes Suu Kyi ineligible for the Presidency. (Her current official title, State Counsellor, is a work-around.) Suu Kyi wants to amend the Constitution and become President, but this requires military support. Her defenders often cite the precariousness of her constitutional position as a reason for her reluctance to speak out about Army abuses. While pushing the military for constitutional reform, she must also avoid antagonism and a return to military rule.

But her failure to condemn the military is not merely a matter of pragmatism. The Party she leads was co-founded by a former commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and several of Suu Kyi’s closest advisers are ex-officers. The

N.L.D. is run with a military emphasis on loyalty and hierarchy. Few members dare to publicly criticize it, let alone its leader, for fear of expulsion. One Cabinet minister proudly told me, “For the most important decisions, the most important person must decide.” The culture of deference means that there is always a backlog of vital decisions at the State Counsellor’s door.

Although the N.L.D. has recruited young talent, party leaders are notable for their age and time served in prison. “She is surrounded by people who are too high level, not grassroots,” Sao Haymar Thaike, the childhood friend, told me. “She doesn’t have many good advisers. She only has her own thoughts. People are scared to give her information.”

For all Suu Kyi’s opposition to the junta, she remains a child of the military. The armed forces of today have their origin in the Burmese Independence Army, which her father founded, in 1941, in order to rid the country of the British. In her Shwedagon Pagoda speech, Suu Kyi reminded her listeners of this history. “Let me speak frankly,” she said. “I feel strong attachment for the armed forces. Not only were they built up by my father—as a child I was cared for by his soldiers.” She retains many of the military’s values, frequently stressing the importance of discipline and unity. In 2013, a year after she first won a parliamentary seat, she surprised observers by appearing among the generals to view the military parades that mark Myanmar’s Armed Forces Day.

I spoke to Jody Williams, who, in 2003, was the first Nobel Peace Prize laureate to be allowed to visit Suu Kyi. (Williams, the founder of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, won the prize in 1997.) She noticed that Suu Kyi took a pragmatic view of the generals who had curtailed her freedom. “She said something to the effect of, ‘If we let the military go with big bank accounts, then that’s fine with me,’” Williams told me. “It’s not an uncommon way to think, but it was surprising to hear.” Williams was even more struck by what wasn’t said: “There was absolutely no discussion of human rights, of all the things that had made her into a global icon.”

Williams’s skepticism deepened when Suu Kyi visited New York, in 2012,

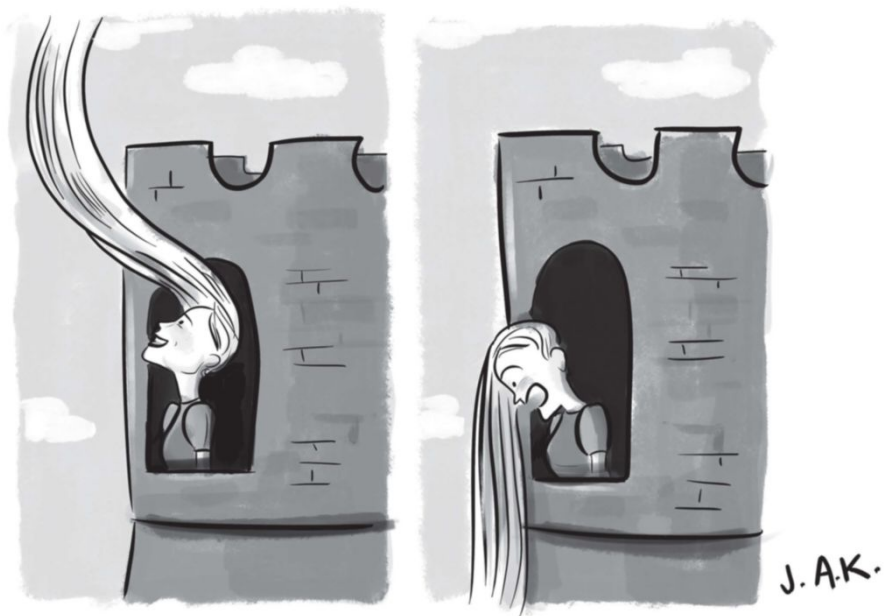


and met with members of an N.G.O. that Williams had co-founded. “She was hostile to any question about human rights in her country,” Williams told me, recalling how a young Burmese activist had been dismayed after Suu Kyi stormed out of the meeting. “She was so excited to see her heroine,” Williams said. “When Aung San Suu Kyi displayed such hostility, the poor young woman just kept saying, ‘I can’t believe this, I can’t believe this, this is Aung San Suu Kyi!’”

Williams has come to think that both the earlier veneration of Suu Kyi as a secular saint of human rights and the current shock at her transformation are based on misinterpretation. “She allowed herself to be misread,” she said. Williams suspects that Suu Kyi’s aims have remained consistent since the period after 1988, when she returned to her homeland, assumed the mantle of her father, set her sights on leadership, and was robbed of victory. “Once she decided to be in the student movement, and then they won the election and it was taken from her, her mind went like a laser beam to getting into power,” Williams said. “That’s been her single ambition, other issues be damned.”

Once asked Aung San Suu Kyi what quality she most valued in people, and she responded, “Loyalty.” Many people attest to this. In Naypyidaw, I met the N.L.D. parliamentarian Kyaw Soe Lin. In 2003, during one of Suu Kyi’s periods of liberty, he was assigned to be her driver on a national tour. On May 30th, her convoy was attacked by well-armed assailants, in what is presumed to have been an assassination attempt ordered by a hard-line military faction. Some seventy people were killed and Suu Kyi’s neck was cut by flying glass. True to the principles of nonviolence, she ordered her guards not to fight back. Kyaw Soe Lin drove as fast as he could through several roadblocks but was eventually stopped at one.

After the incident, Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest again. Kyaw Soe Lin and seventeen others were flown, handcuffed and hooded, to a remote location near the Indian border. He was punched, kicked, and burned with cigarettes and candle wax—I could see the scars on his forearms—in an effort to



## RAPUNZEL'S SHORT-LIVED RELATIONSHIP WITH ICARUS

force him to confess that the N.L.D. had been responsible for the violence. “I could hear the screams of others as they were tortured, but I stayed silent,” he said. He was held for months in a tiny room so water-logged that he could not lie down.

After Suu Kyi was permanently released from house arrest, Kyaw Soe Lin went to visit her. She held out a small plastic wrapper. It was from a packet of snacks he had given her on the day of the massacre. “She told me that she kept the bag of snacks to remember me by,” he said. “Every day, she would eat a little and then put it away.” Eventually, there was nothing left in the bag, but she kept it for eight years.

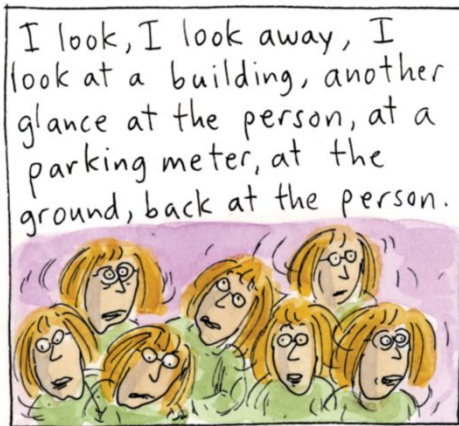
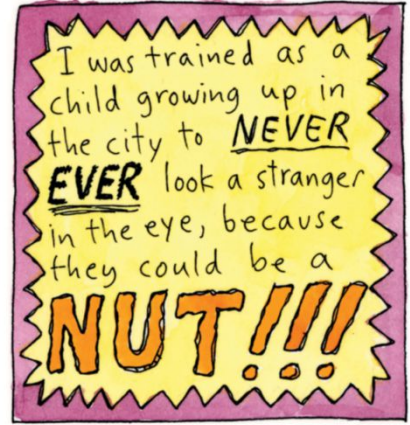
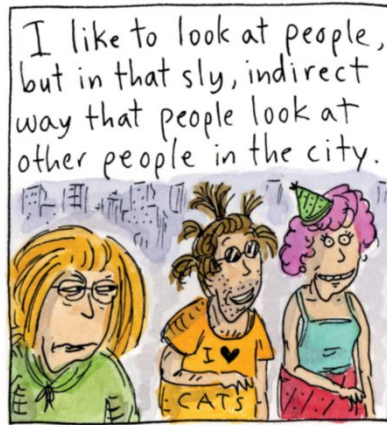
For her entire life, Suu Kyi has been faithful to the memory of a father she never knew and to a country that she’d seen little of between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five. The intransigence and the certitude that may now cause her to be remembered as an enemy of freedom are the same qualities that served her well in captivity. In the years alone in her house, her distance from active politics made her a perfect vessel for the hopes of her countrymen and for the idealistic projections of the wider world.

“Aung San Suu Kyi has the benefit of having become an icon without say-

ing a whole lot,” Kenneth Roth, of Human Rights Watch, told me. “Havel came to his position by saying a lot, by being a moral voice. Aung San Suu Kyi didn’t say much at all. She was a moral symbol, and we read into that symbol certain virtues, which turned out to be wrong when she actually began speaking.” Suu Kyi was not an intellectual, like Havel, or a freedom fighter, like Mandela, or an organizer, like Walesa. And, unlike her father, she did not die before her legend could be tarnished.

In November, 2010, Suu Kyi’s younger son visited Myanmar for the first time since her release. He hadn’t seen her in a decade. Before he returned to England, he went to a pet shop in Yangon and bought her a brown-and-white puppy. Suu Kyi lavished attention on the dog, and foreign dignitaries discovered that bringing gifts for it tended to get meetings off to a good start. Since then, it has grown into an aggressive creature that growls and snaps at anyone who dares approach its owner. Suu Kyi is oblivious of the dog’s mean streak, and enjoys decking it out in sunglasses and kissing it when it sees her off at the airport. “I hate that dog,” one of her closest friends told me. “But she loves it like a child, because it’s faithful to her.” ♦







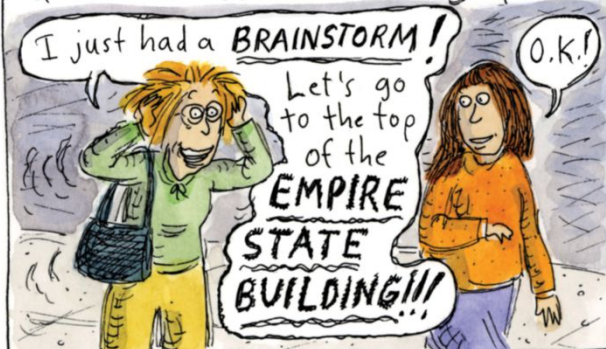
I kept walking. I wasn't tired, and the city was filled with wonderful distractions.



I met my daughter for dinner at an Italian restaurant. We ate and drank and yakked for a long time.



It was such a nice night that after dinner we started walking uptown.



I hadn't been up there in thirty years. My daughter had NEVER been. Sometimes it's actually fun to do a touristy thing.



There certainly had been some changes since then.



My "explanation" didn't help.

Well, you see, I was walking along... found it on the sidewalk!... forgot about it... daughter and I... dinner... blah, blah, blah, and **HERE WE ARE!**



They believed me, but they confiscated it and said I could reclaim it when we came back down from the observation deck. I never bothered.

Out of the ether it came, and back into the ether it went.



R. CW



## CATHER PEOPLE

*Visiting the prairie that inspired America's great novelist of landscape.*

BY ALEX ROSS

In Webster County, Nebraska, the prairie rolls in waves, following the contours of a tableland gouged by rivers and creeks. At the southern edge of the county, a few hundred feet north of the Nebraska-Kansas border, is a six-hundred-acre parcel of land called the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. Cather spent much of her childhood in Red Cloud, six miles up the road, and for many people who love her writing, and perhaps for some who don't, the Cather Prairie is one of the loveliest places on earth. You park at the top of a hill and follow a path down to a gulch, where a creek widens into a pond. At the bottom, you no longer see traces of modern civilization, though you can hear trucks on Route 281 as they clamber out of the Kansas flats. The land here was never plowed, and with careful cultivation it preserves the prairie as Cather roamed it, in the eighteen-eighties—an immemorial zone of grass, trees, birds, water, and wind. You can picture one of Cather's pioneer women—Alexandra Bergson, the canny farm owner in “O Pioneers!”; Thea Kronborg, the budding operatic soprano in “The Song of the Lark”; Ántonia Shimerda, the buffeted heroine of “My Ántonia”—coming over the top of the hill. When I was last there, in June, the sky was a blaring blue and the hills were a murmur of greens. The air was hot and heavy enough that thoughts evaporated from my mind. I lay under a cottonwood tree and listened to leaves and grass swaying . . .

Et cetera, et cetera. The only person capable of doing justice to the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie is the woman who engendered it. In “My Ántonia,”

the orphaned young settler Jim Burden delivers a rhapsody that many Cather fans can recite by heart:

I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away. The light air about me told me that the world ended here: only



*The Nebraska plains gave Willa Cather the stuff of epics.*

the ground and sun and sky were left, and if one went a little farther there would be only sun and sky, and one would float off into them, like the tawny hawks which sailed over our heads making slow shadows on the grass. . . . I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air,

or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.

Visitors to the Cather Prairie are a varied lot. In June, I encountered a woman who was struggling to maintain a farm in Kansas after her parents' death. The previous day, Laura Bush, the former First Lady, had gone for a walk in the tall grass, with members of the Secret Service standing watch.

The occasion that brought the three of us to town, along with several hundred other Cather People, as locals call the literary tourists, was the opening of the National Willa Cather Center, a seven-million-dollar facility with a climate-controlled archive, apartments for scholars, museum exhibits, and a bookstore. The complex is the dream project of the Willa Cather Foundation, which is based in Red Cloud. Bush was the keynote speaker, and she recounted how Cather's “strong, self-reliant women” had appealed to a girl growing up in West Texas. Bush recalled her grandmother Jessie Hawkins, who had driven a dairy truck and learned to lay brick. At this festive occasion, Bush omitted the most Cather-like element of her grandmother's story: when Hawkins was young, her father killed himself on his farm, with a shotgun. Mr. Shimerda, Ántonia's father, does the same. Bush quoted another indelible Cather sentence: “There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened.”

Red Cloud, which has a population of about a thousand and retains a farm-oriented economy, belongs to a select company of literary towns that are permanently inscribed with a writer's identity: places like Hannibal, Missouri (Mark Twain) and Oxford, Mississippi (William Faulkner). Cather depicted Red Cloud in six of her twelve novels. The town is called Hanover in “O Pioneers!”; Moonstone in “The Song of the Lark”; Black Hawk in “My Ántonia”; Frankfort in “One of



Ours”; Sweet Water in “A Lost Lady”; and Haverford in “Lucy Gayheart.” There is always a main street running through the town center, with the wealthier residents to the west and the poorer ones to the east. The railroad always cuts across to the south. Often there is a one-and-a-half-story house off the main street, where, up in an attic room, a girl dreams of being somewhere else. One of the first achievements of the Cather Foundation, in the nineteen-sixties, was to preserve the family home, and up in the attic you can see the wallpaper that Cather installed when she was a child—a pattern of “small red and brown roses on a yellowish ground,” as she writes in “The Song of the Lark.”

Cather transplanted entire Red Cloud households into her fiction, often with physical characteristics and personalities intact. Many of the families Cather wrote about still live in the area. In June, I stayed at the Kaley House, an opulently restored bed-and-breakfast owned by Jay Yost, who grew up in Red Cloud and now works as a private banker in New York. When Yost and his husband, Wade Leak, are in town—Yost is on the Cather Foundation board—they convene mildly raucous gatherings of local family and friends. The first night I was there, I met Brad Sherwood, of Omaha, a great-grandson of Carrie Miner, whose family inspired the prosperous, upright Harlings in “My Ántonia.” At the Cather Center the following day, I spoke to Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, the ninety-seven-year-old granddaughter of Annie Sadilek Pavelka, the Czech immigrant who inspired Ántonia herself. Turner, an uproarious woman with a raspy voice, didn’t immediately remind me of Cather’s weathered heroine, but she exuded elemental force.

“Miss Cather caught my family very well,” Turner bellowed at me. “How my grandmother took life! She never had any teeth, but she’d eat meat no matter what. She said she’d live her whole life the same way again, even with all its tribulations, because that’s the way the Lord wanted it to be. But the book gets one thing wrong—in the scene where Jim Burden kills the snake. My *grandmother* killed the snake!”

You can tour the Cather home, with its dusty Victorian décor; you can visit the Red Cloud Opera House, a modest

second-story theatre where Cather fell in love with the stage; you can drive out to the rural cemetery where the writer’s paternal grandparents are buried. You cannot, however, see Cather’s own grave. That is found in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where she liked to work in the autumn months. Buried beside her is Edith Lewis, her longtime companion. The absence of Cather’s remains in Red Cloud is significant. When tour groups arrive at the old railroad depot, which is now a museum, they see a prop coffin in the stationmaster’s office. This is a cue for guides to discuss Cather’s 1905 story “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” in which the body of a celebrated artist is brought back to his hometown, amid innuendos about his “lady-like voice” and his “trapezing to Paris.” Such talk elicits a rant from a heavy-drinking lawyer with a generous heart: “It’s not for me to say why, in the inscrutable wisdom of God, a genius should ever have been called from this place of hatred and bitter waters.” Cather—who never publicly identified as gay and never pretended to be straight—may have foreseen a similar scene at her own burial, and chosen not to be brought home.

In the decades after her death, in 1947, Cather was in danger of falling into the ranks of regional writers, the rhapsodists of limited geographies. Increasingly, though, scholars treat Cather as a major modernist who rivals Woolf and Joyce in complexity. These days, especially, her tense relationship with the mythology of the American heartland commands attention. Laura Bush rightly said that Cather helped forge a Western identity, but it was not the same West that male bards of empire extolled. Cather introduced a new way of seeing, placing us in landscapes of “obliterating strangeness,” of saturating color and light. When you walk the Cather Prairie, you move not only backward in time but also out into symbolic terrain, one in which the self becomes a “something,” in which a moment of supreme bliss is indistinguishable from death.

The talk in Catherland these days is about the letters. Cather’s will forbade verbatim quotation from her correspondence, probably in an attempt to keep scholars at bay (“information vampires,” she called them). The Cather estate lifted that restriction to allow the

publication, in 2013, of “The Selected Letters of Willa Cather,” edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout. In January, when Cather’s letters enter the public domain, the Willa Cather Archive, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, will begin to publish her complete correspondence online, drawing on a collection of more than three thousand items. The letters echo her voice—“confident, elegant, detailed, openhearted,” as Jewell and Stout describe it. She was, they admit, a “rather histrionic character.” She is abrupt, candid, self-pitying, given to dubious generalizations (“People who go and have grotesque accidents are clowns”), and relentless toward her publishers (“The blue behind the lettering seems to me rather dark and heavy for a jacket,” she writes to Knopf). Although illness and loss shadow her final years, the fire never dies. In 1943, she compliments a college student on his style, but the words “the world beautiful” elicit a rebuke: “That is the only bad phrase in your letter. But it is bad. It is what I call ‘women’s club phraseology.’ You could have said that better, had you tried.”

The Nebraskan was first a Virginian. She was born in 1873, in Back Creek Valley, near Winchester, on the north end of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her background was deeply Southern. Three of her uncles had fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, and several of the family’s African-American servants had been enslaved in her great-grandparents’ household—histories that Cather brought to life in her final novel, “Sapphira and the Slave Girl,” published in 1940. Cather’s father, Charles, managed a sheep farm; when the barn burned, in 1883, the family moved to Nebraska, following other members of the wider Cather clan. They first lived on a homestead north of Red Cloud, then in town, where Charles Cather made a respectable living selling farm loans and insurance. Less than fifteen years earlier, only a few white families had occupied the area; now a community of twenty-five hundred people had sprung up.

The transfer west came as an enormous shock: Cather felt as if she had been cast out of civilization. “It was a kind of erasure of personality,” she later said. Jim Burden, who replicates Cather’s childhood journey in “My Ántonia” and also goes back East as an adult, feels

similarly: “Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out.” Yet Cather soon made peace with this strange new life; erasure permitted self-invention. At around the age of fifteen, she flirted with a male persona, signing her name William Cather, Jr., or Wm. Cather, M.D. She settled on the given name Willa, a variation of her baptismal name, Wilella; she later added the middle name Sibert. On display at the Cather Center is the family Bible, open to the page on which a mature editorial hand has changed Wilella to Willa, added Sibert, and altered her date of birth from 1873 to 1876.

The young Cather was a fury of enthusiasms, scouring her corner of the world for information. As she rode her pony from farm to farm, she found tenacious clusters of European immigrants: Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Czechs, and Germans. Through them, she absorbed a far more variegated cultural experience than she would have encountered in Virginia. The immigrants did not come from high social stations, but many carried with them considerable learning. Jim Burden declares, “There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction, of Antonia’s father.”

There was also music. Not long ago, while researching Cather’s lifelong love of Wagner’s operas, I came across a hitherto unseen trace of Red Cloud’s Euro-

peanness. Several sources mention that Cather studied piano with a music teacher named Schindelmeisser. This man served as the model for the character of Wunsch, in “The Song of the Lark”—a dissolute but impassioned immigrant musician who is among the first to glimpse the talent of Thea Kronborg, destined to become a leading Wagner singer. After digging through newspaper archives, census records, telephone directories, and shipping manifests, I concluded that he was Albert Schindelmeisser, the son of Louis Schindelmeisser, a distinguished German composer and conductor of the mid-nineteenth century, and an ally of Wagner and Liszt.

The life story that can be reconstructed from circumstantial evidence is a rather sad one, suitable for one of Cather’s darker prairie tales. Schindelmeisser came to America in 1862, when he was twenty, and got a job teaching at Lawrence University, in Wisconsin. In an article for the Lawrence college paper, he wrote, “Of all arts music is the most pure and elevated, the most ennobling in its influences.” By 1870, however, he had left the college and established a pattern of being unwilling or unable to stay in one place for any length of time. He worked in Kansas and Iowa as a teacher and a piano tuner, then popped up in Red Cloud in 1884 and 1885. A notice of an event at the Baptist church, to which the Cather family belonged, said that “Mr Schindle-

meisser, at the piano, showed himself master of the situation and called forth loud applause.” By 1886, though, he was back in Kansas. After that, the trail grows thin. Notices of unclaimed letters suggest that he passed through Kansas City and Macon, Missouri. He was in Nashville in 1898. The name does not appear in the 1900 census. He was known to be a heavy drinker, and alcoholism is likely the best explanation for his erratic career. In “The Song of the Lark,” Wunsch’s drinking eventually forces him to leave town, but his acknowledgment of Thea Kronborg’s talent encourages her to pursue singing.

From this roughshod Europe of the mind, Cather also emerged with a complex understanding of American identity. Her symphonic landscapes are inflected with myriad accents, cultures, personal narratives—all stored away in a prodigious memory. When she went off to college, at the University of Nebraska, she was already an imperious cosmopolitan, entirely unafraid to make her views known. She had thought of studying science or medicine, but her command of prose pulled her toward writing. In 1893, she published her first journalistic piece for the Lincoln *Nebraska State Journal*; thus began a two-decade run as a literary critic, drama and music critic, all-purpose reporter, and editor. She went on to Pittsburgh, editing a women’s magazine, and ended up in New York, working at *McClure’s*, the great American magazine of the Gilded Age.

Cather was a mercurial but brilliant critic, veering between ecstatic raves and brutal takedowns. The takedowns were disconcerting to performers who came to town expecting a docile press. The “meat-ax young girl,” she was called. An unlucky actress was characterized as an “unattractive, putty-faced, backachy, headachy little minx.” One actor, she wrote, “stops just where elocution ends and acting begins.” Her reporting was not always trustworthy. In a piece about the painter Edward Burne-Jones, she claims to have interviewed Burne-Jones’s former valet; no such person seems to have existed. But the writing tends to be more distinctive than in her apprentice fiction of the same period.

The prairie figures in some of Cather’s early stories, but she focusses more



JON ADAMS

*“We’ll never have to fold fitted sheets again.”*



often on artists, actors, singers, and writers—denizens of the transatlantic world that she herself joined in short order. These are evocative tales, but the sketches of high-society types are sometimes breathless and thin. When the prairie does enter the picture, as in the 1904 story “A Wagner Matinée,” Cather regains her lordly confidence: “The world there was the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset; between, the conquests of peace, dearer bought than those of war.” She made her first European trip in 1902, in the company of a wealthy Pittsburgh friend, Isabelle McClung, with whom she was evidently in love. On a train ride through rural France, Cather experienced an epiphany: on seeing a “reaper of a well-known American make,” she imagined a girl sitting on it, between her father’s feet. She understood that Nebraska had already given her the stuff of epics. “O Pioneers!” appeared in 1913, and her mature career began.

The area around Red Cloud has long been known as the Divide—a geographical term for a plateau bordered by rivers. Cather titled one of her first important prairie stories “On the Divide.” Cather scholars have not been able to resist using the word in a symbolic sense. The late David Porter borrowed it for his 2008 study, “On the Divide,” which documents Cather’s painstaking construction of her public image, and in particular her attempt, largely successful, to straddle the divide between commerce and art. In 1926, Porter shows, she went to the trouble of inventing an interview with herself—a scene of a journalist badgering the author as she waits for a train in Grand Central Terminal. (It’s as if the younger Cather were buttonholing the elder.) Her world contains other figurative divides: between America and Europe, the Romantic and the modern, country and city, the political left and the political right.

The divides of gender and sexuality remain the most contested ground. The Cather biographer Sharon O’Brien opened discussion of the lesbian question in a 1984 essay, prompting a wave of queer-studies readings and an inevitable backlash. At a luncheon in Red

Cloud, I spoke to Melissa Homestead, a scholar at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who is working on a highly anticipated book about Cather’s relationship with the Nebraska-born, New York-based editor Edith Lewis. The two women met in 1903, at the home of a mutual friend in Lincoln—Lewis later wrote of Cather’s “transparently clear, level, unshrinking gaze”—and began living together in 1908. Homestead told me, “Everyone wants to know what kind of relationship this was. I have been through all Cather’s surviving letters, and there is no ‘smoking gun.’” Homestead, who is lesbian, laughed at the phrase. “But what’s apparent, over and over, is that she and Lewis were thought of as a unit. She would write, ‘Miss Lewis is coming with me.’ People send their regards to both of them. So the question is: What kind of evidence is needed to establish this as a lesbian relationship? Photographs of the two of them in bed together? She was an integral part of Cather’s life, creatively and personally.”

Homestead is impatient not only with those who dismiss the possibility of Cather’s lesbianism but also with those who scan her work for evidence of her closetedness. O’Brien made much of a remark Cather made, in her 1922 essay “The Novel Demeublé,” that fiction depends on “whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there . . . the inexplicable presence of the thing not named.” For Homestead, this emphasis on secretiveness is misleading. She told me, “People picture her as full of shame, destroying letters left and right. Yes, almost all her letters to Lewis are missing. But three thousand letters is still a lot, and the relationship with Lewis is all over them. If she wanted to hide it, she did a bad job.”

There is little trace of sexual attraction between women in Cather’s writing, but male homosexuality surfaces more than once. “The Sculptor’s Funeral” is one instance; another is “Paul’s Case,” the widely anthologized story of a young aesthete who chooses self-annihilation over the dreariness of a routine existence. We can read between the lines when Cather reveals that Paul’s night on the town with another young man begins “in the confiding warmth of a champagne friendship” and ends

with a parting “singularly cool.” Other male friendships show erotic tensions. Godfrey St. Peter, the solitary intellectual of “The Professor’s House,” is plainly smitten with his student Tom Outland, with whom he liked to “sit and talk half through the warm, soft nights.”

In the end, however, sex does not dominate Cather’s imagination. True romance lies elsewhere: in her characters’ relationships with work, art, nature, and the land. In “O Pioneers!,” Alexandra is said to be the first person who has ever looked on her corner of Nebraska with “love and yearning”—to see it as a place to be nurtured, not as territory to be conquered. In sharp contrast to most women’s fiction of the day, the story of Alexandra is not one of marriage but of profession. Likewise, “The Song of the Lark” is, as Joan Acocella wrote in this magazine in 1995, a *Künstlerroman*—a novel about the emergence of an artist. This is not to say that Cather is a feminist. She exalts her exceptional women but is often scathing toward ordinary ones, and toward feminists themselves. One of her less lovely efforts is a satirical assault on the religious pretensions of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Cather’s stories were revolutionary all the same, abandoning the stereotypical register of the female voice.

“The great fact was the land itself,” Cather declares in “O Pioneers!” Humans merely scratch at its surface. Perhaps this enormous empathy for the natural world is, after all, a displacement of desire, though the feeling goes too deep to be psychologized away. An overwhelming attachment to place is often a sign of immovable conservatism, and Cather can get dangerously close to blood-and-soil lingo, as when Ántonia’s strapping sons are compared to “the founders of early races.” But her conviction that the land belongs to no one—“We come and go, but the land is always here,” Alexandra says—undercuts any tendency toward nationalism and tribalism.

That philosophy put Cather at odds with the Western, in which maverick men claim the wilderness as their own. The most influential Western at the turn of the century was “The Virginian,” by Owen Wister, a Harvard graduate who was sent West to toughen up and returned with a quasi-erotic

adulation of the cow-puncher—the cowboy. The nameless hero of “The Virginian” is introduced thus: “Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat; and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips.” With one fond stroke, Wister created the cowboy style. He was also a repulsive racist who halted his narrative to praise the superiority of Anglo-Saxon stock and to claim that the Declaration of Independence enshrined “the ETERNAL INEQUALITY of man.”

Cather undoubtedly read “The Virginian.” In the Cather Center archive, I noticed a copy resting on the library shelves: the inscription indicates that Cather had given it to a family member in 1912. In a 1915 letter, she pointedly observes that the “cow-puncher’s experience of the West was not the only experience possible there.” Wister was a tourist; Cather was the real Virginian. In her rendering of the Great Plains and the West, women achieve independence from restrictive roles; people of many countries coexist; and violence is futile, with guns most often fired in suicidal despair. As the scholar Susie Thomas writes, Cather “created an alternative to the male mythology of the West.” In place of Wister’s slouching cowboy, “O Pioneers!” gives us a “tall, strong girl” with a “glance of Amazonian fierceness,” wearing a man’s coat. She holds the same pose at the end, silhouetted against the landscape and gazing westward.

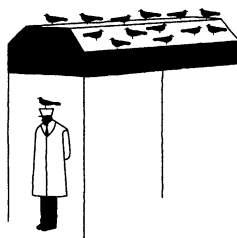
“My Ántonia” is the most complex of the prairie novels because the narrative passes through the consciousness of a male narrator. Jim Burden’s gaze is an objectifying, romanticizing one. Ántonia is made into an icon of tenacity: she survives her father’s suicide, the closure of the family farm, humdrum work as a hired girl, predatory males. Yet the full reality of her life escapes Jim’s grasp. He keeps in mind a succession of pictures of her earthy vitality—“like the old woodcuts in one’s first primer”—but his final glimpse of her, “waving her apron,” feels rote. As the scholar David Laird says, Jim’s way of telling the story cannot capture the “streaming immediacy” of a life lived day by day, with no great

goal in sight. This failure is also a triumph, because you sense so strongly the presence of the thing not named.

In Red Cloud, a ceremonial ribbon was cut. The National Willa Cather Center was declared open, and Laura Bush was whisked away by the Secret Service. At the reception, the atmosphere was one of mild jubilation, mixed with a certain amazement that the project had come to pass. In the crowd was Margaret Ickis Fernbacher, Cather’s grandniece, who was probably the only person present who had met the author. “I have this memory of being in the presence of this—this great presence,” Fernbacher told me. “But I honestly don’t know if I actually do remember it or whether my mother told me about it.”

The journalist Matthew Hansen, whose uncle is Jay Yost, my bed-and-breakfast host, reflected on how the town had changed. He grew up in Red Cloud and then moved to Omaha, where he writes for the *World-Herald*. “I graduated from high school in 1998,” he told me. “Back then, it felt pretty dead—stores closed, buildings boarded up. As teenagers, we’d ride up and down the empty streets. Now there’s a coffee shop, a wine bar—it’s all kind of surreal to me. The next project is to build a hotel, so we can handle tour groups. The town gets ten thousand Cather tourists a year, and it could get more.”

Political support would speed these projects along, but literary infrastructure is not high on Nebraska’s current list of



priorities. Burke Harr, a Democratic state senator from Omaha, told me that he and others were trying to organize state funding for the hotel development, but that they had encountered obstacles. “There are some people who don’t like it that attention is being paid to Cather’s relationship with Miss Lewis,” Harr said. “And, believe it or not, there are families who are still angry about how Cather

wrote about them. I don’t get it. I’d be proud if Cather made fun of my great-uncle!” Even in Red Cloud, some locals still think there’s something off about Cather and the people she attracts. If you stop by the lunch counter at Olson’s gas station, you might hear a farmer grunting at his paper, “I don’t like this Cather stuff.”

The idea that the red-blue divide would complicate Cather’s reputation is ironic, because she largely steered clear of politics. Her 1931 story “Two Friends” tells of the broken friendship of two prosperous citizens, one Democrat and the other Republican. They play checkers in the general store and debate issues great and small, until the advent of William Jennings Bryan, the barnstorming Nebraska populist, causes an irreparable rift. The Democrat grows fanatical; the Republican grows resentful, even though McKinley defeats Bryan in the election of 1896. Cather knew Bryan from her journalistic days; she was fascinated by his oratory but skeptical of his progressive economic agenda. In “Two Friends,” she subtly sides with the Republican, who cannot understand the change that politics has wrought in his friend. Ultimately, she belongs to no party, occupying the high middle ground.

The next morning, I had breakfast at the home of Dennis and Sally Hansen, Matthew’s parents. They live in a modern, spacious house outside town, with plate-glass windows that look out on the family farm and on a swimming pool backed by pine trees. In the distance, Matthew’s eighty-six-year-old granduncle could be seen operating a lawnmower. The Hansens gave me advice on what to see in the area: the Cather family cemetery; the site of their homestead; the spot by the road where Francis Sadilek, the prototype for the unhappy Mr. Shimerda, was buried. “Don’t forget the Dane Church and cemetery,” Sally said. “That’s where Dennis’s folks are, and that’s where we’ll be buried.” I thought about those words during the drive back to Omaha. As much as I love Cather’s writing, I will never know what it means to live a life in one inalienable place.

I am a recent convert to the ranks of the Cather People. I majored in English and American literature in college, but paid little attention to Cather, who was not in fashion. About a decade ago,



I began reading the stories that centered on music. Then I read everything else. When I got to “Death Comes for the Archbishop,” the 1927 novel that Cather considered her best, I felt dismayed that I had lived without it for so long.

It is difficult to explain how Cather conjured one of the supreme English-language novels from scattered stories of the founding of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. Her principal characters, Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant, based on Jean-Baptiste Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf, amble through a loose succession of scenes, undertaking missions in the Southwest. Cather’s prose, more chiselled than in her earlier fiction, refracts these tableaux into “something in the style of legend,” as she said. Latour emerges as a strange sort of passive saint, one who performs the miracle of seeing the world clearly and fondly. Miracles, he explains, result from “our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.” Early on, he watches a flock of goats, which look back at him “with their mocking, intelligent smile.” Their bright coats remind him of the Apocalypse, of the whiteness of those washed in the blood of the Lamb. Such abrupt epiphanies arrive routinely, charging Latour’s experience of daily life.

“Death Comes for the Archbishop” stands apart from other Cather Westerns because of the prominence given to Hispanic and Native American characters. One troubling aspect of Cather’s prairie narratives is that Native Americans scarcely appear in them. What Cather writes of Alexandra in “O Pioneers!”—“For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning”—is, on reflection, outrageous. In “Archbishop,” however, reverence for the land predates the white invaders. Cather comments that Indians have no desire to master nature, instead “accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves.” The same cannot be said of Latour, who spends his later years overseeing the construction of a cathedral in the Romanesque style. Cather said that the novel’s title comes from Hans Holbein the Younger’s “Dance of



*“Just as I suspected. These things make everything louder.”*

Death” woodcuts, in which Death summons men and women both mighty and humble, a bishop among them. At the end of the book, as Latour falls ill, he is visited by Eusabio, a Navajo Indian whose acute intelligence and noble countenance match Latour’s. Eusabio has the aspect of the figure of Death who comes to take the Bishop away—not in retribution but in reconciliation.

A few years ago, on a trip to New Mexico, I spent a day or two retracing Latour’s steps. This is a familiar stage of Cather infatuation. “I seem fated to send people on journeys,” she wrote to a reader in 1943, noting “the number of people who have gone a-journeying in New Mexico on the trail of the ‘Archbishop.’” As David Porter observes, she was especially drawn to majestic masses of rock, like the mesa pueblo at Acoma (“Archbishop”); the cliff dwellings of Walnut Canyon and Mesa Verde (“The Song of the Lark,” “The Professor’s House”); and the promontory of Quebec City (“Shadows on the Rock”). I like to think that she pictured herself as Brünnhilde in Wagner’s “Ring,” stranded on a rock and surrounded by fire.

I visited the Bishop’s cathedral in Santa Fe, which looks centuries older than it is. I drove to the San José de la Laguna Mission, with its brilliantly colored adobe altar, and to Acoma, where the Acoma Pueblo lived in proud isolation until conquistadors slaugh-

tered eight hundred people. The vistas around that shiver-inducing place, which a small group of Acoma still inhabit, have hardly changed since Cather saw them almost a century ago, and, as usual, her description is definitive: “This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape.”

I then drove north to the Valles Caldeira—a vast, craterlike formation that was created by volcanic eruptions more than a million years ago. The caldera does not figure in Cather’s writing, but it is connected to her in my mind. My grandfather, the geologist Clarence Samuel Ross, explored the area in the nineteen-twenties, on horseback, and described its volcanic history. It was a place he loved, and his ashes are scattered there. I have only dim memories of him: he was born in 1880, when Cather was six, and died in 1975, when I was seven. I recall a severe, taciturn man who looked at me with a certain curiosity. Before I went to New Mexico, my father told me that “Death Comes for the Archbishop” was my grandfather’s favorite book. It is the one thing I know about his inner world; somehow, it is enough. ♦

# A WOMAN'S WORK

*Gloria Allred's crusade for equal rights, in court and in the spotlight.*

BY JIA TOLENTINO

A few years ago, Marisa Woytek, a lance corporal in the Marines, decided to help other women deal with a problem she'd already dealt with several times herself. She was going to get their photographs removed from private Facebook groups like Just the Tip of the Spear. (The name refers both to a ploy to coax a woman into having sex and to a military tactic.) Woytek didn't consider herself a feminist, but she was sick of military sexism. The Marine Corps is the only branch of the armed services that still segregates basic training by gender; in 2014, nearly eight per cent of female marines reported having been sexually assaulted within the previous year. On Just the Tip of the Spear's Facebook page, underneath the screenshot of a uniformed marine named Erika Butner, there were typical comments. "Would smash," one male marine wrote. Another asked, "Who has her nudes?" Woytek messaged Butner and offered to help. She contacted the group's secretive administrators, who, by then, had become used to her take-down requests. They agreed to pull Butner's photo.

Woytek and Butner became friends. In the fall of 2016, they learned about a new Facebook group, called Marines United. In this one, men weren't only reposting pictures of female colleagues but also plundering them—hacking social-media accounts, trading nude images from past and present relationships. The group had nearly thirty thousand members; many of the women in the photographs were identified by name, rank, and posting. Under a photo of a female drill sergeant, an active-duty marine wrote, "10/10 would rape." In January of this year, Woytek called a Marine Corps tip line to report the group, and Butner e-mailed the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. Neither heard back. The group continued to grow.

On March 4th, a veteran of the Marines named Thomas Brennan broke the story on Reveal, the Web site of the Center for Investigative Reporting. Nearly every national news organization picked it up; Woytek spoke to the *Washington Post* the next day. "Even if I could, I'm never reenlisting," she told the paper. Her e-mail and social-media accounts were flooded with threats. Her father, a cop in San Bernardino, e-mailed the attorney Gloria Allred. "His favorite saying is 'Don't start the fight, finish it,'" Woytek told me recently. "He's a big Gloria fangirl." Allred called her the next day. Two days after that, Woytek and Butner flew to Los Angeles, and held a press conference in Allred's office. It was International Women's Day, and Allred was dressed in red for the occasion.

This was the first step in what Allred calls "creative lawyering." There was no litigation on the table. Instead, she was aiming to influence the court of public opinion by getting the victim's perspective in the news. Lately, not a day goes by without Allred's name being mentioned in the news somewhere, as my Google alerts can attest. (Allred also receives these alerts; in the past few months, she has occasionally forwarded them to me, with the note "Please see below.") The approach attracts criticism from people who say that Allred is more interested in the spotlight than in justice. It also works.

Less than a week after the press conference with Woytek and Butner, there was a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, in which Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, of New York, excoriated the Marines for their apparent inaction. (Marines United was still up and running; the military had known about similar groups since at least 2013.) Allred then held another press conference with Woytek and Butner, and outlined three goals: legislation banning nonconsensual

sharing of intimate photographs, a meeting with the House Armed Services Committee, and a meeting with the commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. In April, Woytek testified, in uniform, before the Senate, and later that month she met with the commandant. In May, the Protecting the Rights of Individuals Against Technological Exploitation (PRIVATE) Act passed unanimously in the House. The bill awaits a Senate vote. It would make nonconsensual sharing of intimate photographs a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

In June, I visited the law offices of Allred, Maroko & Goldberg, high up in a granite-and-glass building on the corner of Crescent Heights and Wilshire, just outside Miracle Mile. I took a seat in an airy room where Allred holds press conferences—a familiar dark-wood bookcase, lined with bound volumes, occupied one wall. Allred swept in moments later, wearing a bright-pink bouclé suit jacket. Woytek and Butner followed her, in business casual, with tattoos poking out from beneath their sleeves. Butner's forearm was inked with a line from "Star Wars": "DIE REBEL SCUM." It was Woytek's first day as a civilian, and she was practically vibrating with expectant verve. Allred distributed salads and sandwiches and asked if everyone had a muffin. "I'm a mother," she said. "I'm always afraid everyone's going to starve to death. I don't want that on my watch."

We talked about the latest developments in the case. A few dozen men involved with the Facebook groups had been disciplined. A couple of marines had gotten pay reductions. Meanwhile, other Facebook groups had arisen. (In July, a marine pleaded guilty in the first court-martial related to Marines United. Two days later, a story broke about a new shared drive, which included photos



PHOTOGRAPHS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): LEIGH VOGEL/GETTY; DEBORAH PETTO/THE BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY; TASOS KATOPODIS/AFP/GETTY; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY; DEBORAH PETTO/THE BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY; KRIS CONNOR/GETTY



*Allred's career can be seen as a decades-long project to expand the boundaries of legitimate victimhood.*

of an unconscious naked woman.) “Oh, we’re not done,” Allred said, almost mischievously.

While she got up to make a phone call, I asked Woytek and Butner if their friends had been skeptical of the decision to work with Allred. They’d heard all the criticism, they told me—that she was an ambulance chaser, that she was more interested in money and media attention than in her clients. “People think she’s telling us what to say, or pressuring us, and she’s never!” Woytek said. “She shoves the press out of the way for us—like, ‘No, you can talk to *me*!’ And I’m, like, ‘Thank you! Thank you!’”

As Allred sat back down, I asked if they felt like different people, pre-Allred and post. Woytek nodded. “I’m empowered,” she said, welling up. “I’m a feminist.”

Allred clasped her hands, electrified. “Yay!” she shouted. “And she wouldn’t have said either thing before!”

“I have tears in my eyes,” Woytek said, sheepishly.

“Stop!” Butner wailed. She had also teared up.

“Really, I’ve grown as a woman, not just as a person,” Woytek said.

“I’ve always been a feminist,” Butner said. “But, if we didn’t have Gloria, I don’t know where this would’ve gone.”

Allred smiled, beatifically, and said, “They have become the women they were meant to be.”

Gloria Allred may be the most famous practicing attorney in the United States. She has attained that renown less through litigation—though she has done plenty of that—than through a blend of high-profile legal advocacy and public relations. The mention of Allred to another trial lawyer often elicits a discreet pause, then a slightly raised eyebrow, followed by something like “Gloria is really, really great at what she does.” What she does, as far as the public can see, is show up in front of TV cameras, five feet two, in her black turtleneck, with her gold jewelry and her brightly colored jacket and her clients by her side, and deliver her message with bulldog aplomb. Her

voice has the texture of pavement—dark, rough, reassuring, consistent. She has a dry sense of humor, which, these days, tends to emerge in a bemused tone or a sly look, and in a general willingness to play herself as a character. Once, when I asked her about her beach house in Malibu, she said, “Did you ask me if I live there? I have a physical residence there, but my answer to your question is what Mother Jones once said: My home is wherever my shoes are, and my shoes are wherever there’s a wrong to right.”

After Allred and the marines left to wrap up their meeting privately, a camera crew from the L.G.B.T. magazine *The Advocate* materialized in the conference room. They had come to film a documentary segment with Allred, and they started setting up their gear.

“Does she need powder?” one producer asked.

“I don’t think so,” another said. “That foundation she’s got on—she knows what she’s doing.”

The crew didn’t need to prep her; they began filming as soon as she walked back into the room. With the Hollywood Hills behind her and the bright lights illuminating her frosted and immovable hairdo, Allred ran through an abbreviated history of her work for the gay community. In 1983, she sued the Los Angeles restaurant Papa Choux, which had denied service to a lesbian couple. In 1989, she represented Paul Jaspersen, a man with AIDS who’d been turned away from a nail salon in West Hollywood. (She continued with the lawsuit after Jaspersen died.) In 2004, she represented Robin Tyler and Diane Olson in the first challenge to California’s prohibition of same-sex marriage. She won all three cases, establishing anti-discrimination legal precedents. She remains close to Tyler and Olson, who surprised her with lunch at Nobu this summer on her seventy-sixth birthday.

“I am honored to be part of this battle, and I will continue to be for the rest of my life—and, if possible, from the great beyond as well,” she told *The Advocate*, her owl-brown eyes locking on the camera. The segment concluded, and the pro-

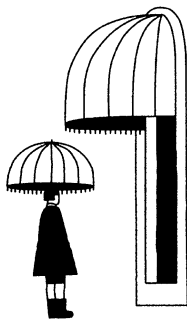
ducers erupted in astonished giggles. “You are so iconic, Gloria!” one of them said. “All I can say is *wow*,” another told her.

“It’s four-twenty-nine,” Allred said triumphantly, brandishing her phone and catching my eye. She had a call scheduled at four-thirty.

Three hours later, just about everyone at the firm—there are eleven other lawyers, along with paralegals and assistants—had deposited their coffee mugs in the office kitchen and gone home. Allred was still working. The firm has three shifts of secretaries to cover its workday. Allred has no hobbies and few indulgences. She is stylish but doesn’t like shopping. She doesn’t cook. (“If I cook, I could be helping someone else during that time,” she told me.) She works on Saturdays and Sundays. She told me that she hasn’t taken a vacation since the eighties. (When I asked her law partner Nathan Goldberg about this, he said, “I do remember a vacation, but it was in the seventies.”) She maintains her stamina without caffeine, her equilibrium without alcohol. She lost interest in dating a long time ago.

Shortly before eight, she led me through the office’s cream-colored hallways, decorated with tasteful prints of floral paintings in gilded frames. “I wanted it to be light, because I feel that people come in with very heavy problems,” she said. The walls outside her corner office are covered with large photos of Allred with former Presidents (Reagan, Clinton, Obama) and dozens of diplomas, posters, honors, and awards. The inside of her office is like a rococo educational museum, half dedicated to the storied career of Gloria Allred and half to the history of women’s rights. Suffragist memorabilia are everywhere. Above a red velvet bench is a large antique crest that reads “Dieu et Mon Droit.” There are political cartoons commemorating her victories; framed press clippings; a Lucite plaque that says “BE REASONABLE, DO IT MY WAY.” She walked over to a four-foot-long telescope and tilted it toward the window. “This is so I can watch what the bad guys are doing,” she said.

Allred has an affinity for props. In 1981, she presented John Schmitz, a California state senator who had introduced anti-abortion legislation, with a black leather chastity belt. He responded by calling her a “slick butch lawyeress.” The following





year, he held a press conference on the first day of Passover to discuss Yasir Arafat's plans for peace in the Middle East; Allred showed up with an aquarium of live frogs and shouted, "A plague on the house of Schmitz!" Her most famous stunt may be one from 1987, after she filed a complaint against the Friars Club of Beverly Hills for not allowing women access to its recreational facilities. She burst into the club's steam room, wearing a nineteenth-century bathing suit, waving a tape measure, and singing the Peggy Lee hit "Is That All There Is?"

Allred has an unusual relationship to the question of what is proper and what is not. She expects her clients to conduct themselves with integrity, but she is unconcerned with the decisions they made prior to whatever matter brought them her way. This stance makes her a committed, effective champion (some clients call her Mama Gloria); it also attracts criticism from feminists who say that presenting such a wide assortment of women as equally in need of justice undermines the cause of fair treatment. In 2010, in the *Los Angeles Times*, Sandy Banks defined Allred's feminist framework as "rights without responsibilities."

At the time, Allred was deep in a tabloid-friendly phase of her career. She had recently, on behalf of the former child star and labor activist Paul Petersen, filed a petition seeking a financial guardian for the children of Nadya Suleman, better known as Octomom. (After giving birth to octuplets, Suleman had courted interview and reality-TV-show offers. "We believe that the babies are entitled to remuneration," Allred said.) She had represented two of Tiger Woods's former mistresses, who were seeking compensation from Woods in the form of an apology or, perhaps, a settlement. (Allred negotiated ten million dollars for Rachel Uchitel, reportedly just before Uchitel was scheduled to hold a press conference about Woods. Uchitel was forced to give back most of the money after Woods claimed that she had violated a confidentiality agreement. She then threatened to sue Allred for malpractice.)

Allred had also taken on the case of Debrahlee Lorenzana, a woman who claimed that Citibank fired her for being "too hot." Before her second breast

augmentation, Lorenzana had said in an interview that she wanted to look like "tits on a stick." Allred eventually dropped Lorenzana as a client, but the association stuck. Benjamin Wallace-Wells wrote, in *The Atlantic*, "What Allred seems to be offering clients such as Lorenzana is shelter, in victimhood, from their own poor choices." Michelle Goldberg wrote, at *Tablet*, that there was a "tragic tension at the heart of Allred's work. Few have done more to advocate on behalf of sexual-harassment victims. And few have done more to make harassment seem laughable."

Allred's career can be seen as a decades-long project to expand the boundaries of legitimate victimhood. Her clients include Ginger Lee, one of Anthony Weiner's sexting correspondents, and Amber Frey, one of the mistresses of Scott Peterson, the California salesman who was sentenced to death for murdering his pregnant wife. (Allred represented Frey during the murder trial.) Allred sees these women as victims of male entitlement who are seeking the justice they deserve. Other people see them in the same way they might see Allred: craven, self-interested, and vaguely in bad taste. When asked about criticism from feminists, or whether it's reasonable to draw a dividing line somewhere between Lorenzana and, say, the

female farmworkers in California for whom she negotiated a \$1.68-million settlement in a class-action sex-discrimination suit, in 2008, Allred answers by saying that she's not a philosopher; or by explaining that she operates on instinct; or by dismissing the commentary as boring and unoriginal; or by saying that she thinks everyone should have access to justice, and that's that. "I'm controversial because the status of women is controversial," she told me. She believes that she could not engage with people's disdain for her cases and still keep up the pace of her work and the tunnel vision required to maintain it.

The charge of ambulance chaser, at least, does not appear to be accurate. "I've been with the firm for forty-one years," Nathan Goldberg told me, "and I can categorically state that we have never sought out a client." The screenwriter and "Army Wives" creator Katherine Fugate, who eight years ago became part of Allred's very small inner circle—she came to her office to try to secure the rights to a client's story and they ended up ordering takeout and talking into the night—told me, "She should have a bumper sticker that says 'GLORIA ALLRED: I DON'T CALL ANYBODY.'" Most of the firm's cases are private. But Allred's temperament, location, and media instincts have led to



"O.K., so clearly the sanctions didn't work."

a self-perpetuating sort of expertise. For many people, hers is the single name that comes to mind when considering the ambitious pursuit of victims' rights. She is the person you call if you're a cop with a daughter who's been harassed by her military colleagues, or if you're a sixty-year-old woman who's finally ready to accuse Roman Polanski of molesting you when you were a teenager. There is no shortage of the Gloria Allred type of case.

Five days after I visited Allred in Los Angeles, I sat in the back of a courtroom in Norristown, Pennsylvania, a half-hour drive from Philadelphia, and watched a bank of journalists whisper as Allred walked in and took her seat. It was 8:30 A.M. on Monday, June 5th, and the criminal trial of Bill Cosby was about to begin. He stood accused of three counts of felony indecent aggravated assault against Andrea Constand, who had been the director of women's-basketball operations at Temple University, Cosby's alma mater, in January, 2004, when the incident in question took place. Each count carried a maximum sentence of ten years in prison.

The Cosby case had become a high-profile proving ground both for Allred's media-centered strategy and for the story of righteous victimhood which she has put forward throughout her career. Constand first reported the incident in 2005. Cosby had invited her to his house, she said, then offered her pills, and assaulted her after she was incapacitated. At the time, the Montgomery County district attorney conducted interviews and decided not to pursue the case, citing a lack of evidence. But Constand was not the first woman to accuse Cosby of rape, and, in the years following, many other women came forward. It took a resurgence of media attention—rooted in Cosby's celebrity status, the salacious nature of the accusations, and a new wave of mainstream sympathy for sexual-assault victims—to prompt the current district attorney to file charges, in 2016, shortly before the statute of limitations was set to expire.

In recent decades, the cultural understanding of sexual assault and the legal procedures governing its adjudication have progressed in rough correspondence. As activists in the nineteen-

## SIGNS FOR THE LIVING

Sometimes, after the last snow in May,  
after the red-winged blackbird clutches the spine  
of the cattail, after he leans forward, droops  
his wings, and flashes his epaulets, I imagine  
shouldering the yellow center lines of the road.

Near the recently thawed pond, within a long  
channel of construction, a man holding a sign.  
One side says slow, the other stop.  
Joy and sorrow always run like parallel lines.

Inside the house, when I leave the lights on,  
small white moths come like a collection of worship,  
pulsing their wings up and up the window,  
as if in a frenzied trancelike dance,  
some dervishes, others the penitent on shaky knees.

The first few years after my husband's suicide  
I wanted to be the penitent.  
I thought I deserved all the pain I could feel.  
The drill of roadwork in late summer  
was a welcome grinding music.  
Now the yellow center lines are flung like braids behind me.

—Didi Jackson

seventies mounted a broad anti-rape movement, feminist legal theorists fought judicial provisions that discriminated against rape victims. (These included rules requiring that the victim physically resist her attacker and provide corroborating evidence, as well as cautionary instructions to juries about the danger of false accusations.) At the Cosby trial, the fact of cultural progress—and its attendant backlash—felt ever-present. I talked to more than a few journalists and casual observers who seemed glad that our conception of sexual assault has expanded but who hesitated to apply new standards retroactively—who said things like “He definitely did it, but, back then, everyone else did it, too.” Deborah Tuerkheimer, a law professor at Northwestern, told me recently, “Over all these years, there may have been a reluctance to hold Cosby accountable for acts that, at the time, didn't seem like sexual assault. But now these acts have a different meaning. People like Gloria have advanced an outcry.” Tuerkheimer noted that Allred had helped push the case

to trial in multiple ways. She had bolstered Constand's credibility by encouraging women to come forward and publicizing their accounts. “She was able to help construct a narrative that made it very difficult, at least outside the courtroom, to be dismissive of what otherwise would have been dismissed,” Tuerkheimer said.

Cosby and Allred have lived much of their lives in strange and striking proximity. Born four years apart, they both grew up poor in Philadelphia, and attended high schools down the block from each other. They both received master's degrees in education and later became famous and wealthy in Los Angeles. For most of the two and a half decades that Allred spent in Philadelphia, she was an energetic extrovert with no idea, she says, that women occupied a secondary place in the world. She was born Gloria Rachel Bloom on July 3, 1941, to two dotting Jewish parents, Morris and Stella. Stella was English; she and Morris had met, Gloria says they told her, “in Baltimore, on a streetcar named desire.” Both left school after the eighth grade. Morris



worked six days a week as a door-to-door salesman, hawking Fuller brushes and photographic enlargements, and the family (Gloria was the only child) lived in a row house in southwest Philly. They didn't attend synagogue together—Morris was too busy, and Stella explored many religious ideas, going to a church one week and an Ethical Culture meeting the next—but Gloria went there for Sunday school, and was confirmed. Her parents were determined to do well by her: on days when they had only enough money for one movie ticket, Morris would send her into the theatre and wait for her in a nearby park. When Gloria was in junior high, she and her mother would put on “American Bandstand” and dance around the living room after school.

At fourteen, Gloria was admitted to the Philadelphia High School for Girls, which was, at the time, one of only a handful of all-girls public schools in the country, and highly competitive. The women who ran the school modelled a matter-of-fact female ambition that seemed, during Gloria's protected adolescence, galvanizing but hardly defiant. On the first day of her freshman year, she met Fern Brown—now Fern Brown Caplan—who was seated next to her in homeroom. Brown's eyes were still dilated from an ophthalmology appointment, and she was straining to see the teacher. In an anecdote she's had to relate to dozens of journalists and gala attendees over the years, Caplan remembers Allred leaning over and saying, “You look like you need help. Can I help?” They became best friends.

“We were different in high school,” Caplan told me. “I was very studious, a big nerd. She was a cheerleader, class treasurer.” In Allred's memoir, “Fight Back and Win,” published in 2006, she recounts the story of a boy asking her how she could be a cheerleader at an all-girls high school: “What's there to cheer about?” he asked.” Caplan describes Allred as “always a limelight person,” the most popular girl at every synagogue dance. Allred's memory is slightly different. “All I did was study,” she told me. Girls High was rigorous, and she wasn't a proto-Gloria Allred yet. Except, she added, after thinking about it, she did receive a class award for Most Persistent. Also, her French teacher nicknamed her Jeanne d'Arc.

After high school, Allred enrolled at

the University of Pennsylvania. In 1960, at nineteen, she married a tall, attractive senior, from a patrician family, named Peyton Bray. In her sophomore year, she got pregnant and gave birth to their daughter, Lisa. (Allred writes that Bray left her side while she was in labor and went out for a beer.) She soon found herself hemmed in by domestic routine. “When I wasn't caring for Lisa, I was cleaning, studying, or sleeping, in that order,” she writes. She and Bray fought frequently; they divorced in 1962. He was later diagnosed as having bipolar disorder, and eventually committed suicide. When I asked Allred about it, she couldn't remember the year. “You'd have to ask Lisa,” she said. (Bray died in 2003.)

Allred's parents helped her raise Lisa while she finished college. In 1968, Gloria married William Allred, who adopted Lisa. They divorced in 1987, and, after graduating from law school, Lisa took her grandparents' last name. As Lisa Bloom, she has followed her mother's professional trajectory, becoming a lawyer who specializes in women's-rights cases that often involve celebrities and frequently appearing on cable news shows. (They have their differences: Bloom loves animals and travel and goes to Burning Man every year with her husband and three kids.) Earlier this year, Bloom represented the three women who accused Bill O'Reilly of sexual harassment. “I came up with the media and legal strategy to take him down,” she told me. “We made a video of us calling in the complaints to the Fox News hotline. You can't let these stories die—you have to keep them in the news.” Advertisers pulled away from O'Reilly, and he was ousted from the network. Bloom also represents two of Cosby's accusers, including the actress Janice Dickinson.

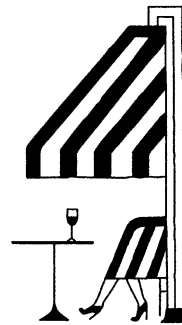
Allred represents thirty-three of them. (There are nearly sixty. Allred has taken Cosby's deposition in a civil suit brought against him, in California, by Judy Huth, which is set to go to trial in 2018.) Half a dozen Cosby accusers came to Norristown to observe the trial. On the first day, two of them squealed when they saw Allred in the bathroom, and ran over to give her a hug. During the trial,

Allred sat in the courtroom and scribbled notes on a legal pad. One day, her phone rang, and she was booted from the courtroom; a Page Six item about it was all over my Twitter feed when I next checked my phone. Each afternoon, she walked out onto the steps of the courthouse, and the cameras assembled in front of her in an enormous flashing scrum.

The prosecution had proffered thirteen of the accusers as “prior bad-act witnesses,” hoping to establish Cosby's modus operandi. In pretrial proceedings, Cosby's defense team had argued that Allred, who represented ten of the thirteen, had organized this campaign herself. Allred, they said, had contacted law enforcement on behalf of her clients; she had flown to Philadelphia to speak with the district attorney. On the Sunday after the trial began, I met Allred for dinner at the restaurant in the Doubletree Hotel where she'd been staying. Picking at a caprese salad, she responded to the defense's allegations. “I didn't say if any of that was true. But if it is true—a big so what. Why shouldn't I speak to law enforcement if my client has information that could help with a case?” (Barbara Ashcroft, a law professor at Temple and a former chief of the Montgomery County sex-crimes unit, told me that sex crimes are often reported by someone

other than the victim—a mother, a friend, a civil lawyer.) The defense attorney Angela Agrusa noted the similarities in the women's accounts, and suggested that this reflected Allred's manipulations, rather than Cosby's pattern of behavior. The thirteen witnesses were winnowed down to one, Kelly Johnson, whose alleged assault had occurred most recently, in 1996.

Johnson, who is represented by Allred, was the prosecution's first witness. She had worked at William Morris as an assistant to Cosby's agent. Cosby took an interest in her career, she said, and this led to an invitation for lunch in a hotel bungalow. There he gave her a pill that incapacitated her, and molested her. When Johnson was on the stand, the defense attorney Brian McMonagle asked her again and again, with slight variations, whether Allred had written the statement that she



gave at their initial press conference. Each time, Johnson said no. He then asked if Allred had told her what to say on the stand, if she had fed her certain words. “No,” Johnson said again, looking bewildered. McMonagle’s cross-examination eventually brought her to tears.

Johnson’s story had obvious parallels with Constand’s: a work relationship, an offer of pills. Both women knew that Cosby wielded power over their professional lives and they behaved accordingly. They both testified that they had never been interested in sexual contact with him, nor had they consented to such a thing. There was not much disagreement about the basic facts of the case—the jury’s calculations depended on whether small inconsistencies, both perceived and actual, in Constand’s testimony made her seem like a liar, and whether her story, much of which Cosby had corroborated, met the jurors’ understanding of sexual assault.

In a police interview, Cosby described his behavior that night by saying, “I go into the area that is somewhere between permission and rejection. I was not stopped.” Over dinner, Allred repeated the line to me, incredulous. “‘Somewhere between permission and rejection’? What is that? I always say—you’re either pregnant or you’re not. There’s no in-between.” I asked her if she’d ever talked about consent growing up. “Absolutely not,” she said. “We didn’t talk about rape, or abortion, or child support, or sexual harassment, or sex discrimination, or anything. It was like the Cave Age.” She recalled one day during a period when she was teaching in Philadelphia and commuting to N.Y.U. for her master’s degree. In a philosophy class, she brought up the lack of rights for black Americans, and her professor asked her, What about women’s rights? “What rights don’t women have?” she remembered saying. “All he said was ‘You’ll find out.’”

Allred majored in English at Penn, and wrote her undergraduate honors thesis on Ralph Ellison, Alex Haley, and James Baldwin. She graduated as a single mother, “flat broke, recently divorced, and undecided about how to make my way in life,” she writes in her memoir. She took a job as an assistant buyer at a Gimbels department store, earning seventy-five dol-

lars a week. When she found out that a male assistant buyer earned ninety, she asked about the discrepancy and was told that her colleague needed to earn a family wage. (He was a bachelor, Allred says.) She left Gimbels and took the exam to become a public-school teacher, and began teaching at Benjamin Franklin High, which had an all-male and mostly black student body. Bray wasn’t paying child support, and she had a hard time making ends meet. Shortly before she moved to Los Angeles, in 1966—“I figured, if I was going to be poor, then I’d be poor where it’s warm,” she writes—she hired an attorney, and Bray was arrested for nonpayment. The charge was dropped soon afterward; Allred doesn’t remember why.

In L.A., Allred and her daughter moved into a rented house just south of the 101. They shared it with one of Allred’s girlfriends, who had three daughters and had recently left her husband. She started teaching at another mostly black high school, in Watts. This was a year after the riots. Allred still didn’t think of her life as “cause-oriented,” she told me. During her first year in California, she went to Acapulco for a vacation. One night, a local physician asked her out to dinner. He had to make a few house calls first, he said, and they stopped by a motel. He took her to an empty room, pulled out a gun, and raped her. She didn’t report the crime to the police, fearing that she wouldn’t be believed. Soon after returning home, she discovered that she was pregnant.

It was seven years before *Roe v. Wade*, and abortion was illegal in California. She made an appointment for one and went alone, as instructed. She began hemorrhaging after she got home, and the man who had performed the procedure declined to offer guidance. Allred was afraid to go to the hospital. She sat at home, feverish and bleeding; eventually, her roommate called an ambulance, which took her to a hospital ward filled with other women who had had illegal abortions. She didn’t realize until later that patients around her had died. A nurse told her, as she was recovering, “This will teach you a lesson.”

“If you were to write a screenplay of her life, that’s the catalyst for the

story,” Fugate told me. “That’s what motivates her.” She added, “It’s not the act, either—it’s the aftermath. It’s the female nurse who told her that she hoped she’d learned her lesson. When she talked about that, it was the only time in seven or eight years of friendship that I’ve ever seen her eyes flare. That’s what she wants to protect her clients against. Gloria will never allow herself to be spoken to like that again.”

I asked Allred, at the hotel restaurant, if she’d felt, while she was in the hospital, like she needed a champion, and if she’d then decided to become the champion she’d lacked. “No,” she said. “I was just stunned. This was not something I had anticipated for myself, not something anyone had ever talked about with me.” Though she was raising her daughter to be outspoken—“I was born a baby feminist, and I was radicalized after that,” Bloom told me—Allred didn’t talk about her trauma initially. She didn’t tell Caplan for a long time, or her mother. Then, in the eighties, she decided to disclose her abortion to a journalist at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. “I thought, If I’m going to be ashamed as a women’s-rights attorney, what hope do we have?”

Before Allred moved to Los Angeles, she had dated a law student and developed an interest in what he was studying; she picked up an application to Penn’s law school but discarded it because of the steep tuition. In L.A., she was introduced to William Allred by a mutual acquaintance. He ran an aircraft-manufacturing outfit called Donalco, which he’d founded in the fifties. After they were married, they moved to a house in Burbank, where Gloria invited her students over for pool parties. She left her school to work at the Los Angeles Teachers Association, organizing teachers during the East L.A. student walkouts, and then returned to teaching and earned a credential at U.S.C. to become a high-school principal. “I wanted to be a principal in Watts,” she told me, “but this was the time of the Black Power movement, and they wanted African-American principals in those high schools. I agreed with them—and when they offered me a position in the Valley I said, Thanks but no thanks.”

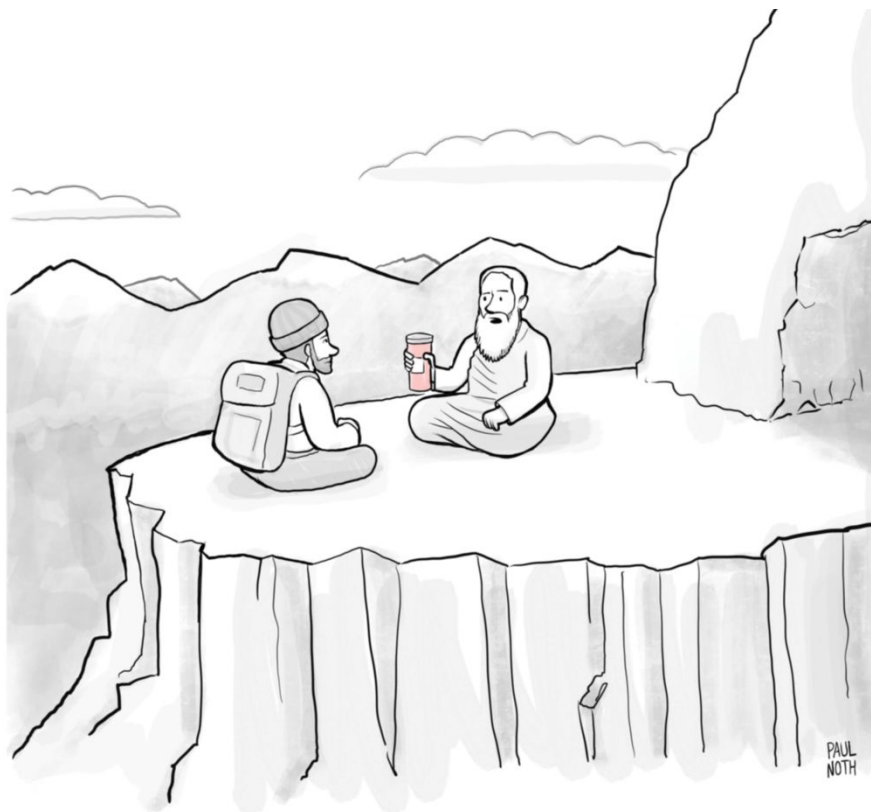
She decided to go to law school, and enrolled at Loyola. Bloom remembers



her mother as “extra grateful to be in law school, doing what she was meant to do.” Allred befriended two classmates, Michael Maroko and Nathan Goldberg, who shared her interest in social justice. In 1976, a year after graduating, and with financial support from William, the three of them started a firm. Their expertise developed quickly: discrimination, harassment, sexual abuse, employment.

In 1980, Allred successfully fought against Los Angeles County’s practice of shackling pregnant female prisoners during labor and childbirth. In 1984, she sued the Los Angeles archdiocese on behalf of Rita Milla, a devout woman from a low-income family who claimed that she had been regularly forced into sex with Catholic priests. Abuse by priests was not widely discussed at the time; it was another decade and a half before the Boston *Globe*’s landmark investigative series confirmed the Church’s methods of systematic concealment. Allred fought the case for years, and ultimately proved Milla’s claims. In 1985, she and Maroko settled another high-profile case: A group of Holocaust deniers had offered fifty thousand dollars to anyone who could produce evidence that Jews were gassed at Auschwitz. After a man named Mel Mermelstein, who had survived the camp, provided his own testimony, other eyewitness accounts, and ashes from Auschwitz, the group published a letter accusing him of perpetrating a hoax. Mermelstein sued, and eventually received a ninety-thousand-dollar settlement, a formal apology, and an on-the-record acknowledgment of the truth of his story.

Allred became well known in Los Angeles. Fugate remembers being in college in the early eighties and thinking of Allred as a sort of local Wonder Woman figure. “There would be a news story on TV, man after man after man talking about it, and then, suddenly, this petite, dark-haired woman would take the stage, with this air of bravery,” she said. In her structured eighties outfits, Allred cut a bold and recognizable figure. She walked in the gay-pride parade, shouted into megaphones at protests, and posed for photographs to publicize and commemorate her work. Goldberg told me, “It was obvious that, for Gloria, media was very intuitive.” He pointed out that the firm has never



*“The meaning of existence is this thirty-two-dollar jar of salt.”*

hired a public-relations consultant.

In 1985, federal investigators opened an inquiry into Donalco, which was suspected of selling counterfeit aircraft parts. In 1986, Gloria asked William for a separation. They divorced the following year, after William was convicted on charges of conspiring to defraud the government. (Allred, Maroko & Goldberg represented William during his criminal trial.) Following a hearing after the divorce, Gloria was awarded four million dollars. William contested the judgment in a bankruptcy hearing, in 1992. “It’s the height of hypocrisy for her to do this,” he told the Los Angeles *Times*. “I put her through law school, and now she’s going to take everything I ever earned.” He added, “I don’t think feminists would approve of that. Feminists believe in equal rights for men and women.” When I asked Gloria about his comments, she told me, “I’ve never seen that article. I’m not aware of any such quotes.” Eventually, I reached William on the phone. “A reporter for *The New Yorker*?” he said, after I identified myself. “I think

you probably have the wrong Allred. Bye.” When I called back, he said he didn’t want to comment on anything. “It’s all in the past,” he said.

On Monday of the second week of the trial, Cosby’s defense team called a single witness, a laconic police sergeant named Richard Schaffer. McMonagle asked Schaffer about a 2005 document he had created, called “Questions for Andrea,” in which Schaffer expressed curiosity about why Constand had agreed to meet Cosby at a casino before the night of the alleged assault. Then, seven minutes after beginning its case, the defense rested. The two sides presented their closing arguments, and the jury began deliberating that night. On Tuesday, the jurors returned to the courtroom to ask the judge, Steven T. O’Neill, several questions, including a request for clarification concerning the phrase “without her knowledge.” Judge O’Neill said that he could not define the charges any further.

That night, I spotted Allred in the courthouse. It had been a long, hot day,

and the journalists were getting sloppy—complaining, charging their phones next to the bathroom, eating takeout on the floor. Allred was sitting ramrod straight on a little bench, sending e-mails on her laptop. She was supposed to take the train to Washington, D.C., on Thursday, to testify at a city-council hearing about a potential extension of the criminal statute of limitations for rape and sexual assault, but she was waiting for the verdict. “I need to be here for the accusers,” she said.

The D.C. hearing was part of a larger effort initiated by several of these women. Frustrated that they couldn’t file charges against Cosby because the statute of limitations had expired, they had asked Allred if an extension would help. It wouldn’t help them, she said, but it would help other people—and, if they found a legislator in their states willing to sponsor a bill, she’d help them advocate for change. She and her clients have successfully won statute-of-limitations extensions in Nevada and Colorado. Thanks to their efforts in California, there is now no statute of limitations for rape, sexual assault, and child-molestation cases in that state. Allred is proud that her clients are working to change the law; she hopes that some of them will think about running for office. Allred was approached years ago by people who wanted her to run for a seat in the California State Senate; she didn’t seriously consider it, she told me. She

isn’t particularly religious, but she believes in the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, that it is the job of individuals to repair the world. “Each one of us has the responsibility of turning a negative experience into a positive experience,” she had told me the previous week, in Los Angeles. “Maybe that’s why these bad things happened. Maybe that’s the purpose—if there is a purpose, and I don’t know that there is. But a human being likes to think there is.”

Extending the statute of limitations will not lessen the inherent difficulty of securing a conviction in a sexual-assault case. The crime is uniquely tough to adjudicate: it frequently occurs in private, without witnesses; the challenge of convincing a twelve-person jury of guilt “beyond a reasonable doubt” will remain prodigious even as attitudes toward the crime change. But there are many avenues that lead to a more victim-friendly world. In her office, Allred had talked about how outlawing the nonconsensual distribution of nude photographs wouldn’t stop the practice. “The fact that rape is a crime doesn’t mean that rape is no longer going to happen,” she said. But, when an act is recognized as criminal, that in itself can “serve as a disincentive. It will mean that there are consequences.”

After a week of deliberation, the Cosby jury failed to reach a verdict, and a mistrial was declared. Allred held a press conference outside the courthouse, flanked by two accusers. “Justice will

come,” she said, expressing her hope that the court would allow more bad-act witnesses to testify when they retried the case. She praised the courage of the women who had come forward. For a moment, she smiled, as if consoling a dear friend.

The Cosby trial will begin again next April, with a new defense team, led by Thomas Mesereau, a Los Angeles lawyer whose past clients—Michael Jackson, Mike Tyson, Robert Blake—are more or less the opposite of Allred’s. (The two lawyers have publicly sparred in the past.) Regardless of the outcome, Cosby’s career is over, and his legacy is in ruins. There is a growing sense among women that it is now possible to name, shame, and prosecute sexual predators—and that they will find public support if they do. In his closing argument for the defense, McMonagle had shouted, “We know why we’re here! We’re not here because of Andrea Constand.” He pointed to the journalists in the back of the courtroom. “We’re here because of *them* banging the drum!”

It would seem that we have entered a new era of women’s empowerment, were it not for ample evidence to the contrary. Last November, for instance, the United States elected Donald Trump President. Allred has tussled with Trump before. In 2012, she represented a transgender woman named Jenna Talackova, who had been barred from competing in the Miss Universe pageant, which Trump bought in 1996. (He sold it in September, 2015, during his campaign.) At a press conference, Allred pointed out that Talackova hadn’t asked Trump for any proof that he was a naturally born man. In a comment to TMZ, Trump took the reference to his genitalia a step further: “I think Gloria would be very impressed with me, I really do.” Talackova was ultimately allowed to compete, but Trump wouldn’t drop it. On Twitter, he asked, “Is Gloria a man or a woman????—few men would know the answer to that one.” Two years later, one of Allred’s clients was in the greenroom before an appearance on Fox News, and Trump popped in. “Gloria is absolutely relentless,” he said. “Never, ever, ever, ever, ever fire her,” he added, magnanimously, in an anecdote that Allred later relayed to the Daily Beast and repeated to me.





At a Thai restaurant near her office, I asked Allred if the election had changed her sense of moral progress in the United States. “The election was a heartbreaker,” she said. “But that’s the way it’s always been for gender progress, which has always been behind racial progress—two steps forward, one step back.” She was a delegate for Hillary Clinton, with whom she is friendly. The two have more than a few qualities in common. They are both prominent feminists whose ambition has grated on the public. (Which is to say that they are both prominent, ambitious feminists.) They speak like people who long ago found the story they wanted to stick to. Each seems temperamentally incapable of absorbing the charge of self-interest, having woven self-interest together so tightly with an interest in the public good.

On November 8th, Allred was in downtown Los Angeles at an Election Night party for supporters of the Clinton campaign. As the electoral map started turning red, young women at the event came up to her, sobbing, asking her what they should do, what could be done. “They expected me to have the answer,” she said. Allred prides herself on supplying answers, and options, for women in crisis. But that night she didn’t have one.

One answer that Allred provided for herself, later, was to sue the President-elect. During the campaign, more than a dozen women accused Trump of past sexual misconduct. He responded by saying, “All of these liars will be sued after the election is over.” Allred picked up four new clients. Three days before the Inauguration, she held a press conference with Summer Zervos, a former contestant on “The Apprentice,” who alleged that Trump had harassed and groped her at the Beverly Hills Hotel in 2007 and then took back a job offer after she rebuffed him. They announced that Zervos was suing Trump for defamation. On January 21st, Allred walked with Zervos in the Women’s March on Washington, flanked by other Trump accusers. “It changed Summer,” Allred said. “It’s a very scary thing to have a lawsuit against the President of the United States, particularly this President. But the Women’s March showed Summer that she was not alone.”

Marc Kasowitz, Trump’s New York lawyer, has filed several motions arguing that Trump has Presidential immunity. In a brief filed in July, he argued that Trump’s statements about the accusers should be seen as campaign rhetoric intended to secure a victory, and should not be taken literally. He also cited statements from Allred at her pre-Inauguration press conference—she had likened the suit to Paula Jones’s sexual-harassment case against Bill Clinton—as evidence that the primary goal of the lawsuit is to trigger impeachment proceedings. Allred seems happy to give that impression. She smiles when she talks about the prospect of taking Trump’s deposition in the matter. “I look forward to him telling the truth, as I expect any witness under oath to do,” she told me. Her smile got bigger. “And if he doesn’t—if he’s not truthful about a material fact, and he knows he’s not being truthful about a material fact—then that would constitute perjury, a high crime or misdemeanor for which he could be impeached.”

Since her initial press conference with Zervos, Allred has been saying that, if Trump retracted what he said about Zervos, “we would dismiss the case, and we would not seek damages or attorney’s fees.” Trump wouldn’t have to testify under oath about his sexual behavior. “But,” she added, “we would need an acknowledgment that what she said was true.”

By all accounts, Allred refuses to consider retirement. “You’d have to drag her kicking and screaming out of the office,” Bloom told me. One day in August, I spoke to Allred shortly after she went to court in Los Angeles to represent a transgender woman who had been assaulted and then immediately flew to a small town in Texas to represent a minor who had been sexually abused by a police detective. “I would be exhausted if I couldn’t work,” she said. Fugate told me, “One day, she’ll just have a heart attack at her desk while she’s in the middle of something, and that’ll be that.”

I asked Allred who will carry on her work when she is gone—her daughter, perhaps? “I hope the next Gloria Allred is many, many young lawyers,” she replied. Within the National Trial Lawyers’ Association, she’s forming a group

of women’s-rights attorneys, seeking representatives from every state. “It can’t just be people who have interest,” she said. “They have to have successes, I think.”

The world has changed since Allred first started practicing. She has anticipated, and helped create, a variety of cultural shifts: the advent of unapologetic, mainstream, professionalized feminism; a valuation of victimhood; a broad embrace of personal branding; a tabloid energy that consumes even the White House; a society in which ordinary women have begun to feel confident accusing powerful men who abuse them.

On September 19th, in partnership with the New York law firm Cuti Hecker Wang, Allred filed an opposition brief in her lawsuit against Trump, arguing that the President has no immunity for unofficial acts and that this suit would not interfere with the performance of his duties. The brief supplies seventeen statements from Trump discrediting Zervos or other accusers. “Lies, lies. No witnesses, no nothing. All big lies,” Trump said at a rally in West Palm Beach, last October. “Words matter,” the brief states. Later, it goes on, “Defendant is not above the law.” There is also the occasional flash of wit: “Defendant is of course correct that his office is singularly important.”

Whenever I asked Allred whether she enjoyed what she did, she always turned back to the idea of duty. But I got the distinct sense that sometimes, at least, she finds her work fun. At the Doubletree in Norristown, during the Cosby trial, she was assigned a room adjacent to McMonagle’s and directly across from a conference room where the defense was prepping. When I met her in the lobby, she told me about this, then leaned in close and asked, “Should we go?” We took the elevator upstairs and walked slowly past the room’s big windows. Allred, in the mode of ostentatious inconspicuousness, shook with silent laughter as we passed the huddled team. She stage-whispered, “You’ve got to block me so they don’t see!” A few hours later, when we finished dinner, Allred deadpanned that she was going to go back upstairs and surprise them. She would hold a sign up to the conference-room window, saying “Time’s up!” ♦

# IS HEALTH CARE A RIGHT?

*It's a question that divides Americans. But it's possible to find common ground, too.*

BY ATUL GAWANDE

Is health care a right? The United States remains the only developed country in the world unable to come to agreement on an answer. Earlier this year, I was visiting Athens, Ohio, the town in the Appalachian foothills where I grew up. The battle over whether to repeal, replace, or repair the Affordable Care Act raged then, as it continues to rage now. So I began asking people whether they thought that health care was a right. The responses were always interesting.

A friend had put me in touch with a forty-seven-year-old woman I'll call Maria Dutton. She lived with her husband, Joe, down a long gravel driveway that snaked into the woods off a rural road. "You may feel like you are in the movie *'Deliverance'*," she said, but it wasn't like that at all. They had a tidy, double-wide modular home with flowered wallpaper, family pictures on every surface, a vase of cut roses on a sideboard, and an absurdly friendly hound in the yard. Maria told me her story sitting at the kitchen table with Joe.

She had joined the Army out of high school and married her recruiter—Joe is eleven years older—but after a year she had to take a medical discharge. She had developed severe fatigue, double vision, joint and neck pains, and muscle weakness. At first, doctors thought that she had multiple sclerosis. When that was ruled out, they were at a loss. After Joe left the military, he found steady, secure work as an electrical technician at an industrial plant nearby. Maria did secretarial and office-manager jobs and had a daughter. But her condition worsened, and soon she became too ill to work.

"I didn't even have enough energy to fry a pound of hamburger," she said. "I'd have to fry half of it and then sit down, rest, and get up and fry the rest. I didn't have enough energy to vacuum one room of the house." Eventually, she was diag-

nosed with chronic-fatigue syndrome and depression. She became addicted to the opioids prescribed for her joint pains and was started on methadone. Her liver began to fail. In 2014, she was sent two hundred miles away to the Cleveland Clinic for a liver-transplant evaluation. There, after more than two decades of Maria's deteriorating health, doctors figured out what the problem was: sarcoidosis, an inflammatory condition that produces hardened nodules in organs throughout the body. The doctors gave her immunosuppressive medication, and the nodules shrank away. Within a year, she had weaned herself off the methadone.

"It was miraculous," she said. In middle age, with her daughter grown up and in the Army Reserves herself, Maria got her life back and returned to school. All along, she'd had coverage through her husband's work. "They have amazing insurance," she said. "I think one year the insurance paid out two hundred thousand dollars. But we paid out, too."

This was an understatement. Between a six-thousand-dollar deductible and hefty co-pays and premiums, the Duttons' annual costs reached fifteen thousand dollars. They were barely getting by. Then one day in 2001 Joe blacked out, for no apparent reason, at a Girl Scout meeting for their daughter and fell down two flights of stairs, resulting in a severe concussion. It put him out of work for six months. Given the health-care costs and his loss of income, the couple ran out of money.

"We had to file for bankruptcy," Joe said. He told me this reluctantly. It took them more than five years to dig out of the hole. He considered the bankruptcy "pretty shameful," he said, and had told almost no one about it, not even his family. (This was why they didn't want me to use their names.) He saw it as a personal failure—not the government's. In

fact, the whole idea that government would get involved in the financing of health care bothered him. One person's right to health care becomes another person's burden to pay for it, he said. Taking other people's money had to be justified, and he didn't see how it could be in cases like this.

"Everybody has a right to access health care," he allowed, "but they should be contributing to the cost." He pointed out that anyone could walk into a hospital with an emergency condition, get treated, and be billed afterward. "Yes, they may have collectors coming after them," he said. "But I believe everybody should contribute for the treatment they receive."

Like her husband, Maria leans conservative. In the 2016 election, Joe voted for Donald Trump. Maria voted for Gary Johnson, the Libertarian candidate. But on health care she was torn. Joe wanted Obamacare repealed. She didn't.

"I am becoming more liberal," she said. "I believe that people should be judged by how they treat the least of our society." At her sickest, she had been one of them. But she was reluctant to say that health care is a right. "There's where the conservative side comes in and says, 'You know what? I work really hard. I deserve a little more than the guy who sits around.'"

A right makes no distinction between the deserving and the undeserving, and that felt perverse to Maria and Joe. They both told me about people they know who don't work and yet get Medicaid coverage with no premiums, no deductibles, no co-pays, no costs at all—coverage that the Duttons couldn't dream of.

"I see people on the same road I live on who have never worked a lick in their life," Joe said, his voice rising. "They're living on disability incomes, and they're healthier than I am." Maria described a relative who got disability payments

*A right doesn't distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving, and, for many in my Ohio home town, that rankled.*





and a Medicaid card for a supposedly bad back, while taking off-the-books roofing jobs.

"Frankly, it annoys the crap out of me—they're nothing but grasshoppers in the system," Joe said, recalling the fable about the thriftless grasshopper and the provident ant.

The Duttons were doing all they could to earn a living and pay their taxes—taxes that helped provide free health care for people who did nothing to earn it. Meanwhile, they faced thousands of dollars in medical bills themselves. That seemed wrong. And in their view government involvement had only made matters worse.

"My personal opinion is that anytime the government steps in and says, 'You must do this,' it's overstepping its boundaries," Joe said. "A father, mother, two kids working their asses off—they're making minimum wage and are barely getting by—I have no problem helping them. If I have someone who's spent his whole life a drunk and a wastrel, no, I have no desire to help. That's just the basics."

Such feelings are widely shared. They're what brought the country within a single vote of repealing major parts of President Obama's expansion of health-care coverage. Some people see rights as protections provided by government. But others, like the Duttons, see rights as protections from government.

Tim Williams, one of my closest childhood friends, disagreed with the Duttons. Tim is a quiet fifty-two-year-old with the physique of a bodybuilder—he once bench-pressed me when we were in high school—and tightly cropped gray hair that used to be flame red. He survived metastatic melanoma, in the nine-

ties, and losing his job selling motorcycles, during the great recession. He went through a year of chemotherapy and, later, three years without a job. He can figure out how to fix and build almost anything, but, without a college degree, he had few employment options. Hundreds of job applications later, though, he was hired as an operator at our town's water-treatment plant, where I visited him.

The plant was built in the nineteen-fifties. We walked among giant pipes and valves and consoles that controlled the flow of water from local ground wells through a series of huge pools for filtration, softening, and chlorination, and out to the water towers on the tallest ridges surrounding the town. The low hum of the pump motors churned in the background.

People don't think about their water, Tim said, but we can't live without it. It is not a luxury; it's a necessity of human existence. An essential function of government, therefore, is to insure that people have clean water. And that's the way he sees health care. Joe wanted government to step back; Tim wanted government to step up. The divide seemed unbridgeable. Yet the concerns that came with each viewpoint were understandable, and I wondered if there were places where those concerns might come together.

Before I entered the field of public health, where it's a given that health care is a right and not a privilege, I had grown up steeped in a set of core Midwestern beliefs: that you can't get something for nothing, and that you should be reluctant to impose on others and, likewise, to be imposed upon. Here self-reliance is a totemic value. Athens, Ohio, is a place where people brew their own beer, shoot

their own deer, fix their own cars (also grow their own weed, fight their own fights, get their own revenge). People here are survivors.

Monna French was one. She was fifty-three years old and the librarian at Athens Middle School. She'd been through a lot in life. She had started a local taxi company with her first husband, but they couldn't afford health insurance. When she gave birth to her daughter Maggie and then to her son, Mac, the couple had to pay cash, pray that there'd be no unaffordable complications, and try to leave the hospital the next morning to avoid extra charges. When Monna and her husband divorced, litigation over the business left her with no income or assets.

"I had twenty-six dollars, two kids, and a cat," she said.

She held down five part-time jobs, working as a teaching assistant for three different schools during the day, bartending at night, and selling furniture at Odd Lots department store on weekends, while her parents helped with the kids. Finally, she got the librarian job. It was classified as clerical work and didn't pay well. But it meant that her family had health insurance, and a roof over their heads. She also met Larry, an iron worker and Vietnam veteran, who became her second husband. He had two children, but he was older and they were grown. Together, Monna and Larry had a child of their own, named Macie. Then, thirteen years ago, Maggie, at age sixteen, was killed in a car accident. Seven years ago, Larry's son, Eric, who had spina bifida and multiple medical needs, died suddenly in his sleep, at the age of forty.

After twenty-two years as a librarian, Monna still makes only sixteen dollars and fifty cents an hour. Her take-home pay is less than a thousand dollars a month, after taxes and health-insurance contributions. Her annual deductible is three thousand dollars. Larry, now seventy-four, has retired, and his pension, military benefits, and Medicare helped keep them afloat.

For all her struggles, though, Monna is the kind of person who is always ready to offer a helping hand. When I visited her, there were stacks of posters on her porch, printed for a fund-raiser she was organizing for her daughter's high-school marching band. She raised money for her township's volunteer fire brigade. She was the vice-president of her local union,

#### AN INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO SURVIVING A PARTY



GRAB SOME  
ME TIME



HIDE UNDER  
THE COATS



ADD YOURSELF  
TO THE PUNCH



one of the largest in the county, which represents school-bus drivers, clerical staff, custodians, and other non-certified workers. She'd been deeply involved in contract negotiations to try to hold on to their wages and health benefits in the face of cutbacks.

"I don't know anything about health care," she protested when I asked her for her thoughts on the subject. In fact, she knew a lot. And, as she spoke, I thought I glimpsed a place where the health-care divide might just allow a bridge.

Monna considered herself a conservative. The notion of health care as a right struck her as another way of undermining work and responsibility: "Would I love to have health insurance provided to me and be able to stay home?" Of course, she said. "But I guess I'm going to be honest and tell you that I'm old school, and I'm not really good at accepting anything I don't work for."

She could quit her job and get Medicaid free, she pointed out, just as some of her neighbors had. "They have a card that comes in the mail, and they get everything they need!" she said. "Where does it end? I mean, how much responsibility do tax-paying people like me have? How much is too much?" She went on, "I understand that there's going to be a percentage of the population that we are going to have to provide for." When she was a young mother with two children and no home, she'd had to fall back on welfare and Medicaid for three months. Her stepson, Eric, had been on Medicaid and Social Security Disability Insurance before he died. Her eighty-three-year-old mother, who has dementia and requires twenty-four-hour care, was also on Medicaid. "If you're disabled, if you're mentally ill, fine, I get it," Monna said. "But I know so many folks on Medicaid that just don't work. They're lazy." Like the Duttons, she felt that those people didn't deserve what they were getting.

But then we talked about Medicare, which provided much of her husband's health care and would one day provide hers. That was different, Monna told me. Liberals often say that conservative voters who oppose government-guaranteed health care and yet support Medicare are either hypocrites or dunces. But Monna, like almost everyone I spoke to, understood perfectly well what Medicare was and was glad to have it.

I asked her what made it different. "We all pay in for that," she pointed out, "and we all benefit." That made all the difference in the world. From the moment we earn an income, we all contribute to Medicare, and, in return, when we reach sixty-five we can all count on it, regardless of our circumstances. There is genuine reciprocity. You don't know whether you'll need more health care than you pay for or less. Her husband thus far has needed much less than he's paid for. Others need more. But we all get the same deal, and, she felt, that's what makes it O.K.

"I believe one hundred per cent that Medicare needs to exist the way it does," she said. This was how almost everyone I spoke to saw it. To them, Medicare was less about a universal right than about a universal agreement on how much we give and how much we get.

Understanding this seems key to breaking the current political impasse. The deal we each get on health care has a profound impact on our lives—on our savings, on our well-being, on our life expectancy. In the American health-care system, however, different people get astonishingly different deals. That disparity is having a corrosive effect on how we view our country, our government, and one another.

The Oxford political philosopher Henry Shue observed that our typical way of looking at rights is incomplete. People are used to thinking of rights as moral trump cards, near-absolute requirements that all of us can demand. But, Shue argued, rights are as much about our duties as about our freedoms. Even the basic right to physical security—to be free of threats or harm—has no meaning without a vast system of police departments, courts, and prisons, a system that requires extracting large amounts of money and effort from others. Once costs and mechanisms of implementation enter the picture, things get complicated. Trade-offs now have to be considered. And saying that something is a basic right starts to seem the equivalent of saying only, "It is very, very important."

Shue held that what we really mean by "basic rights" are those which are necessary in order for us to enjoy any rights or privileges at all. In his analysis, basic

rights include physical security, water, shelter, and health care. Meeting these basics is, he maintained, among government's highest purposes and priorities. But how much aid and protection a society should provide, given the costs, is ultimately a complex choice for democracies. Debate often becomes focussed on the scale of the benefits conferred and the costs extracted. Yet the critical question may be how widely shared these benefits and costs are.

Arnold Jonas is another childhood friend of mine. Blond, ruddy-faced, and sporting a paunch at fifty-two, he has rarely had a nine-to-five job and isn't looking for one. The work he loves is in art and design—he once designed a project for the Smithsonian—

but what usually pays the bills is physical labor or mechanical work. He lives from paycheck to paycheck. ("Retirement savings? Ha! You're funny, Atul.") Still, he has always known how to take care of himself. "I own my house," he told me. "I have no debts."

This is a guy who's so handy that the cars he drives are rehabbed wrecks rebuilt from spare parts—including the old Volvo that he drove to the strip-mall Mexican restaurant near my family's house, where we were catching up. But when I asked him about health care he could only shake his head.

"I just try not to think about it," he said. He hadn't seen a doctor in at least a decade. He got a health-care plan through an insurance-agent friend, but could only afford one with minimal benefits. He wasn't sure whether he'd got an Obamacare subsidy. "I don't read the fine print, because it's going to be completely confusing anyway." All he knew was that the plan cost him a hundred and ten dollars a month, and the high deductible (however many thousands of dollars it was, it was well beyond his savings account) made doctors' visits almost out of the question.

"I am lucky I can get my teeth looked at because I'm dating a dental hygienist. But"—here he showed me his white-toothed grin—"I can't date a dental hygienist *and* a cardiologist."

Arnold, with his code of self-reliance, had eliminated nearly all sources of insecurity from his life. But here was one that



was beyond his control. “The biggest worry I have would be some sort of health-care need,” he said. A serious medical issue would cost him his income. As an independent contractor, he isn’t eligible for unemployment benefits. And, having passed the age of fifty, he was just waiting for some health problem to happen.

So did he feel that he had a right to health care? No. “I never thought about it as a matter of rights,” he said. “A lot of these things we think are rights, we actually end up paying for.” He thinks that the left typically plays down the reality of the costs, which drives him crazy. But the right typically plays down the reality of the needs, which drives him crazy, too.

In his view, everyone has certain needs that neither self-reliance nor the free market can meet. He can fix his house, but he needs the help of others if it catches fire. He can keep his car running, but he needs the help of others to pave and maintain the roads. And, whatever he does to look after himself, he will eventually need the help of others for his medical care.

“I think the goal should be security,” he said of health care. “Not just financial security but mental security—knowing that, no matter how bad things get, this shouldn’t be what you worry about. We don’t worry about the Fire Department, or the police. We don’t worry about the roads we travel on. And it’s not, like, ‘Here’s the traffic lane for the ones who did well and saved money, and you poor people, you have to drive over here.’” He went on, “Somebody I know said to me, ‘If we give everybody health care, it’ll be abused.’ I told her that’s a risk we take. The roads are abused. A lot of things are abused. It’s part of the deal.”

He told me about a friend who’d undergone an emergency appendectomy. “She panicked when she woke up in the hospital realizing it would cost her a fortune,” he said. “Think about that. A lot of people will take a crappy job just to get the health benefits rather than start an entrepreneurial idea. If we’re talking about tax breaks for rich people to create jobs and entrepreneurialism, why not health care to allow regular people to do the same thing?”

As he saw it, government existed to

provide basic services like trash pickup, a sewer system, roadways, police and fire protection, schools, and health care. Do people have a *right* to trash pickup? It seemed odd to say so, and largely irrelevant. The key point was that these necessities can be provided only through collective effort and shared costs. When people get very different deals on these things, the pact breaks down. And that’s what has happened with American health care.

The reason goes back to a seemingly innocuous decision made during the Second World War, when a huge part of the workforce was sent off to fight. To keep labor costs from skyrocketing, the Roosevelt Administration imposed a wage freeze. Employers and unions wanted some flexibility, in order to attract desired employees, so the Administration permitted increases in health-insurance benefits, and made them tax-exempt. It didn’t seem a big thing. But, ever since, we’ve been trying to figure out how to cover the vast portion of the country that doesn’t have employer-provided health insurance: low-wage workers, children, retirees, the unemployed, small-business owners, the self-employed, the disabled. We’ve had to stitch together different rules and systems for each of these categories, and the result is an unholy, expensive mess that leaves millions unprotected.

No other country in the world has built its health-care system this way, and, in the

era of the gig economy, it’s becoming only more problematic. Between 2005 and 2015, according to analysis by the economists Alan Krueger and Lawrence Katz, ninety-four per cent of net job growth has been in “alternative work arrangements”—freelancing, independent contracting, temping, and the like—which

typically offer no health benefits. And we’ve all found ourselves battling over who deserves less and who deserves more.

The Berkeley sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild spent five years listening to Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, and in her masterly book “Strangers in Their Own Land” she identifies what she calls the deep story that they lived and felt. Visualize a long line of people snaking up a hill, she says. Just over the hill is the American Dream. You

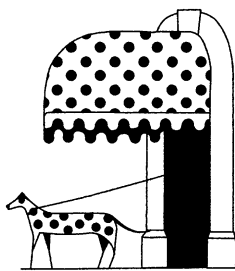
are somewhere in the middle of that line. But instead of moving forward you find that you are falling back. Ahead of you, people are cutting in line. You see immigrants and shirkers among them. It’s not hard to imagine how infuriating this could be to some, how it could fuel an America First ideal, aiming to give pride of place to “real” Americans and demoting those who would undermine that identity—foreigners, Muslims, Black Lives Matter supporters, feminists, “snowflakes.”

Our political debates seem to focus on what the rules should be for our place in line. Should the most highly educated get to move up to the front? The most talented? Does seniority matter? What about people whose ancestors were cheated and mistreated?

The mistake is accepting the line, and its dismal conception of life as a zero-sum proposition. It gives up on the more encompassing possibilities of shared belonging, mutual loyalty, and collective gains. America’s founders believed these possibilities to be fundamental. They held life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to be “unalienable rights” possessed equally by all members of their new nation. The terms of membership have had to be rewritten a few times since, sometimes in blood. But the aspiration has endured, even as what we need to fulfill it has changed.

When the new country embarked on its experiment in democracy, health care was too primitive to matter to life or liberty. The average citizen was a hardscrabble rural farmer who lived just forty years. People mainly needed government to insure physical security and the rule of law. Knowledge and technology, however, expanded the prospects of life and liberty, and, accordingly, the requirements of government. During the next two centuries, we relied on government to establish a system of compulsory public education, infrastructure for everything from running water to the electric grid, and old-age pensions, along with tax systems to pay for it all. As in other countries, these programs were designed to be universal. For the most part, we didn’t divide families between those who qualified and those who didn’t, between participants and patrons. This inclusiveness is likely a major reason that these policies have garnered such enduring support.

Health care has been the cavernous





exception. Medical discoveries have enabled the average American to live eighty years or longer, and with a higher quality of life than ever before. Achieving this requires access not only to emergency care but also, crucially, to routine care and medicines, which is how we stave off and manage the series of chronic health issues that accumulate with long life. We get high blood pressure and hepatitis, diabetes and depression, cholesterol problems and colon cancer. Those who can't afford the requisite care get sicker and die sooner. Yet, in a country where pretty much everyone has trash pickup and K-12 schooling for the kids, we've been reluctant to address our Second World War mistake and establish a basic system of health-care coverage that's open to all. Some even argue that such a system is un-American, stepping beyond the powers the Founders envisioned for our government.

In fact, in a largely forgotten episode in American history, Thomas Jefferson found himself confronting this very matter, shortly after his Inauguration as our third President, in 1801. Edward Jenner, in England, had recently developed a smallpox vaccine—a momentous medical breakthrough. Investigating the lore that milkmaids never got smallpox, he discovered that material from scabs produced by cowpox, a similar condition that afflicts cattle, induced a mild illness in people that left them immune to smallpox. Smallpox epidemics came with a mortality rate of thirty per cent or higher, and wiped out upward of five per cent of the population of cities like Boston and New York. Jefferson read Jenner's report and arranged for the vaccination of two hundred relatives, neighbors, and slaves at Monticello. The President soon became vaccination's preëminent American champion.

But supplies were difficult to produce, and the market price was beyond the means of most families. Jefferson, along with his successor, James Madison, believed in a limited role for the federal government. They did not take expanding its power and its commitments lightly. By the time Jefferson finished his two terms as President, however, city and state governments had almost entirely failed to establish programs to provide vaccines for their citizens. Thousands of lives continued to be lost to smallpox outbreaks.



*"He spent the last half hour trying to piratesplain sea shanties to me."*

Meanwhile, vaccination programs in England, France, and Denmark had dramatically curbed the disease and measurably raised the national life expectancy. So, at Jefferson's prompting, and with Madison's unhesitating support, Congress passed the Vaccine Act of 1813 with virtually no opposition. A National Vaccine Agent was appointed to maintain stocks of vaccine and supply it to any American who requested it. The government was soon providing free vaccine for tens of thousands of people each year. It was the country's first health-care entitlement for the general population. And its passage wasn't in the least controversial.

Two centuries later, the Affordable Care Act was passed to serve a similar purpose: to provide all Americans with access to the life-preserving breakthroughs of our own generation. The law narrowed the yawning disparities in access to care, levied the taxes needed to pay for it, and measurably improved the health of tens of millions. But, to win passage, the A.C.A. postponed reckoning with our generations-old error of yoking health care to our jobs—an error that has made it disastrously difficult to discipline costs and insure quality, while sev-

ering care from our foundational agreement that, when it comes to the most basic needs and burdens of life and liberty, all lives have equal worth. The prospects and costs for health care in America still vary wildly, and incomprehensibly, according to your job, your state, your age, your income, your marital status, your gender, and your medical history, not to mention your ability to read fine print.

Few want the system we have, but many fear losing what we've got. And we disagree profoundly about where we want to go. Do we want a single, nationwide payer of care (Medicare for all), each state to have its own payer of care (Medicaid for all), a nationwide marketplace where we all choose among a selection of health plans (Healthcare.gov for all), or personal accounts that we can use to pay directly for health care (Health Savings Accounts for all)? Any of these can work. Each has been made to work universally somewhere in the world. They all have their supporters and their opponents. We disagree about which benefits should be covered, how generous the financial protection should be, and how we should pay for it. We disagree, as well, about the trade-offs we will accept: for instance,

between increasing simplicity and increasing choice; or between advancing innovation and reducing costs.

What we agree on, broadly, is that the rules should apply to everyone. But we've yet to put this moral principle into practice. The challenge for any plan is to avoid the political perils of a big, overnight switch that could leave many people with higher costs and lower benefits. There are, however, many options for a gradual transition. Just this June, the Nevada legislature passed a bill that would have allowed residents to buy into the state's Medicaid plan—if the governor hadn't vetoed it. A similar bill to allow people to buy into Medicare was recently introduced in Congress. We need to push such options forward. Maintaining the link between health coverage and jobs is growing increasingly difficult, expensive, and self-defeating. But deciding to build on what's currently working requires overcoming a well of mistrust about whether such investments will really serve a shared benefit.

My friend Betsy Anderson, who taught eighth-grade English at Athens Middle School for fifteen years, told me something that made me see how deep that well is. When she first started out as a teacher, she said, her most satisfying experiences came from working with eager, talented kids who were hungry for her help in preparing them for a path to college and success. But she soon realized that her class, like America as a whole,

would see fewer than half of its students earn a bachelor's degree. Her job was therefore to try to help all of her students reach their potential—to contribute in their own way and to pursue happiness on their own terms.

But, she said, by eighth grade profound divisions had already been cemented. The honors kids—the Hillary Clintons and Mitt Romneys of the school—sat at the top of the meritocratic heap, getting attention and encouragement. The kids with the greatest needs had special-education support. But, across America, the large mass of kids in the middle—the ones without money, book smarts, or athletic prowess—were outsiders in their own schools. Few others cared about what they felt or believed or experienced. They were the unspecial and unpromising, looked down upon by and almost completely separated from the college-bound crowd. Life was already understood to be a game of winners and losers; they were the designated losers, and they resented it. The most consistent message these students had received was that their lives were of less value than others'. Is it so surprising that some of them find satisfaction in a politics that says, essentially, Screw'em all?

I met with Mark, a friend of Arnold's, at the Union Street Diner, uptown near the campus of Ohio University, which makes Athens its home. The diner was a low-key place that stayed open

twenty-four hours, with Formica tables and plastic cups, and a late-night clientele that was a mixture of townies and drunken students. I ordered a cheeseburger and onion rings. Mark ordered something healthier. (He asked me not to use his last name.) The son of a state highway patrolman, he had graduated from Athens High School five years ahead of me. Afterward, he worked as a cable installer, and got married at twenty-three. His wife worked at the Super Duper grocery store. Their pay was meagre and they were at the mercy of their bosses. So, the next year, they decided to buy a convenience store on the edge of town.

Mark's father-in-law was a builder, and he helped them secure a bank loan. They manned the register day and night, and figured out how to make a decent living. It was never a lot of money, but over time they built up the business, opening gas pumps, and hiring college students to work the counter part time. They were able to make a life of it.

They adopted a child, a boy who was now a twenty-five-year-old graduate of the local university. Mark turned fifty-seven and remained a lifelong conservative. In general, he didn't trust politicians. But he felt that Democrats in particular didn't seem to recognize when they were pushing taxes and regulations too far. Health-care reform was a prime example. "It's just the whole time they were coming up with this idea from copying some European model," he said. "And I'm going, 'Oh shit. This is not going to end up good for Mark.'" (Yes, he sometimes talks about himself in the third person.)

For his health coverage, Mark trusted his insurance agent, whom he'd known for decades, more than he trusted the government. He'd always chosen the minimum necessary, a bare-bones, high-deductible plan. He and his wife weren't able to conceive, so they didn't have to buy maternity or contraceptive coverage. With Obamacare, though, he felt forced to pay extra to help others get benefits that he'd never had or needed. "I thought, Well, here we go, I guess I'm now kicking in for Bill Gates's daughter's pregnancy, too." He wanted to keep government small and taxes low. He was opposed to Obamacare.

Then, one morning a year ago, Mark's back started to hurt. "It was a workday. I grabbed a Tylenol and I go, 'No, this



*"And it's just a ten-minute walk to much nicer apartments."*



isn't going to work, the pain's too weird." It got worse, and when the pain began to affect his breathing he asked his wife to drive him to the emergency room.

"They put me in a bed, and eight minutes later I'm out," he recalled. "I'm dying." Someone started chest compressions. A defibrillator was wheeled in, and his heart was given a series of shocks. When he woke up, he learned that he'd suffered cardiac arrest. "They said, 'Well, you're going to Riverside'"—a larger hospital, in Columbus, eighty miles away. "And I went back out again."

He'd had a second cardiac arrest, but doctors were able to shock him back to life once more. An electrocardiogram showed that he'd had a massive heart attack. If he was going to survive, he needed to get to Columbus immediately for emergency cardiac catheterization. The hospital got him a life-flight helicopter, but high winds made it unsafe to fly. So they took him by ground as fast as an ambulance could go. On the procedure table, a cardiologist found a blockage in the left main artery to his heart—a "widow-maker," doctors call it—and stented it open.

"The medicine is just crazy good," Mark said. "By twelve-thirty, I was fixed."

After that, he needed five days in the hospital and several weeks at home to recover. Although he had to take a pile of drugs to reduce the chance of a recurrence, he got his strength back. He was able to resume work, hang out with his buddies, live his life.

It was only after this experience that Mark realized what the A.C.A. had given him. Like twenty-seven per cent of adults under sixty-five, he now had a preëxisting condition that would have made him uninsurable on the individual market before health-care reform went into effect. But the A.C.A. requires insurers to accept everyone, regardless of health history, and to charge the healthy and the less healthy the same community rate.

"This would have been a bad story for Mark," he said. "Because the same time you're being life-flighted is the same time you lose value to an employer. Your income is done."

He no longer opposed the requirement that people get insurance coverage. Fire insurance wouldn't work if people paid for it only when their house was on fire, and health insurance wouldn't work if people bought it only when they needed

it. He was no longer interested in repealing protections for people like him.

In this, he was like a lot of others. In 2013, before the implementation of the A.C.A., Americans were asked whether it was the government's responsibility to make sure that everyone had health-care coverage, and fifty-six per cent said no. Four years after implementation, sixty per cent say yes.

"But that doesn't mean I have to sign on for full-blown socialism—cradle-to-grave everything," Mark said. "It's a balance." Our willingness to trust in efforts like health reform can be built on experience, as happened with Mark, though we must recognize how tenuous that trust remains. Two sets of values are in tension. We want to reward work, ingenuity, self-reliance. And we want to protect the weak and the vulnerable—not least because, over time, we all become the weak and vulnerable, unable to get by without the help of others. Finding the balance is not a matter of achieving policy perfection; whatever program we devise, some people will put in more and some will take out more. Progress ultimately depends on whether we can build and sustain the belief that collective action genuinely results in collective benefit. No policy will be possible otherwise.

Eight years after the passage of the Vaccine Act of 1813, a terrible mistake occurred. The Agent accidentally sent to North Carolina samples containing smallpox, instead of cowpox, causing an outbreak around the town of Tarboro that, in the next few months, claimed ten lives. The outrage over the "Tarboro Tragedy" spurred Congress to repeal the program, rather than to repair it, despite its considerable success. As a consequence, the United States probably lost hundreds of thousands of lives to a disease that several European programs had made vanishingly rare. It was eighty years before Congress again acted to insure safe, effective supplies of smallpox vaccine.

When I told this story to people in Athens, everyone took the repeal to be a clear mistake. But some could understand how such things happen. One conservative thought that the people in North Carolina might wonder whether the reports of lives saved by the vaccine were fake news. They saw the lives lost from the supposed accident. They knew the

victims' names. As for the lives supposedly saved because of outbreaks that didn't occur—if you don't trust the government's vaccines, you don't necessarily trust the government's statistics, either.

These days, trust in our major professions—in politicians, journalists, business leaders—is at a low ebb. Members of the medical profession are an exception; they still command relatively high levels of trust. It does not seem a coincidence that medical centers are commonly the most culturally, politically, economically, and racially diverse institutions you will find in a community. These are places devoted to making sure that all lives have equal worth. But they also pride themselves on having some of the hardest-working, best-trained, and most innovative people in society. This isn't to say that doctors, nurses, and others in health care fully live up to the values they profess. We can be condescending and heedless of the costs we impose on patients' lives and bank accounts. We still often fail in our commitment to treating equally everyone who comes through our doors. But we're embarrassed by this. We are expected to do better every day.

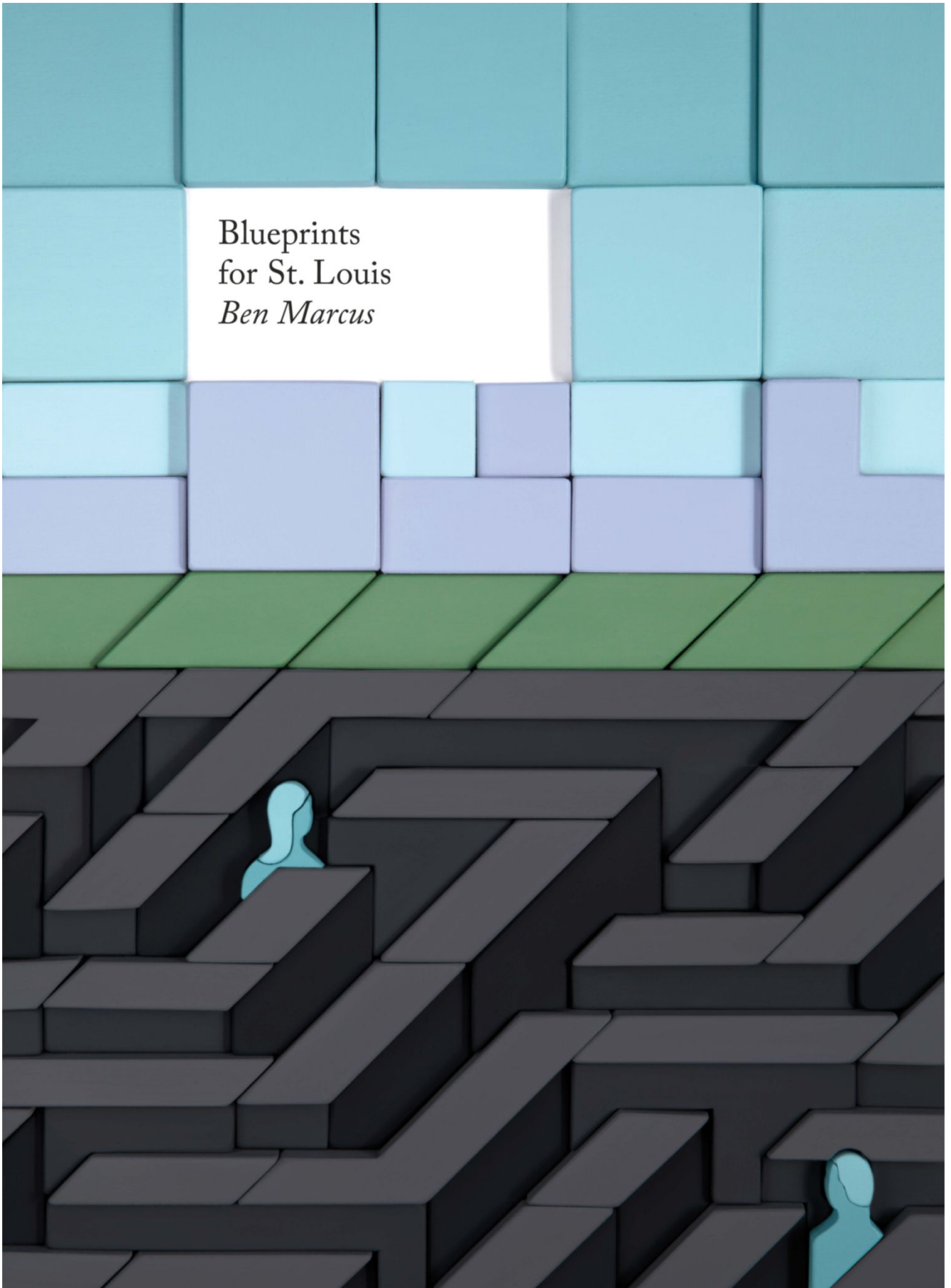
The repeal of the Vaccine Act of 1813 represented a basic failure of government to deliver on its duty to protect the life and liberty of all. But the fact that public vaccination programs eventually became ubiquitous (even if it took generations) might tell us something about the ultimate direction of our history—the direction in which we are still slowly, fitfully creeping.

On Mark's last day in the hospital, the whole team came in to see him. He thanked them. "But I didn't thank them for taking care of me," he said. "I thanked them for when I was smoking, drinking, and eating chicken wings. They were all here working and studying, and I appreciated it."

"That's what you thanked them for?"

"Yeah," he said. "Because if Mark wasn't going to stop this, they were going to have to keep working hard. Something had to happen because Mark was clogging up." And those people did keep working hard. They were there getting ready for Mark, regardless of who he would turn out to be—rich or poor, spendthrift or provident, wise or foolish. "I said, I am glad they do this every day, but I'm hoping to do it only once." ♦

Blueprints  
for St. Louis  
*Ben Marcus*





**I**t was winter, which meant that a pelvic frost had fallen across the land. Or maybe just across Roy and Ida's apartment. And, in truth, the frost had long since matured into a kind of bodily aloofness, just shy of visible flinching, when they passed each other in the halls, or when they co-slept in the intimacy-free bed they'd splurged on. Why not have the best sleep of your life next to the dried-out sack of daddy you've long taken for granted, whose wand no longer glows and quivers for you and for whom you no longer quietly melt?

You had to track the erotic cooling back into summer, or the prior spring, and, well, didn't the seasons and the years just dog-pile one another when you tried to solve math like that? Ida wasn't particularly concerned, because, whatever, there was a clarity to the coldness, right? And screw Roy if he'd fallen down a brightly colored porn hole, pummeling himself to images of animated youngsters slithering around in grownup crotch gear in a cartoon fairyland. Browser histories weren't her favorite literary genre, but she knew how to read them. Anyway, if her husband's use-case viability on the marital graph had taken a nose-dive, then so, too, had her own burden. She had her friends, she had her work on the memorial, and she had the show-erhead. When she and Roy first got married, whenever ago, Ida's mother had told her that if people don't visit you don't have to host. Period, full stop. And even though Ida's take on this advice now was off-label, it applied just fine to her touchless union. The body unloved, the body unhandled and unseen. The body as a ghost-in-training for whatever soiled world came next. Anyway, wasn't left-alone the best place to wind up?

Maybe old age and the cold blue death of the groin would solve that. Maybe Ida would inherit a sweet and useless Roy, post-pornography, sitting politely behind a drool cloth, swaddled in food-stained sweaters. She'd feed him until he cooed and maybe sometimes they would run out of gruel and she would watch his hunger grow, watch his eyes turn small and sad. Would it be so terrible? The sexual urge would be merely an embarrassing spasm of the past. They'd been friends once, before they'd got into designing memorials for

unspeakable catastrophes. Intense and respectful partners in their architectural firm. Mutually committed cattle prod-ers of each other's darker, stranger brains, torturing out each other's best ideas, before the chemical repulsion and bed-death had struck. Maybe by old age they'd return to form, be ideal dance partners again, if only they could stay alive long enough.

The problem was today and tomorrow and the next fucking huge bunch of days, the entirety of their middle age, really, which shouldn't be just a rotten footbridge you had to navigate, with a creepy old troll beating off underneath it. Roy was technically handsome, but he preened, and he moped, and he fished for so many compliments that Ida was fished out, empty, unable to smear any favorable speech over his prim, needy body. For some time he'd been taking himself to the gym with more ambition and lust than he showed for their collaborative design work, and he was all cut up now, a strange, Photoshopped musculature slipped over his bones like a bronzed wetsuit. She should have wanted to handle the new body he'd built, use it to snuff out her baser urges, not that Roy offered it to her, but she asked that he keep it covered. In loose-fitting layers, please. It stank of his not-so-hidden effort to attract a mammal outside the home. To sport with it and lick its fur, no doubt. Plus, she had tolerated her husband better when he wasn't such a vain custodian of the ephemeral—one mustn't fawn over that which will rot, someone important must have once said.

**W**hat consumed them both right now was the situation in St. Louis, for which their firm had been ceremoniously commissioned to design the memorial. Months after the bombing, the city was still digging out. Thirty dead souls, the news had said when it happened. But everyone knew that number wasn't real. It was low by a couple of decimal points. For days, the toll did not breach a hundred, which seemed impossible. Where did these cautious estimates come from? Maybe from actual bodies. Maybe this meant that the other, more plentiful dead were simply nowhere to be found, in the same way that wind can't be found. What you did was you factored in the missing, and

privately you did not call them missing. Thousands of people had not suddenly left their homes that morning and vanished into the mountains. When you watched the footage of the bombing, the dark slab of glass folding over itself like a blanket, then erupting into a pale-brown flower of smoke, and you calculated the typical occupancy, not just of the office tower but of the surrounding plaza, with its underground restaurants and shops, its perimeter of cafés, along with the time of day, the number thirty was a violent piece of wishful thinking, heavy, heavy, heavy on the wish.

"10k+," Roy had texted Ida from wherever he was the day it happened.

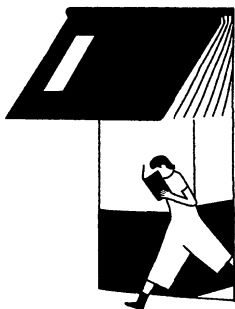
He wasn't wrong. It emerged that explosives had been buried in the foundation of the tower when it was being built, two years before, by some slithering motherfuckers on the construction crew. Stashed down there the night before the footings were poured, apparently, and then triggered when the building was finished and stuffed to the gills with people. In burning daylight, a time of high commerce, maximum human traffic. Not a government building, so far as anyone knew. Just as dense a cluster of people as any in the Midwest, excepting one or two zones in downtown Chicago. And so, and so. They had the perpetrators on video, brutes in hard hats. Except that they were skinny and they laughed a lot and were often seen hugging one another. Four of them had walked off the job on the same day, before the building had even started to rise up out of the concrete. How that very act—quitting in a group, never to be seen again—hadn't been some sort of security trigger was beyond Ida, but whatever, hindsight was a foul drug. And now everyone was asking, Who were these men and where had they gone? Oh, please, Ida thought, whenever this particular investigation blistered onto the screen. The St. Louis Four. The villains of Missouri. Can we please not believe that finding these men will matter at all? Please?

**T**errorism" wasn't really the term anymore. Ida found that it soured in her mouth, like a German word for some obscure feeling. "Tax" seemed to be a finer way to put it. A tax had been levied in St. Louis. In New Orleans last

year, in Tucson three years back. Et cetera. A tax on comfort, safety. A price paid for being alive, for waking up. Occasionally, the tax collector came. Not just occasionally. Quite a lot these days. You could run out of breath trying to name all the cities that had been hit in this country. The collector came, and people were subtracted from space. Buildings withered into rubble. One's imagination needed to frequently dilate in order to accommodate the ways and means, and otherwise smart men and women were busy with their scuffed crystal balls trying to figure out what was next, and how, and how. As if this forecasting ever . . . oh, forget it. Soon you knew not to be surprised, and this awareness was chilling. A low hum could be heard during the day, the night. You walked in a space that might not really be there. There was no longer anything proverbial when it came to danger, nothing to invent, no more fiction of dark days to come. The dark days were here. They were now.

In light of this, it was somehow Roy and Ida's calling to honor the site with a memorial. Or to try to, to actually compete for this kind of work, squirming through town halls and public debates, spinning a story about their vision, which was only ever a humble story to the effect that nothing anyone did could ever be enough. Their track record so far wasn't the worst, which was not much of a feel-good fact for either of them, even if a sort of undertaker's renown had attached itself to their firm over the years. They made their mark by designing large public graves where people could gather and also where maybe really cool food trucks would park. There was money for this, and money for this, and money for this. Hooray. Except that now Ida found it hard to view any other kind of design commission—for a vanilla-white office building in their own downtown Chicago, for example—as anything other than a future headstone, a kind of sarcophagus that would briefly house living, glistening people before they were lowered into the earth or scattered out over the lake in a burst of powder. If you were an architect, you designed tombs, for before or for after. What was the difference?

Ida kept a map pinned above her desk because she thought she might see something in the pattern of fallen cities: a story. Detectives did this to solve crimes. She thought it might tell her what to build. But sometimes, when she and Roy marvelled at it, it seemed to them like a coloring book that hadn't been filled in all the way yet. Sure, there were some spaces still to shade, whole cities left strangely untouched, but not that many. And there was always tomorrow.



St. Louis should not have been high on the list of targets, maybe not on the list at all, but that seemed to be the point these days, in the year of our sorrow. The years and years of it. A new and unspoken list of vulnerable sites had emerged: sweet zones, soft parts of the American body that could be knifed open and spilled out by the most skilled urban surgeons the world had ever seen.

Six months after the St. Louis attack, Roy and Ida had been invited to submit a proposal, and they'd gone through their usual tangled brainstorm, smoothing over the sharper ideas of their junior staff, whiteboarding a design that would appear sufficiently nonthreatening in the space, a kind of tranquillizing maze of low walls and open rooms for visitors to throw themselves around in and grieve. Roy called it the sanatorium aesthetic, and he wasn't that far off.

One day, as the deadline loomed, they walked along the great lake, which was flat and black, even as the wind pounded them. They started, brokenly, to drill down toward what they might possibly build, what it would look and sound like, what sort of feelings they were trying to create. Usually, you had to dance around the stakeholders to determine the emotional bolus of a work, as they called it. But the stakeholders for this project? Only the entire population of the United States of America.

Ida didn't want to aim high, she started to say, so much as she wanted to aim into a kind of hidden space. "I don't want you to be able to picture it when I talk about it," she told Roy. "You shouldn't be able to photograph it. I mean, like the lake—you wouldn't even

want to photograph it. You shouldn't be able to draw it. That's my problem."

"Gosh, that really is your problem."

"I don't know," she said, gesturing at the sky, which was not particularly pretty or interesting that afternoon. It was not the kind of sky you would ever take a picture of, and Ida found that compelling. "Is there a better memorial than that? The sky?"

"Ha," Roy said. "It's good. It's moody. Maybe it's a bit obvious, though?"

"Isn't the sky just a gravestone," Ida said, "and we're all buried under it?"

"Ooh. Not bad. I see what you did there. But, no offense, why are we talking about this?"

Ida had to do this, to think too grandly or wrongly in order to maybe get closer to what was called for. "It's almost like," she said, "what if you had to design the afterlife exactly as you really think it is. Not something aspirational, some bullshit heaven. Not a religious fantasy. The truth."

"Yeah?" Roy said. "As in . . . oblivion? You want to build an oblivion theme park?"

He didn't care about any of this right now, Ida could tell, and maybe he had a point.

"I assume you don't believe in, well, anything?" When she thought back to their first conversations in grad school, prickly and intense and flirty, she wasn't sure if this had ever come up. Was that possible? She had adored and then admired him for so long, and now she knew him inside and out, and she felt she understood him to the core. Was it possible that he harbored private, unknowable ideas about his own death and whatever might happen after?

"O.K., let's assume that you're agnostic," Ida said. "We die and there's nothing."

"Sometimes there's nothing before you die," Roy cut in. "Don't forget that."

"O.K., let's say that you want to make an experiential piece that invites people to inhabit that sort of emptiness. How do you do it?"

Roy looked up. "How? As in, how do certain Midwestern architects make a credible design of the one true afterlife? Seriously. Are we really having this conversation?"

He seemed to give it some thought, but there was something unnatural about how theatrically he pondered, as if he



already knew what he was going to say but was pausing for effect. This was the Roy who spouted off on arts panels, who was about to spray fine, floral bullshit across the auditorium.

"I like the question," he said. "It reveals something important, and I see where you're going with it. If you make a space like that, you connect visitors with the dead, which is a pretty big artistic win."

Ida winced. *Big artistic win.*

"In the end," Roy said, "the question falls apart because the answer is just too easy. It's too obvious. Why not just kill them? Then they'll get the real and true afterlife. Who needs to simulate anything when you have the real thing? Someone already designed death. We were beaten to the punch."

He smiled at her and very nearly seemed to be gloating.

O.K. God. "This isn't a battle of wits, Roy," she said. But then she wondered if maybe it was, and that was what was wrong. Partly. When one person thinks it's not a contest.

They stopped and looked out over the lake.

"I was hoping we could produce work without a body count, though. A modest goal."

"Oh, you mean because too many people have died already?"

"Jesus, Roy."

"None of this works if I can't be honest with you," he whispered.

"There are other reasons that none of this works," she said.

"Ida, I was joking. I was trying to be funny."

But why? she didn't say. To what end? And aren't we supposed to be doing this together?

"I don't know, Roy. Can we think about a tranquil space, not heavy on physical material, not oppressive and thick, that isn't just a New Age wank space with wind chimes and shit? Can we do that?"

Roy admitted that this sounded good, that this was something they could shoot for.

The memorial planning went on for weeks. They mocked up models, strung wire through their studio and tuned it to different tensions, just to explore suspended structures that might

allow for a subterranean feeling without actually trapping people underground. Haunt the viewers but don't stress them out. And almost every day, sometimes in the afternoon and sometimes in the very early morning, they walked the city together, looking at space and light, growing ever more certain of what they didn't want the memorial to be.

Fucking Roy was kind and gracious, suppressing his own ideas while generously fielding every wild and unbuildable notion from Ida, perhaps knowing that her interest in reality, in plausibility and practicality, could be low. She couldn't help herself; she went on and on about the mourners. They were still here, she was saying, in this world, but they were pulled elsewhere, to the place where their loved ones were. Wherever that was. Survivors lived in both places. That was what she wanted this monument to say. She wanted it to feel like that, the tension between two worlds.

"That's some Schrödinger's-cat bullshit," Roy said. "And I love it. That's what I want, too. That's exactly right."

For a little while they walked arm in arm, and for a little while things seemed different. But what had they really agreed on? Ida wondered. What were they even talking about?

Roy must have known the whole time that there was no building design behind this idea, that time was really fucking upon them and something had to take shape on paper. The office was waiting to pounce at their go-ahead, and he needed to ring the bell. Ida realized that he'd been slowly laying the groundwork for his own plan, which maybe he'd had in his head all along. It was simple and obvious and probably inevitable, and he told it to her in pieces, over a period of a few days. It was to be a hollow square glass museum, low on the plaza, with a center that could not be accessed or even seen. A black void where the building and the shops had been. Right. There were details and details and details, and a narrative had to be written, because, well, yeah, but this was a square with a hole in it. To Ida, it resonated just a wee bit of other memorials, built and unbuilt, which was probably shrewd on Roy's part. He wanted their work to get made, whereas sometimes she suffered the classic ambivalence of an

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architect. Maybe her designs had a kill switch on purpose.

They went home and had dinner, and that night Roy was already calling it a lock, getting renderings done, and spec'ing out site maps and plans and all the shit that had to happen even to get this thing ready for the review board.

There was really just one more thing to deal with for now, and they had both been dreading it. They had to finally sit down and look at bids from the pharmaceuticals, which were fighting their way onto the proposal, vying to be the providers of the chemical component that every memorial these days was more or less expected to have: a gentle mist to assist the emotional response of visitors and drug them into a torpor of sympathy. Not garment-rending sympathy, but something more dignified. A mood was delivered via fog. Discreetly, and mildly, with micro-doses misting through carefully arranged spouts, the way an outdoor mall in the summer might be air-conditioned. You didn't see it and you didn't smell it. You strolled through a field or a plaza or a series of dark marble tunnels, whatever, sipping the sorrow-laced air, and, when you finally departed, a kind of low-grade catharsis had been triggered. You were bursting with feeling. Big artistic win.

It was sponsorship and it was gross, but because it was essentially invisible, and because people genuinely seemed to seek it out—attendance had undeniably spiked—Roy and Ida had been looking the other way and letting it happen, and now they really didn't have a choice. It was an inevitable shortcut, or even a stage of evolution, in architecture, assisting the public's reaction and securing that most prized of currencies: human fucking feeling. How to create it, how to create it? And why not use all the help you could get?

But here was Roy saying that he didn't want to agree to anything yet, and fuck these companies for trying to leverage a sacred memorial with their God-damned money. "Maybe we only consent to a zoned dispensary this time," he said. "There should be an area, cordoned off, where the feelings are more intense."

"Intense how?"

"Like, harder, more honest."

"Oh, some feelings aren't honest?"

"None of them are, Ida. It's fake, right?"

It's a drug spout in the ground. Or it's a gas stream pulsing from the ass of a mechanical bird flying a figure eight around the fucking burial ground. Isn't that the idea, that we can't make people feel exactly what we want with our structures, so we fucking poison them instead?"

"Poison."

"Sure, it's poison. In high enough doses."

"Like water, then. Like oxygen."

"Exactly like water and oxygen. A perfect comparison. You just read my mind."

"I couldn't help it. The door to your face was open and the text was scrolling inside. Impossible to miss."

Roy shook his head. "On the other hand, why not put people in a more pensive or reflective state? Why not even stoke their anger a bit?"

"Because those are the moods they bring to us. Those are the moods we correct."

"O.K., do you hear how that sounds, Ida? We correct their feelings? Really?"

"You make that sound dirty."

"I guess I'm not sure why we're even arguing about this," Roy said. He sounded defeated. "I don't think the ingredients are within our purview. I don't think we can edit those parameters."

"Not with chemicals, we can't," Ida said.

"Meaning?"

"Look, I don't care how happy or blissed-out or in touch with the one true good earth you are, if you walk into a certain space, situated on a certain site, and that space has been shaped to the *n*th fucking degree, your mood, if we want it to, will freaking collapse like a lung."

"I don't know. Drugs are stronger than buildings."

"Maybe we make our buildings more potent, then," Ida said. "We increase the dosage."

Roy smiled at her. He raised an empty hand in a toast. Such a small and delicate hand. "Cheers," he said, and he softly pawed the air.

After they won the bid, with a forty-eighth-iteration proposal that was mildly tolerated by all—a black granite labyrinth, inset with dark transparencies, as if panels of the stone itself

were made of glass, which, however badass that would have been, they weren't—Roy went out to St. Louis. Roy was the face, the body, the organism. Maybe he had sweet young people he fucked; Ida couldn't be sure. He caught the temperature of the place and tried to decode the deeper desires of the city, which could then be met or thwarted so that the appropriate tension might infuse the final project. He photo-documented and did flyovers and he stuck his finger into the client's collective rotten body to determine where the hard command center was. These kinds of projects often blew up in your face. You were fired while you slept. So Roy, with his temper and his charm and his perfect little body, stayed out there and fought like a mongrel to keep them in the game.

Ida spent that time at the drafting table, sketching mostly, working from the gut, ignoring what she knew in order to make way for what interested her far more—what she didn't know. For instance, she knew that she felt tremendous sorrow for the dead and thought about them often, if vaguely. What she didn't know was why she wasn't crippled with grief, stupefied at the scale of the atrocity, unable to move or speak. This was a mystery.

She wanted to draw a purely empty space, which wasn't as easy as it sounded. Heavy lines were required, of all things, and not just for framing the so-called void, as people in her profession loved to say, but for actual fucking substance. She had to ready the space for haunting. Purity was called for. This was a tombstone for a city, a funeral for a feeling of safety that was now gone. Leaving a blank page was not the same thing. That was a cop-out, and, anyway, you couldn't shit on the client that way. Partly because she herself was the client, and Roy was the client, and so was everyone they knew, and everyone they didn't. Now you had to view the world, the air itself, as something that could be torn away to reveal an eerier sort of place. Maybe that sounded like bullshit, but sometimes, sometimes, this process—if followed strictly and without concern for hovering meddlers—led to a wild, unstable kind of vacuum that you were not always prepared to be sucked into, Ida thought, even if you

## WHITE GAYS

Privilege is a man  
taking up two seats on the train.  
Now four, putting his feet up.

It is also my not having  
to describe his leather loafers for you  
to fill in the white space of his body  
straight and able

and also my body's proximity  
to his, socially and physically,  
on this train he is taking from  
the Hamptons and I am taking  
from the Pines. And how

my finding him handsome  
keeps him handsome,  
that if he were to look my way,  
his would be worth more to me  
than any other gaze.

What I'm trying to say is  
proximity is the problem with White Gays.  
I'm one of them, so I can say that.

Proximity, because it promises  
the possibility of arriving  
where all the room in the world  
waits to be claimed.

Privilege is a tease, we forget,  
what we learned in grade school.  
Even spread in his lap,  
everything for the taking  
taken from someone.

—Jameson Fitzpatrick

were curious, even if you felt you couldn't be shocked.

That was what she tried to draw, and that was ideally what she and Roy tried to build, even though "build" was a strange word, and you sounded like a punk if you said "erase," or something pretentious like that. *Like, in my work, I erase the landscape in order to reveal the true terrain of the world.* Yeah, uh, no. Maybe it didn't make sense, none of it, but it didn't have to. Sometimes it just had to sort of look pretty and make you sad and thoughtful. That was Memorial Theory 101. In the end, no one cared what you thought, or said, about a me-

morial you made. That sort of verbal posturing was for students and the simperingly boneless teachers who floated over them, gushing endless praise out of their open necks.

Roy phoned from St. Louis, early in the process, and even though a working design had been approved, the understanding—Ida's understanding, anyway—was that certain, uh, changes could still be made, and these changes could, caveat, significantly alter and enhance and improve the original, shit-sucking plan, which she suddenly thought might belong, in miniature, on the wall of a Starbucks.

What Ida envisioned, she told Roy, was a series of soft columns swelling out of the plaza, but almost imperceptibly. You almost wouldn't even know they were there.

"You know how there are some people who think that if they could only sharpen their vision they would see ghosts?" Ida asked.

"I didn't know that," Roy said. "Interesting."

The plaza itself, Ida went on, would be poured from a spongy material, so that visitors might feel as though they were sinking as they walked along. Playground rubber, maybe? The columns would be slablike but ephemeral—Ida emphasized this word: "You know, very nearly not there," she told him—fabricated out of a kind of stable, nearly elastic, she didn't know how else to put it, *smoke*.

"You can admire them as sculpture—they will be beautiful, and up close the smoke will reveal a texture, sort of like porcelain, with streaks and veins and imperfections in the surface. But, from farther away, they may just look like clouds. Rogue clouds that have fallen or just got too low to the ground."

Roy was quiet for a while. She thought she could hear him typing. "That sounds nice," he finally said. "Aside from wondering how this remotely relates to the approved plan, am I supposed to be asking how you'll achieve this?"

"Other than the obvious way?"

Roy was rummaging at the other end of the line. Talking to someone or watching TV. Ida listened into the room and listened and listened, on the verge of hearing something clear. Maybe he was falling from an airplane. She wasn't even kidding. There was so much wind around him.

"I mean, how serious are you?" he said. "This sounds maybe more speculative? Which is cool. Which is, you know, I know it's part of your process, but I'm living in reality right now. I'm in an actual hotel room. In the actual real world. I'm talking to the board, or, really, they're talking to me, very sternly—they are literally holding my hand like I'm a child—and I'm talking to the mayor and the city and the state, and in my downtime I am fucking having elevator sex with the donors, who are huge hairy creatures with indeterminate genitalia, because they get to



have whatever little thing they want from me."

"How nice for you."

"I don't have a choice, Ida. Seriously, how possible is this, your sticky smoke? Are we really spitballing this idea right now, at this fucking late date? Am I supposed to be telling people that this is what we are doing?"

"Well, whatever you do, please don't refer to it as sticky smoke. It sounds like a carnival attraction. With a little bit of work, we can find some seductive language. That's never so hard."

She wanted to laugh. *Never so hard*. It was the hardest thing in the world. There wouldn't be language for this. Not in her lifetime.

"Jesus, Ida. The tech—and you fucking know this very well—doesn't allow for what you're talking about. I mean, right? Suddenly I'm the bad guy because of physics?"

Ida sighed. "That's not why you're the bad guy, Roy."

They covered other topics, because they had a stupid business to run, and so many details to haggle over—zoning and permissions and negotiations

with contractors, along with political tensions that Ida couldn't even fathom—and then, just as they were saying good night, Ida said she needed to ask him a question.

Roy was still distracted; he would always be. Some muscle in his face produced the word "yeah," but otherwise nobody was home. After finding out what he needed to know from Ida, he'd moved on to gather information from other sources. This was Roy spreading himself so thin that you could see through him. At least in person he knew to tilt his face into postures of interest, taming his little mannequin body. So Ida was silent for a while. She heard the same dull murmur in the background. A voice or a bird or the wind, or just some subvocal turbulence on the phone line. It was almost pretty.

"What?" Roy said, suddenly impatient. "What do you want to ask me?"

"I just wanted to know . . . who's that with you?"

"What?"

"Next to you, Roy. Just look. In the bed. Touching you while you talk. What

a curious creature. Who is that? I'd really like to know."

As she said this, she pictured someone, something, crawling over her husband's body. The most gorgeous living thing.

Roy said nothing. Maybe he turned off the television, or maybe something else caused a rapid drop in room tone, because now the sheer silence was staggering. It was shocking to Ida. Like you'd need a machine to achieve that kind of quiet. The world had been scrubbed of noise, just because she'd said a bunch of words. That was what a spell was, maybe. Had a mere sentence of hers ever had such an effect before? She could hear Roy breathe; she could hear the churn of his body.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ida."

It wasn't like she expected a different answer, or particularly cared. Confessions and denials were equally troubling. Answers in general were so often disappointing. Was there any speech at all that didn't, in the end, cause a little bit of dejection?

"No, I guess you don't," she said.

"I mean, if I could show you, I would."

"Show me, Roy. Switch over to video. Show me the room and the closets and the hallway. That'd be great. Thanks."

"Uh, O.K. I'll have to call you back. I'll call you back."

She laughed out loud, but it came out a little bit off, like a shout.

"Good night, Roy," she said. "Sleep well." And she hung up.

The apartment was cold and she couldn't wait to crawl under the covers. "Oh, and by the way," Ida said to no one, as she readied herself for bed. "You can bleed smoke into a clear skin, no problem." She laughed softly. It was not as strange as it might have been to be talking out loud to herself. "You'd want to use a large-field polymer, of course. Totally transparent and ridiculously thin. I guess it's a kind of windowpane balloon, in a way, but its contours can be fixed non-spherically, which gives it any shape you want, including tufts and wisps and whatnot, like a cloud. A sort of scientific version of a balloon animal. Low-tech, really. And what you get is a shape made of smoke with the barest hint of skin—a person, a column, a cloud, anything. You could even make a maze, and fill the



BURNS

*"All in favor of telling Anderson about that thing stuck to his lip, say aye."*

walls of the maze with dark black smoke.

"So, yeah," she whispered, turning out the light in her empty apartment. "That's how you'd do it, if you were to do it. The physics aren't an issue. But, honestly, I'm not sure anymore that that's the way to go."

It was late and she was very tired. She could hardly even hear herself, as she started to fall asleep.

"I just can't honestly say that it's the right idea for this particular project."

When Roy came back from St. Louis he didn't come home. Ida wouldn't have minded seeing him, to shake hands maybe, to perform some soft footwork that might approximate closure, but Roy had apparently made his decision, and soon some sweethearts from the office came for his things, operating with a list, leaving behind only an old pair of shoes. The transaction was either respectfully nonverbal, Ida thought, or calmly hostile. Was there much of a difference? It was interesting when a set of feelings went so unspoken for so long that they drifted into the unknown. Did they expire or fester? Maybe one day she'd find out.

Construction was under way on the memorial, and the opening wasn't that far off, but rather than hover in St. Louis and fret, micromanaging the development of their sorrowful mall, as she'd started to think of it, Ida stayed in Chicago and took walks along the lake. More often than not, she ended up in one of the older graveyards of the city. For research, she told herself. She had no family dead in these places, no one to mourn. Everyone she grieved for these days was unknown to her, which made her grief seem more like self-pity. Was that true of all grief? Who the fuck knew. She toured the marked paths and cut across the grass when she could, because that was where you could start to feel something, however fleeting. Sometimes there were woods to traverse, and then she'd burst out into a patch of graves on the other side. More dead to consider. Folks who died long before she was born. Cemetery design had not changed in some time. The aesthetic was pretty resilient. Maybe it wasn't an aesthetic. Just an instinct for shelter. She marvelled at the sight lines, at the effortlessly endless rows of dead, each

name, each life, hollowed out in space.

Of course it was too late. You couldn't simply plant grass in St. Louis and design the simplest of headstones. There were too many dead. A technical problem. But a headstone could shrivel into a narrow granite pin, with a name inscribed vertically. Didn't that solve the issue? Of course it didn't, because no one even knew what the issue was. And, whatever slick and welcoming thing she and Roy built for the plaza, there would still be a graveyard beneath it, the way there is a graveyard beneath everything. It would just take generations of people to find it, clawing down into the earth year after year until they touched stone.

A fog of birds passed over the Eberlee Plaza in St. Louis on the morning the memorial opened.

Ida sat at some distance from the ceremony. Roy had said that she was, of course, expected to be there, and here she was, alone on a bench with a perfect view of what she had wrought.

The birds didn't go away. They swished and darted and soon struck a steady, gliding orbit over the plaza, a kind of dark and clotted halo, like barbed wire in the air. Had they come for the sweet sedatives that were no doubt pumping into the area from underground cylinders? Would the dosage be too strong for a bird, and was there any concern about this? Was anyone in charge of the most basic shit?

Ida sat, by chance, just across from the long, snaking plywood wall of the missing. The weather over the past two years had done a job on the wall. It was mostly stripped of posters by now. The remaining posters were scarred and wind-bleached and almost impossible to decipher. On a few, the photos had eroded but the text had endured, so there were blank sheets that simply said "Missing," with nothing below, as if it were the white space itself that had vanished and could no longer be found.

When the ceremony began, she saw Roy. He looked good. Half the size of the large, sweaty men who surrounded him, as if he were a child encircled by monsters. He was shaking hands, talking, laughing, and several times, as Ida watched from the bench, she saw Roy applauding vigorously, even though no

one, as far as she could see, was speaking or performing. It was just her husband, alone in the square, clapping his hands as hard as he could.

Mostly Ida watched the birds, which seemed bizarrely determined, almost angry, certain of something that she would never know. There was a theory of bird vision that came to mind: that birds saw the world through a grid, bisected down to the finest detail. Not a mosaic so much as a shattered image, with white tracers boiling in the spaces in between, or so Ida imagined, so that all the bird really saw was a kind of luminescent netting. Aglow or afire or whatever. No need to poeticize it, but still. Sort of hard not to. You didn't see the mouse, if you were a bird, but a mouse-shaped mesh of light that contained it. She was butchering the science, she knew, but this was the general idea. A kind of shining wire bag we're all trapped in, which might explain some shit, right? Or, Ida thought, deepen the mystery. It was a structural view of space, and it treated objects as an afterthought. Objects described the light, not the other way around. Yes, it was speculative, since, what the fuck, it posited the sensory experience of a God-damned bird, but it seemed to have been endorsed by some of the more distinguished eggheads from expensive, self-regarding universities. One particular scientist claimed that this bird vision revealed the true, unmediated world, something that we humans couldn't handle. We humans! Ida thought. Us! Is there anything we *can* handle? Our desire for sense and order, our sentimental belief that we are not hurtling through space in tiny pieces, has served as a kind of biological propaganda for our visual apparatus, leading to the sentimentalized, so-called whole world on view in front of us.

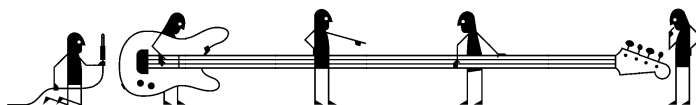
In other words, fear, and more fear, and, yeah. Wouldn't there one day, just by chance, Ida thought, be a little person who came along and didn't feel afraid? Someone who saw this world of speeding pieces just as it was? Wasn't that bound to happen, and what on earth, she thought, as she watched everyone walking past her into the mirage, was taking so long? ♦

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Ben Marcus on how to honor a catastrophe.

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## SHOT OF COURAGE

*Ulysses S. Grant, defended.*

BY ADAM GOPNIK

It is one of the more improbably dramatic moments in American letters. Henry Adams, as he reports in his memoirs, was breathlessly waiting in the Capitol Building in 1869 for word of the Cabinet appointments that would be made by the newly elected President Grant. Foreseeing a renaissance of civic virtue after the sufferings of the Civil War, Adams—whose great-grandfather was the second President, and whose father had been Lincoln’s Ambassador to Great Britain—expected his reformist vision and his intellectual cohort to be brought forward to rule, as the Alexander Hamilton–Thomas Jefferson generation had been after the triumph of the Revolution.

Instead, he heard, one after another, the names of mere time-servers and hack politicians and unknown cronies of the General. Crushed (at least in memory), he felt that a line had been crossed, permanently separating the high-minded, essentially intellectual inheritance of the Revolution from the American future. “Grant’s nominations had the singular effect of making the hearer ashamed, not so much of Grant, as of himself,” he writes in his great third-person autobiography, “The Education of Henry Adams.” His hopes that Grant would be George Washington had been delusional folly, Adams decided: “The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant alone was evidence enough to upset Darwin.”

Though partial and prejudiced, to put it mildly, Adams’s vision of Grant as the author of America’s fatal five

minutes has endured: Washington won his war and fathered his country; Grant won his war but screwed over his. The brilliant general became the miserable President, fueling the descent from glory into the Gilded Age. Journalists still cite the Grant Administration as among the most scandal-ridden and corrupt in American history. His tomb, on New York City’s Riverside Drive, had become, by the nineteen-nineties, so neglected that it was a national symbol of chaos. Things are better now, but a quick survey of a Manhattan office showed that, while almost everyone had made a school trip to the Lincoln Memorial, not one had stopped to visit Grant’s Tomb.

In a new biography, “Grant” (Penguin Press), Ron Chernow, whose previous subjects include Washington and Hamilton (improbably launching the greatest musical-theatre work of our age), strenuously disputes the conventional view. Though he does the usual justice to the military saga of the Civil War, and Grant’s decisive part in it, his book aims to rehabilitate Grant as a politician and as President. He makes a convincing case that Grant actually behaved nobly, even heroically, while in the White House. He pressed the cause of black equality under the law, and was consistently on the right side of Reconstruction-era issues—winning more heartfelt praise from Frederick Douglass than Lincoln ever did. The reason Reconstruction failed, and ended with the reimposition of an apartheid system, had to do with an exasperat-

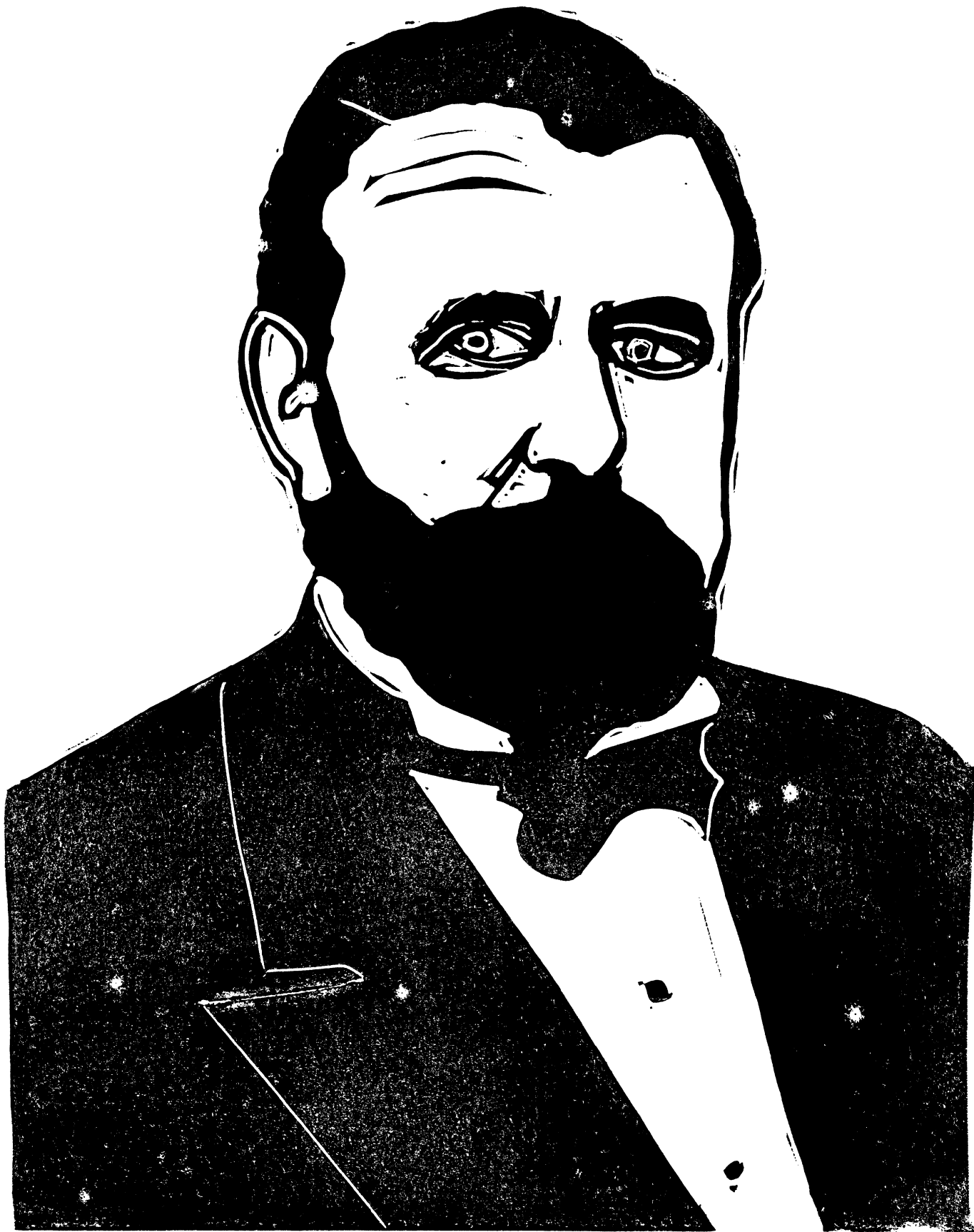
ing coalition of self-styled Northern “reformers” and the openly revanchist, anti-Grant Southerners—misguided progressives making common cause with true reactionaries against a well-meaning middle—and also with a general battle fatigue that afflicted the nation.

The first pages of the book tell of Grant’s rise from a hardscrabble life in Point Pleasant, Ohio. It is a style of American Misery familiar from Mark Twain—the Scotch-Irish-American style, mirthless and Methodist and mercenary. Ulysses’s father, Jesse Grant, was a hard-pushing small-time entrepreneur who started out as a tanner. (Working in the tannery, among the bloody skins and the giant rats that gnawed on them, left young Ulysses permanently unable to eat less-than-well-done meat.) All sons are made in their father’s shade, and Grant’s pushy, braggart, loudmouthed father produced a quiet, outwardly obedient, and inwardly resistant son, who came to hate showing off. This crippled Ulysses in most areas of life, where some kind of thrusting or self-positioning is essential, but wartime demonstrated the difference between showing off and getting the job done, between those who look good on the parade ground and those who look good on the battleground.

Grant did poorly at West Point; decently as a young officer in the Mexican War; not so well as an officer when the conflict was over (tedium took its toll, and he was forced to resign from the Army for being drunk on duty); and then terribly as

ABOVE: TODD ST. JOHN





*President Grant's lapses were minor, Ron Chernow argues, compared with his widely overlooked furtherance of racial justice.*

a would-be businessman in St. Louis, forced at last to sell firewood on the street. When the Civil War came, Grant, a mild abolitionist (his wife, Julia, owned slaves), strove to get the right kind of commission. He overcame the resistance of those who remembered the drinking and didn't think he looked as if he'd dried out, and, in 1861, was put in command of the 21st Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. "Well, I'll be damned. Is that our Colonel?" one of the soldiers said when Grant showed up, a small, sad, beat-up-looking guy in rumpled civilian clothes. He tamed the troops, and began to fight.

Chernow tells all this rapidly and well; his talent is suited to Grant's story. He writes the way Grant fought: lacking elegance of means, he covers an immense area of ground, thoroughly and relentlessly, capturing his objectives one by one. (He does take some stylistic casualties: a single sentence gives us Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman as "damaged souls" about to redeem "tarnished reputations" in the "brutal crucible of war.") He is extraordinarily good on what could be called, unpejoratively, the Higher Gossip of History—he can uncannily detect the actual meaning beneath social interactions. In "Hamilton," he could tell in a second when Hamilton was making sly reference to Jefferson's Sally Hemings intrigue, or when his hero's enemies were coyly alluding to Hamilton's own adulteries. Here he grasps the meanings of Grant's interactions with other officers under their gruff military cover, knowing when Grant is obliquely threatening someone and when he is really praising him. When Charles Dana, working for the Secretary of War, visited Grant's headquarters during his command—an incident that Grant refers to in a single sentence in his memoirs—Chernow understands that this was a checkup inspection, authorized by headquarters, to see just how bad Grant's drinking was, and that Grant, instead of keeping his inspector at a distance, embraced him and welcomed him into the tent, know-

ing that for the duration of his visit he could easily stay sober and make a good impression.

Grant's drinking is a persistent theme in the book. Lincoln's line on it is famous; when warned that Grant was drinking hard, he is said to have replied, "Can you send a barrel of whatever whiskey he drinks to all my other generals?" One of the unsung heroes, properly sung in "Grant," was John Aaron Rawlins, whose job, basically, was to be Grant's aide-de-camp in charge of alcohol, plaintively urging the General to climb back on the wagon when he fell off. ("I again appeal to you in the name of everything a friend, an honest man, and a lover of his country holds dear, to

immediately desist from further tasting liquors of any kind," began one forlorn letter.)

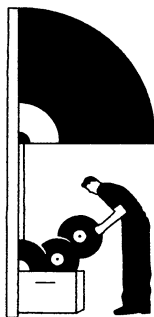
Grant, Chernow makes clear, was an addict, who fought his addiction, with various degrees of success, throughout his life, and finally intuited that he could manage his problem best by bouts of binge-drinking followed by long episodes of abstinence. Grant drank in a very American way—not like the sociable, southern-European kind of drinking, or even the clubbable, competitive drinking of the nineteenth-century British Army. This was hard-edged, solitary drunkenness in search of oblivion.

The remarkable thing about Grant was that he could stop. He would start up again at some point, but he *could* stop. It would be picturesque to say that he drank to escape the bloody landscapes he was making—at Shiloh, you could walk across a field of corpses without your boots touching the mud—but Chernow, wisely, doesn't make that claim: Grant drank because he drank because he drank. James Thurber understood that kind of drinking, which may be why the funniest thing ever written about Grant is Thurber's "If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox." (It ends with a dazed, hungover Grant mistakenly surrendering to Robert E. Lee: "We dam' near licked you. If I'd been

feeling better we *would* of licked you.") Many people, Chernow among them, have pointed out that his binges always corresponded with the absence of his difficult but much-loved wife. In the end, one wonders if the drinking wasn't actually a sounder way of dealing with the pressures than the compulsive, sleepless worrying that other generals did.

Two incidents stand out in Chernow's fluent and intelligent narrative as the decisive moments in Grant's war. One was at Vicksburg, in 1863, where one side or the other would end up owning the Mississippi River. Grant enjoined Admiral David Dixon Porter, of the often forgotten Union Navy, to run all his gunboats downriver, in the middle of the night, past formidable Confederate batteries, to encircle the Vicksburg fort. It was an audacious gamble, but it worked. The other was after the Battle of the Wilderness, in 1864, when Grant, having been given the Army of the Potomac and leading his forces into Virginia, got badly beaten up by Lee's troops in extremely hostile terrain. Instead of turning back or pausing, Grant pressed on, having, as Lincoln put it, grasped the "awful arithmetic": he could lose men, and battles of this kind, indefinitely, and Lee could not. Even after the Battle of Cold Harbor, ten miles northwest of Richmond—a senseless massacre of men as bad as the worst assaults at the Somme, which it anticipated—Grant pressed on.

The antiheroic nature of the two moments—war by deception and then by determination, more than by strategic coups—raises the big question: Was Grant a great general? The answer can seem obvious: he won the war. But, as we know of football coaches, sometimes greatness is really luck compounded. Those closest to Grant couldn't make up their minds if his propensity for sullen, silent brooding indicated that he was taking in everything or nothing. Adam Badeau, his military secretary, who later wrote a history of his campaigns, said once that Grant's aides "could never measure his character or be sure when he would act. They could never follow a mental process in his thought. They were not



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sure that he did think.” (Vince Lombardi’s auxiliaries said something similar about the coach—that when he wasn’t winning games you could hardly tell if he was even quite alive. Peculiar intelligences work in spasmodic ways.)

The argument against Grant’s military greatness, made by the famous military historian and theorist Basil Liddell Hart, was that Grant was an unimaginative placeholder who basically got a lot of people killed—who grasped the arithmetic without taking charge of the field. Sherman, in Hart’s view, was the real genius of the Civil War, a man who understood how to win wars while avoiding battles. He turned a sidewise skirmish into a devastating campaign that got Lincoln reelected.

The alternative view is that Grant was a great instinctive Clausewitzian who believed in forcing the decisive battle no matter how brutal, and who strenuously avoided any peripheral engagement. He got his army in front of the other guy’s and bulldozed the other guy until he quit. Sherman was able to do what he did only because Grant was doing what he was doing. As Lincoln, with his usual flair for seeing the point and saying it right, observed, Grant held the beast while Sherman skinned it. (In his memoirs, Grant quietly but firmly lets the reader know that in Georgia Sherman was doing what Grant had told him to do.) If holding meant losing a lot of men, he would. When he had the opportunity to fight a more resourceful, less wasteful kind of war, as in the sequence of hit-and-run battles that led up to Vicksburg, he did.

John Keegan, whose “The Mask of Command” contains the best study of Grant as a general, credits him with inventing “unheroic” leadership. Everything Grant did was designed to minimize his personal example and to maximize his “corporate” leadership. It was the beginning of the bureaucratic mind at arms, of the kind of role that Dwight Eisenhower and Omar Bradley later inhabited. Grant treated his men with courtesy and a general sense of solidarity (within the limits of command hierarchy), and was popular with them. It worked. Even Charles Francis Adams, Jr., Hen-

ry’s brother, had to admit that “Grant had his army as firmly in his hand as ever. . . . He has effected this simply by the exercise of tact and good taste.” It was the general as good boss instead of great leader—even if the boss was one who cajoled the employees, by tact and good taste, into getting themselves killed for the benefit of the head office. The model puzzled Lee, who could not understand the military rationale for a mass murder like Cold Harbor—the simple fact that the North had men to waste and the South did not—and who always said, pointedly against Grant, that the skilled but ineffective George (Little Mac) McClellan was the best general he ever opposed.

Grant had other strengths on the field. In his memoirs, we see him thinking always on many levels at once, attending to geographic, strategic, and logistic questions, not sequentially but simultaneously, in a single paragraph. His close eye for the ground always led to a tactical plan, and then the tactical plan was reinforced by the most mundane-seeming logistical questions—so he recalls that his troops outside Vicksburg, though reasonably well fed, lacked bread, and began to cry out in unison, “Hardtack! Hardtack!” In fact, one might say that his strictly military, as opposed to organizational, genius lay in trying to make battles terrain-first instead of tactics-first. This is made most vivid in his memoirs when, recalling the exasperating run-up to the Battle of Corinth, in the fall of 1862, he tried to talk terrain to his then superiors:

Our centre and right were, at this time, extended so that the right of the right wing was probably five miles from Corinth and four from the works in their front. The creek, which was a formidable obstacle for either side to pass on our left, became a very slight obstacle on our right. Here the enemy occupied two positions. One of them, as much as two miles out from his main line, was on a commanding elevation and defended by an entrenched battery with infantry supports. A heavy wood intervened between this work and the [Union] forces. . . . In the rear to the south was a clearing extending a mile or more, and south of this clearing a log-house which had been loop holed and was occupied by infantry.

Taking stock of this position—which, like a hundred others, he was

able to remember perfectly a quarter century later, down to the last log cabin—he concluded that a move at night, to the right, would find “no natural obstacle.” This was too unconventional at the time: “I was silenced so quickly that I felt that possibly I had suggested an unmilitary movement.” A more frontal approach was tried, and it failed. Even when he chose a frontal assault himself, as at the Wilderness and Cold Harbor, it was because the terrain allowed, in his view, for no other tactic.

Grant genuinely enjoyed the tedium of preparation. A fascinating set piece in his memoirs describes Union soldiers putting up telegraph poles and wires immediately upon making camp. It’s not a Napoleonic scene, but telegrams helped win the war. The breakthrough at Vicksburg, a mysterious act of audacity even in Chernow’s account, becomes less mysterious if one reads Grant’s anti-dramatic account of it: the Navy boats had been reinforced with water-soaked bales to reduce the chances of cannonballs starting fires, and, anyway, the experiment of running the batteries had been tried before. It is a very Grant-like touch to have protected the boats from fire with hay and grain, needed for food after the encirclement began—a provisioning and a tactical problem solved at the same time. Throughout the war, Grant also seems to have grasped another basic truth—that while Civil War weaponry, large and small alike, was utterly lethal when massed together, it was, when fired singly at specific moving targets, as likely to miss as to hit. This accounts both for his confidence that Admiral Porter’s boats could get past the Vicksburg guns and for his own confidence on the parapets and the battlefield, where he felt safe enough to mix with the men and to lead occasionally from in front.

The postwar Grant is a tougher nut with a harder historical shell, and Chernow has at it with a gratifying vigor. Grant was elected more or less by acclamation in 1868, after Andrew Johnson’s tumultuous term, and his Cabinet choices, Chernow insists, can be entirely vindicated against Adams’s ancient contempt. Chernow

quotes Rutherford B. Hayes, the future President, as saying that he was “enraptured” by Grant’s freedom from party hacks: “His cabinet looks like a revolution. . . . It is an attempt to put fitness and qualifications before what is called ‘claims’ and ‘political services.’”

Why, then, Adams’s famous dismissal? Chernow makes a reasonable case that it was mostly class resentment. “My family is buried politically,” Adams admitted, and he was right to think so; Grant wrote elsewhere that Adams’s family “did not possess one noble trait of character that I ever heard of.” With class animosities disguised as high-minded mistrust, Adams’s anti-Grant virus communicated itself to other “reformers,” who saw in Grant’s readiness to use the normal spoils system of civil-service appointments a form of rampant corruption.

What they missed, Chernow notes, was Grant’s remarkable advances in hiring minorities to federal positions. Small incidents of nepotism, Chernow maintains, have “overshadowed this far more important narrative.” Grant’s open affirmative action on behalf of the Jews—he “appointed more than fifty Jewish citizens” at one friend’s request alone, “including consuls, district attorneys and deputy postmasters”—was doubly significant given that, in a fit of anger at a handful of opportunistic merchants in the midst of the war, he had imposed an anti-Jewish ukase in one district under occupation.

Reading Chernow on Grant’s patronage practice, one may also start to cast a skeptical eye on the notion that “identity politics” is in any way a newcomer to progressive coalitions. Worrying about providing significant spoils to minorities—and women, too, who, though unable to vote, were still subjects of patronage—was half the political work that Grant had to do. His campaign theme for his eventual reelection sounds positively Clintonian, in Chernow’s summary: “He had appointed a prodigious number of blacks, Jews, Native Americans, and women, and delivered on his promise to give the country peace and prosperity.” A group of reform Republicans—Henry Adams’s father among them—formed a party to run against

Grant in 1872 on a confused platform of good government and support for renewed “home rule” in the South. They displayed a now-familiar refusal to believe that the real source of persistent racial resentment among their fellow-countrymen was persistent racial resentment.

In truth, everything else was overshadowed by the violence directed against the former slaves of the South by its former soldiers. Nathan Bedford Forrest’s new Ku Klux Klan acted “by force and terror,” as Grant wrote, “to deprive colored citizens of the right to bear arms and for the right to a free ballot; to suppress schools in which colored children were taught and to reduce the colored people to a condition closely akin to that of slavery.” Chernow vindicates Grant’s response. Grant pushed and signed the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which allowed the federal government to move against Klan violence when the states would not, and issued a military order allowing federal troops to disperse “bands of disguised marauders” on their own authority.

What’s more, he sent the courageous Attorney General Amos Akerman, himself a Georgian, south to enforce it. The Klan, Akerman said, “was the most atrocious organization that the civilized part of the world has ever known” and its acts “amount to war, and cannot be effectually crushed on any theory.” Only direct action would do it. He went to South Carolina, at extraordinary personal risk, to supervise the campaign, and brought in more than eleven hundred convictions, with Southern juries, against the K.K.K. Chernow concludes, “In 1872, under Grant’s leadership, the Ku Klux Klan had been smashed in the South.”

In the long run, of course, these measures hardly helped. Though the Klan, in its original incarnation, had been crushed, its politics had not, and, by the end of the eighteen-seventies, apartheid enforced by at least the threat of sporadic white terror was back in place. Did this represent a subsequent failure of nerve on Grant’s part or a tragedy of history that no one could have avoided? One sometimes hears it argued that, if Lincoln had lived,

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the path to radical Reconstruction would have been smoother. Through the force of his character and the prestige of his name, the argument goes, Lincoln might have obtained a more unified national consensus on racial equality without, somehow, enraging the Southern power structure.

This badly misconstrues Lincoln's genius, which was never for conciliation but always for drawing the maximally tough line with minimal outward hysteria. Lincoln's response to secession was to fight one of the hardest wars mankind had ever fought, and to find people, like Grant, willing to fight it that hard. The only way to establish Reconstruction on something like an egalitarian footing—the truly Lincoln-like solution—would have been to have a permanent occupying army in most of the South and to enforce de-secessionism as we later supported de-Nazification in Germany. Short of that, there was going to be an absolute inequality of forces between Northerners who didn't live there and white Southerners who did, surrounded by the people they feared, and who still controlled the sources of power. There were hardly any Jews left in Germany after the Second World War, but Mississippi in the Reconstruction era was a black-majority state. A hundred years later, the same apartheid regime persisted, and the only way to begin to remedy it was with infusions of federal troops. Lincoln might have done this, but it seems more likely that he, too, would have been exhausted by the perpetual recurrence of Southern revanchism.

More telling, in its way, than the ultimate failure to enforce voting rights in the South was Ackerman's resignation from Grant's Administration, in December of 1871, and the reasons for it. Ackerman had clashed with the country's new tycoons—notably railroad barons like Jay Gould—and they wanted him out. Big capital leaning on government to get its way: this became the model of the period. An epoch is usually better mirrored in its vices than in its virtues; civic virtues are constant, whereas each corrupt period is corrupt in its own way. And

the corruption of the Grant era involved mutations in the two great changes that the Civil War had already wrought in the country.

First, there was the growth of the small government offices that the sudden creation of big armies always involves (the notion that one can have a big military and a small government is not the least of American illusions), which led to a huge number of appointments to make and taxes to pay and graft to get. The expanded government produced the “rings” that bedeviled Grant, most notoriously the Whiskey Ring—a group of distillers and Treasury Department agents who colluded to avoid tariffs on alcohol, a scheme in which some of those closest to the President were entangled. Second, there were the new tycoon-driven Wall Street businesses that had become as inseparable from the Republicans as their original abolitionism had been. In 1869, Gould, the archetype of the Wall Street buccaneer, engineered a famous “corner” (that is, a near monopoly) in gold—with Gould actually having a crony marry Grant's poor spinster sister-in-law, according to his partner, hoping that the family connection would make the President pressure the Treasury not to sell gold and lower its price.

Chernow presents a convincing case that neither the rings nor the corners ever touched Grant directly—the Treasury continued to sell gold despite the arranged marriage—and that, in any case, the scandals have been oversold to history by a toxic combination of snobbish New England mandarins and sinister revanchist rednecks. Grant, as is the way with generals in politics, mistrusted politicians but trusted former officers and big businessmen. Eisenhower was another of the type. Generals are used to judging men only by their successes—good character being an untrustworthy guide to battle-winning—and so tend to imagine that a rich man has made good by energy and discipline, rather than, as is just as often the case, luck and cupidity.

Grant's last years are first famously pathetic and then famously heroic. After leaving office, in 1877, he moved to New York, eager to make his for-

tune, and got swindled by a plausible con man, losing all the money he had made. Afflicted with throat cancer, he fought as hard as he had fought at the Wilderness in order to save his family from poverty by writing his memoirs, in an ambitious subscription-publishing scheme fathered by Mark Twain. (Chernow dismisses the common belief that Twain played an active role in the book's composition.)

The memoirs were a hit—and they are not really as short on character analysis and motive as their clipped, taciturn sentences would suggest. The prose is a model of the American stoical, with a very special note of wry mockery buried within it. Of the egocentric General Gouverneur Warren, who always wanted the rest of the Union Army to bend to his needs, Grant writes, “His ideas were generally good, but he would forget that the person giving him orders had thought of others at the time he had of him.” Some of Grant's sentences still startle with their compressed poetry: “He had sixty thousand as good soldiers as ever trod the earth; better than any European soldiers, because they not only worked like a machine but the machine thought.” There is psychological shrewdness on every page, but almost no rumination on larger causes. It is tough, observant, here-and-now narration, and in that way a potent literary model even for the Hemingway era.

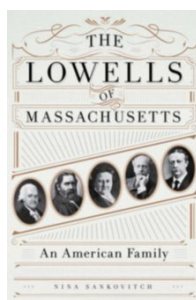
A student of American prose could hold up Adams's Grant-bashing memoir against Grant's own memoir to define the two furthest points of American recollection: one discursive, mordant, allusive, and hyperbolic—exaggeration of affect is the key to Adams's “education”—the other pointed, reduced, and understated. (Lincoln's speeches, Grant's memoirs, and Stephen Crane's stories are the triple pillars of American stoical prose to this day.) What the two old enemies have in common, significantly, is a natural taste for irony: Grant's understatement, like Adams's self-mortifications, are meant to make the narrator seem modest while showing that he sees through everything. Grant underplays savage battles to escape the pretensions of heroic rhetoric; Adams overdramatizes his internal “lessons” to



mock the earnest pretensions of intellect to master the commercial world. Grant's battles have no heroism; they just happen. Adams's education keeps sending him back to Go.

A failure or a forerunner? Grant's world is, in certain respects, painfully familiar, peopled by such figures as the military man whose managerial skill is assumed to indicate integrity; the tycoon who is assumed to have none; and a press that is engaged in bouts of unfocussed self-righteousness, damaging the well-meaning and the malevolent alike. Coming to the close of Chernow's book, one will think that we have had, since Grant's Presidency, very much the same politics, with the same two political parties. One is a progressive party that accommodates what is now called identity politics, reaching out to a coalition of people—those black, Jewish, Native American, and Irish petitioners Grant tried to favor—who think the world is getting better and who support some kind of benevolent government protection. The other is a reactionary party rooted in a core base of revanchist Southern whites who believe that the world is getting worse, want to keep black people from exercising too much political power, and hate the federal government that helps them.

Sometimes the progressive, or government-good, party (Grant's Republicans) reaches out to fringe elements of the reactionary, or government-bad, party (the Democrats of his day), who are in economic distress, as in the nineteen-thirties; sometimes elements of the reactionary party reach out to former elements of the progressive party who are newly fearful of social change, as now. But the two parties in 1877 looked remarkably like the two parties today. The names are switched, and the violence permitted against the minority in the South is at least more limited than it was, but they still superintend a system in which the same two peoples are very much locked in conflict—with a Wall Street economy as the engine that drives it, left too often alone as it routinely overheats and explodes. Of this second, enduring postbellum country, Grant remains very much the Washington. ♦

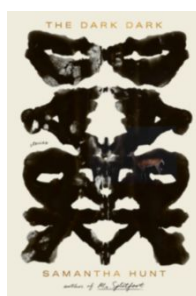


## BRIEFLY NOTED

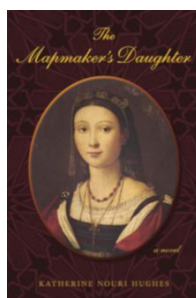
**The Lowells of Massachusetts**, by Nina Sankovitch (*St. Martin's Press*). In 1639, Percival Lowle emigrated from England to Massachusetts, giving rise to a dynasty of influential Americans, especially poets, including Robert Lowell. First distinguishing themselves in professions key to the nascent colonies—law, politics, the ministry—the family veered toward the arts. In the Romantic era, James Russell wrote of being racked with grief over the death of his wife, who was “half of earth and more than half of heaven.” Amy, who, in 1926, posthumously won a Pulitzer Prize, challenged audiences at her readings by saying, “Clap or hiss, I don't care which, but do something!” Sankovitch relies too heavily on the imagined thoughts of her subjects, but her skillful blending of context and detail makes the vicissitudes of one family emblematic of a nation's.



**The End of Advertising**, by Andrew Essex (*Spiegel & Grau*). “Nobody actually likes advertising,” writes the author of this fast-paced history by a self-proclaimed “real-life Roger Sterling,” the ad exec on the TV series “Mad Men.” Essex warns that the widespread adoption of ad-blocking software may doom a nearly trillion-dollar industry, and that ads must change or die. Branded infrastructure projects, such as CitiBike, appeal to consumers through civic enrichment, but, according to Essex, similar projects have even greater potential: a sponsored renovation of the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway, for example, could “reinvent advertising” and “make America great again.”



**The Dark Dark**, by Samantha Hunt (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Each of the stories in this collection harbors a surreal twist. An F.B.I. agent is driven to suicide by his love for a humanoid female robot whose “perfection is alarming”; thirteen pregnant teen-agers quietly discuss the intimacies of their condition as they float through the air down the hallway of their high school; a young woman metamorphoses into a deer whose hooves make it impossible to turn the knob of her bedroom door and escape. Hunt lingers over such moments just long enough to suggest that the phantasmagorical can be found in any situation, no matter how banal.



**The Mapmaker's Daughter**, by Katherine Nouri Hughes (*Delphinium*). In the Ottoman Empire of the sixteenth century, a woman of Venetian birth gained power as the privileged consort of Sultan Selim II. Nurbanu Sultan (as she became known), the narrator of Hughes's absorbing historical novel, defends her status against the vicious intrigues of Topkapi Palace. “It is fair to say about eunuchs that they are vindictive, babyish, condescending, and easily bored,” she reflects at one point. According to custom, when a new sultan ascends, his brothers are strangled. When Selim dies, Nurbanu must decide how far she will go to secure her son's reign—and enlarge her own influence. Hughes's Nurbanu is alert to her political and sexual vulnerabilities, and unsparing as she reflects on the manipulations and sacrifices that have marked her life. The result compellingly interlaces public history and intimate conjecture.

## SPOKEN FOR

*Danez Smith's poetry of reclamation.*

BY DAN CHIASSON



The American poet Danez Smith's third book, *"Don't Call Us Dead"* (Graywolf), opens with "summer, somewhere," a stunning elegy that contains a tense refusal:

somewhere, a sun. below, boys brown  
as rye play the dozens & ball, jump  
in the air & stay there. boys become new  
moons, gum-dark on all sides, beg bruise  
-blue water to fly, at least tide, at least  
spit back a father or two. i won't get started.  
history is what it is. it knows what it did.

Starting without having "started," Smith's lines suggest the discourses that they suspend. History "is what it is," since it can't be changed. Even though "it knows what it did," it's like a stubborn child: nobody can coax it into confessing. These phrases cut in all kinds of directions, threatening the exasperated truce that they establish. A history that "is what it is" doesn't sound like it can be so blithely dismissed; "i won't get started," in the

context of an elegy about murdered black boys, is what you say when you've had to point out the obvious too many times. These poems can't make history vanish, but they can contend against it with the force of a restorative imagination.

Smith's work is about that imagination—its role in repairing and sustaining communities, and in making the world more bearable. Poets, very broadly speaking, are sometimes disparaged as solo fliers, and few as idiosyncratic as Smith want to bend their gifts to the thriving of non-literary communities. Smith, who is African-American, H.I.V.-positive, and genderqueer, goes by plural pronouns. Their poems are enriched to the point of volatility, but they pay out, often, in sudden joy. Smith's style has a foot in slam and spoken word, scenes that reach people who might not buy a slim volume of poems. But they also know the magic trick of making writing on the page operate like the most ecstatic speech. And they are, in their cadences and management of lines, deeply literary. In the poem above, with its ampersands and strong enjambments, its knowing alliterative excesses, I hear Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit priest who jury-rigged his verse to express personal turmoil, and Hart Crane, whose gentleness was expressed in an American idiom full of thunderclap, and Allen Ginsberg, who loved and learned from them both. The addition of Smith's star turns a random cluster of points into a constellation, the way new work of this calibre always does.

At the center of many of these poems is the black queer body as it moves through a range of contemporary American spaces, some comparatively safe, many potentially lethal. The mind that tracks it—imagining its outcomes, adjusting to its setbacks, processing its sudden drives and imperatives—is a wild and unpredictable instrument. In an extraordinary poem about sex and death, "strange dowry," Smith finds themselves in a strobe-lit bar, checked

*Smith has a rare talent for mapping the body and its authority onto the page.*



out by potential lovers. Here is the poem's opening:

bloodwife they whisper when i raise my  
hand for another rum coke  
the ill savior of my veins proceeds me, my  
digital honesty about what  
queer bacteria dotted my blood with  
snake mist & shatter potions  
they stare at my body, off the app,  
unpixelated & poison pretty flesh  
men leave me be, i dance with the ghost  
i came here with  
a boy with three piercings & muddy  
eyes smiles & disappears into the strobes  
the light spits him out near my ear, against  
my slow & practiced grind

Once “off the app”—a proxy that stipulates the precise terms of erotic transaction—we’re in a whirlwind with the ill but “pretty” body at its center. The “snake mist & shatter potions” of H.I.V. mean that a person is, for that evening and in that bar, the poison in his blood. The “boy with three piercings” is in the same boat, and so the night becomes “cum wonder & blood hallelujah” before, in the morning, a cruel “seven emails: meeting, junk, rejection, junk, blood work results.” Many poets would end the poem after the elation, or moralize the morning after. Smith gives us the whole arc of the experience, in a language whose pleasure shines through even the bleakest details.

Spontaneity is the great virtue of this work, but calculation is a survival skill. The open-endedness of “strange dowry” is matched, in this book, by a grim determinism. In “it won’t be a bullet,” Smith’s advantages over “the kind of black man who dies on the news” are offset by H.I.V., which targets black men by a different standard of intention:

in the catalogue of ways to kill a black boy,  
find me  
buried between the pages stuck together  
with red stick. ironic, predictable. look at me.

The ghastly alternative to turning up “on the news” is to be “buried,” the way the classifieds or the obits are “buried” in the paper, in a “catalogue” of potential deaths. An individuated life, complete with choices that feel like one’s own, isn’t a possibility: Smith is waiting to be used, discarded, and

forgotten by a reader who gets off on the death models in the back of the book.

The word “boy”—sometimes sexualized, sometimes not, but always uttered with a kind of tragic holiness and reverence—chimes throughout these poems. A boy’s will is the wind’s will, according to Longfellow, in a gorgeous phrase that Robert Frost adapted for the title of his first book. That dream of waywardness is liable to get a black boy killed, but Smith’s imagination operates as though it still exists somewhere. The elegy that opens the book, “summer, somewhere,” after it benches history, suggests a ritual in which martyred boys can “say our own names when we pray.” Guarded by prayer, simple acts of innocence become, again, plausible: “we go out for sweets & come back.”

I hope this book brings fans of Smith’s astonishing performances, all readily available online, to the printed page. Smith’s performance of their poem “dear white america” was a viral hit, viewed by more than three hundred thousand people after it was featured on the “PBS NewsHour.” It’s a prose poem; I might not have guessed. How to convert that performance to the page, when so much of its power rests in Smith’s delivery? In this moving, unsettling work, the question is not simply one of craft. It’s about how the body and its authority can be manifested in writing, with only the spindly trace of letters to stand in for it. What does written poetry do that spoken word cannot? For one thing, it forces you, the reader, to say aloud, to embody, the words, while leaving a gap for the inevitable differences of race or gender identity, of illness and health, that might sometimes seem unbridgeable. They might be unbridgeable; but they are not unimaginable. ♦

*From Yahoo News.*

The young competitors have spent months poring over word lists and dictionaries, probing the depths of entomology in an attempt to answer one nagging question: what strange word is Carolyn Andrews going to come up with next?

“Thorax”?

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## BEYOND BEAUTY

*Auguste Rodin sent sculpture tumbling into modernity.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



The hundredth anniversary of the death of Auguste Rodin prompts “Rodin at the Met,” a show of the Metropolitan Museum’s considerable holdings in works by the artist. But no occasion is really needed. Rodin is always with us, the greatest sculptor of the nearly four centuries since Gian Lorenzo Bernini perfected and exalted the Baroque. Matter made flesh and returned to matter, with clay cast in bronze: Rodin. (There are carvings in the show, too, but made by assistants whom he directed. He couldn’t feel stone.) You know he’s great even when you’re not in a mood for him. Are “The Thinker” and “The Kiss” kind of corny? I’ve felt that. Does the grandiosity of “Monument to Balzac” (for which there is a small study in

the show) overbear? Sure. There’s a stubborn tinge of vulgarity about Rodin, inseparable from his strength. But roll your eyes as you may, your gaze is going to stop, again, and widen at the sight of one or another work of his. What does it is a touch that thinks. He—or his hand, as his mind’s executive—wrenched figurative sculpture from millennia of tradition and sent it tumbling into modernity.

A team of Met curators led by Denise Allen has installed about fifty bronzes, plasters, terra-cottas, and carvings by Rodin, along with works by related artists, in the grand foyer of the museum’s galleries of nineteenth-century painting and filled one room with a chronological survey of his drawings. The ensemble tells a number of sto-

ries, depending on how you proceed and where you focus. I took it randomly, as a picaresque culminating in a visit to the museum’s ground-floor sculpture court. There, permanently on view, is a full-sized cast of Rodin’s “The Burghers of Calais” (1889), to my mind the most stunning of modern monuments. It depicts six wealthy men who, in 1347, volunteered to be executed by a besieging English force as a price for mercy to their fellow-citizens.

Milling at odd angles to one another on uneven ground, naked beneath robes or draped sheets, the burghers are heroes whose shared moment of heroism—stepping forth for sacrifice—is over. Each man is now terribly alone. One appears resigned, one writhes in despair, and another, tasked with surrendering the key to the city, attempts defiance while palpably trembling on the verge of tears. The youngest pleads with an older one who turns angrily away; but another, forgetting himself, offers comfort. Enlarged hands and feet emphasize the bodies to counterbalance the faces. Light pools and, as you move, flows on the black patina. Rodin wanted the monument placed at ground level in Calais, but the city’s officials weren’t ready for so radical an overture to common humanity. They hoisted the humble and humbling burghers onto a ceremonious pedestal. (It’s too bad, but understandable, that the Met must protect the work by installing it on a low plinth.)

Rodin was a child of the working class. (His father was a police clerk.) I think that this explains a lot about him—and about his reception, to this day—as it does about his close friend Pierre-Auguste Renoir (the son of a tailor). Both men came to art by way of tradecraft: architectural ornament in Rodin’s case, decoration of ceramics in Renoir’s. Their training in commercial aesthetics, aimed to please, distinguished them from their more privileged and urbane Impressionist and Post-Impressionist contemporaries. They loved flesh, which Rodin sensualized and Renoir prettified, both shamelessly. Rodin had no avant-gardist desire to reject academic convention, which, nonetheless, rejected him. He was refused, three times, admittance to the École des Beaux-Arts, probably because of his early fondness for

eighteenth-century rococo—too old-fashioned for the academy's reigning neoclassicists. He was doomed to independence. He worked as a craftsman, in Belgium, while living with Rose Beuret, a seamstress. (They had a son in 1866 and, despite Rodin's many infidelities, married in 1917, the last year of both their lives.) On a trip to Italy, in 1875, works by Michelangelo and Donatello set Rodin's imagination afire. He was ready for Paris.

Rodin's breakthrough work, "The Age of Bronze" (modelled in 1876), made when he was thirty-six, is beautiful: a nude youth, life-sized, rests his weight on one leg, lifts his face with eyes closed, clutches the top of his head with one hand, and half raises the other, clenched as if grasping something. (The model had held a staff to keep his arm up.) When the enigmatic work was first shown, in 1877, Rodin titled it "The Conquered Man," to elegize his nation's recent defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. But no one was eager to be reminded of that. In addition, the figure's extreme naturalism, which caused an immediate public sensation, gave rise to rumors that Rodin hadn't sculpted it but had cast it from an actual body. Stung on both counts, he subsequently steered clear of contemporary political references and made his figures either larger or smaller than life. Meanwhile, his initial notoriety morphed, by quick stages, into international fame, crowned by the triumph of a show of his work at the 1900 Paris world's fair, the Universal Exposition.

In 1880, Rodin was commissioned to design the portal for a museum of decorative art in Paris. The museum was never built, and Rodin's Dante-inspired, megalomaniacal melee of a hundred and eighty figures, "The Gates of Hell," was still unfinished when finally cast after his death. It spawned many of his touchstone sculptures: constituent figures, cast in varying sizes. "The Thinker," a presiding presence in "The Gates," ponders damned souls, apparently, while displaying a set of muscles that might as easily juggle them. But Rodin wasn't much for musculature generally. The physical organ that most galvanized him was the skin, not just as the outside limit of the body but as the inner limit of the outer world.

It is what excites—and stops—his hand. The effect is timelessly startling. Abandoning the refinement of "The Age of Bronze," it shrugs off beauty, which requires a degree of detachment. Rodin didn't behold his subjects or present them for admiration. He had at them, and they have at us.

The kinetic appeal of Rodin's most original works is complicated by something like wit, if wit can be said to impart power. A primary case in point is "The Walking Man" (modelled before 1900), for which he plunked the rough torso of one uncompleted sculpture onto the fully articulated legs of another. The legs appear to stride, with momentum conveyed by a twist at the hips. But they can't do it. Both feet are flat on the ground. Try assuming the posture yourself, as I did at the Met. (People will stare. So what?) Your rear foot feels stuck in something. Walking becomes lurching. The effect is simple, but it electrifies as the sign of an intelligence that comprehends, and can gainfully subvert, the fictive language of figuration in sculpture. You get, in a flash, that Rodin could have played no end of Picasso-like games with givens of the medium, had he been more of a sophisticate.

As it is, Rodin's reputation was long qualified, in the twentieth century, by an imputation of laggard taste, like that of the painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, several of whose suavely executed Arcadian scenes complement the show. Did Rodin drag Romantic and Symbolist longueurs and boilerplate mythology into the stern light of modernity? Yes. He could title even an inventive, violently erotic figure—headless, with spread legs—"Iris, Messenger of the Gods" (modelled in 1890). But I would be for forgiving him that, if it needed forgiveness. His retention of old tropes is no more inherently sentimental than the myth of progress that led some modernists to snoot him. Indeed, his ready access to the past in art, combined with the absolute audacity of his stylings, recommends him to a moment—our own—that is disillusioned with formal development while hungering for authenticity. If you give Rodin the chance, he will show you possibilities of transcendence that aren't only close at hand but identical with it. ♦

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## MOTHER!

*Suzan-Lori Parks's "Scarlet Letter" spinoffs.*

BY HILTON ALS

Nearly twenty years ago now, the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks created two works for the stage that remain masterpieces of the form. The first, "In the Blood," had its première at the Public, in New York, in 1999; "Fucking A" was staged by Parks at a smaller venue, in Houston, in 2000. The plays, which are now in revival under the joint title "The Red Letter Plays" (at the Signature), present different landscapes and story lines, but they have a number of technical similarities—including the use of monologues, projected titles, and songs—and both examine a woman's dream of motherhood and the challenges of mothering without societal support or faith. The plays' protagonists, both named Hester, bend low or stand tall in a political climate in which the powerless are given an even rawer deal than they could have imagined, but Parks never gives up on her characters; she shows how pain wears on them, but also how they outwit life—which is to say a life that is dominated by male-generated puritanism.

Before writing these plays, Parks notes in the *Playbill*, she joked to a friend that she was going to create a piece based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"—which she hadn't read at the time—and call it "Fucking A." After reading the novel, she wrote two plays, and to see them one after the other is to understand how Hawthorne's book gave Parks permission to explore her own gothic sensibility. In "The Scarlet Letter," which is set in Puritan Massachusetts in the seventeenth

century, the proud and beautiful Hester Prynne has a child whose father she refuses to name. For this, she is ostracized by her judgmental and bitter community and forced to wear a letter "A"—for "Adulterer"—on her chest.

In "Fucking A" (directed by Jo Bonney), Hester Smith (Christine Lahti),

he was jailed for stealing a piece of meat from a rich man's house. Hester hungers for revenge against the person who ratted her son out and longs to return her child to his rightful place: her nurturing bosom, in which beats a heart that can kill and does kill. Though there is still some tenderness in her soul, Hester has seen too much damage to trust the world; hers is a wounded consciousness. She works and works to free her son (who she thinks is still incarcerated), but whenever she believes she's got enough coins to buy his release, the female gatekeeper at the town treasury raises the price.

Hester is not friendless, though. She has Canary Mary (Joaquina Kalukango), the town whore—another female pariah—who's in love with the Mayor (Marc Kudisch) and can't let go of her hope that he will eventually love her, too. He is married to the equally lovesick First Lady (Elizabeth Stanley), who wants to have a child. But when will that happen? The Mayor, who speaks and moves like a military officer, gets off on his own exaggerated masculinity, which he performs with verve for his all-female audience.

So many frustrated dreams in this story of romance-as-blight—and yet love or the dream of love won't let anyone go. One place where the women find shelter is in talk—Parks's well-crafted English—and in "Talk," a kind of patois that she has invented. The women joke freely as subtitles are projected on the wall of Hester's sitting room, like thought bubbles. The play

is about language as a specious but necessary form of communication, and how it can push the soul into crisis when words are buried, history twisted. Parks emphasizes those frustrating obfuscations by breaking the play up into blocks and songs. While watching, I wondered if this Brechtian "distancing" made me feel more or less implicated in the proceedings,



*Saycon Sengbloh and Christine Lahti as troubled mothers.*

an abortionist, lives and works in a nameless town that feels murky and closed off. Hester's "A"—for "Aborter"—has been branded on her chest. Her bloody work never ends. Women come to her to evade the thing that would make them even more vulnerable than they already are—motherhood—just as it has made Hester vulnerable. She doesn't know where her son is; as a boy,



and I liked not knowing. Parks's language always has that effect on me; she refuses to be only one thing on the page, so how can we feel only one thing? Language is confusing, anyway: do we ever really say what we mean, let alone write it? When Hester's son, Monster (the outstanding and sexy Brandon Victor Dixon), finally reappears at their home, mother and son speak at cross-purposes, which kills, at least temporarily, the thing they've both been searching for: a body to love that will love them in return. That's the currency they're after, even though time has robbed them of so much that they never get to share, let alone spend, what their hearts have been saving.

Hester La Negrita (Saycon Sengbloh) has a great deal of love, in "In the Blood" (directed by Sarah Benson). But, although this mother of five children fathered by five different men is rich in reciprocated affection, she is blocked from the power of knowledge, because she has no written language: the only letter she can write is "A." Hester and her children live under a bridge, where people throw trash and someone has scrawled the word "slut" on the wall. Hester asks her bright son Jabber (Michael Braun) what it says, but he loves her too much to tell her, and in this way Parks teaches us the power of shutting up—how we can sometimes save one another with silence. Hester La Negrita's "A" isn't stitched onto her clothing, but her illiteracy is a stigma that invites all sorts of figures—a welfare worker, a preacher, and others—to believe that they're superior to this stalwart, poetic woman because they can write their hate, while she can only speak her love, which is like a defiant scrawl across their smugness.

I didn't see either of these plays when they were first staged, but I read them then and was amazed, not for the first time, by Parks's gift for theatrical synthesis. She never tries to deny her influences—Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange, among others—in order to compete with them. She picks up where they left off, making major pieces about black women in America in her own voice, which is many voices. Parks spent part of her youth in Texas,

and she's in love with the syntax and cadences of Texan speech. The poetry of her language reminds us that English drama began as verse, and there's a great deal of Shakespeare in her work as well; from him, she learned how secondary characters can introduce new ideas while helping move the primary narrative along. Beckett is an influence, too, particularly his works, like "Krapp's Last Tape," that emphasize the notion of voice as story. But Parks's voice is entirely American in tone, driven by rhetoric and plain speaking, or the way that plain speaking becomes rhetorical in a story about love—and all Parks's stories are about love.

There's a great gulf in the mind between reading a play and seeing it, and I wonder if the disappointment I felt at both shows had to do with how I'd first imagined these essential works—and how far short of that these productions fell. Perhaps the greatness of Parks's language shut the directors out, before they even got started. There isn't a lot of air in her scripts, and I can see how an actor could feel cowed by them. Of the performers here, Lahti, Kalukango, Dixon, and Jocelyn Bioh (who plays Hester La Negrita's smart, talkative daughter) seemed the most relaxed with the words. I was interested in the way that Lahti was able to use her body to show how Hester Smith's slow manner was born out of necessity: her gruesome instruments are heavy in more ways than one, as is her letter "A." I suppose what I missed in both shows was a sense of desperation—of the Hesters actually being in the shit, as opposed to playing it. There are glimpses of this, though. Sengbloh, who seemed to be struggling with her lines the night I saw "In the Blood," had some explosive moments at the end of the drama. But, over all, Parks's complicated view of motherhood—is it fulfillment or destruction, biology or destiny, liberation or prison, or all these things?—isn't played out enough. Despite the playwright's distancing devices, we should never feel too far from the funky smell these women emit as they try to make it in a compromised world without compromising their romantic dream of life with their children in the glow of a better day. ♦

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Charles E. Martin, September 20th, 1969

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## UNRELIABLE HISTORIES

*"American Made" and "Victoria & Abdul."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

At the start of "Fargo" (1996), the Coen brothers, keeping the straightest of faces, informed us, "This is a true story," and proceeded to unwrap a pack of delicious lies. Moviegoers, of all people, should know that truth is not to be trusted; yet we are credulous creatures, with a sweet tooth for the authentic, and so, week after week, directors con-

flight, with his co-pilot dozing beside him and the passengers in repose, he switches off the autopilot and tips the plane into a lurching plunge. Order is soon restored, but, for a few seconds, as the oxygen masks drop down, we race through the possibilities in our minds: Is Barry suicidal? Could he be a terrorist on the sly? Then we real-

he delivers, but the rewards are meagre, and his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is expecting a child, so how to pump up his pay? Enter three business-minded gentlemen from Colombia, one of them named Pablo Escobar (Mauricio Mejía), whose argument is that, since Barry is so often, you know, in the neighborhood, why not fly a few packages back to America on their behalf?

If you already feel bowed down with plot, be advised that "American Made" is just hitting its stride. Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, tend to chivvy us through the narrative with indecent haste, only to pause awhile and savor the scene as if enjoying a fine cigar. The jungle airstrip, for instance, from which Barry must depart with his precious cargo is stomach-heavily short, and we glimpse the graves of pilots who have come to grief; during Barry's maiden effort to take off, shredding the treetops as he goes, the camera picks out Escobar and his pals, beside the runway, happily gambling on whether their latest recruit will make it or die. Life, to them, is as light as a banknote. At this point, when I saw the movie, everyone in the theatre laughed at the sight of them, and it's clear that Liman has got us right where he wants us. The impetuous pace of the film is at one with its moral shamelessness, and, without thinking, we sign up for both.

No surprise, then, that as the geopolitics of the time turn sleazy and wild Barry gets sucked in afresh. We wouldn't want him to be anywhere else. He says yes when asked to run guns down to the Contras, in Nicaragua, and then, later, when asked to run planeloads of Contras back to the United States, for secret military training. And yes again when the drug lords mention that, as a matter of fact, they could use more guns themselves; can Barry possibly spare a few? And so on, and on, until he is making so much lucre that, back at home, in Mena, Arkansas, he and Lucy hardly know where to stash it all. Some of it gets buried in the woods; some sits rotting in the stable, and you have to go around a horse to reach it. There's a lovely freeze-frame of our hero opening a closet and reeling back as his ill-gotten gains, stuffed into bags, crash down on him. It's an eighties reboot of the stateroom sequence from "A Night at the Opera"



In Doug Liman's film, Tom Cruise is a drug-running pilot recruited by the C.I.A.

tinue to reassure us that what we are about to witness is rooted in fact. Two new films maintain the tradition. Doug Liman's "American Made" declares itself to be "based on a true story," while Stephen Frears's "Victoria & Abdul" offers first the tagline "Based on real events" and then, after a pause, the simpering suffix "Mostly."

Barry Seal (Tom Cruise), the hero of "American Made," has a tale to tell, so preposterous that he himself seems unsure whether to believe it. He even warns us, in voice-over, of the direction in which it's about to veer—"Shit gets crazy from here on"—thus firing our interest all the more. We join the craziness in 1978, when Barry is a young pilot with T.W.A. On a nocturnal

ize: No, he's bored. He does this sort of thing for fun.

What a way to kick off a movie. The scene is suspended between darkness and lightheartedness, and touched with a hint—or a promise—that the latter may prove more dangerous. Barry is an Icarus in aviator shades, and you wonder how high he might dare to soar. Enter Schafer (Domhnall Gleeson), a C.I.A. agent who has noted Barry's talents, such as they are, and now proposes that he serve his country by flying low over other countries, in Central America, and photographing secluded camps that are said to house Communist guerrillas. Barry agrees to help, and a twin-prop plane is provided. He gets fired at from the ground, and is lauded for what



(1935), when Margaret Dumont opens the door and a torrent of waiters, maids, and Marx Brothers falls out. In Liman's version, the humans are replaced by loot.

It is this mood of unreflective overkill, rather than any aggregation of details, that stamps "American Made" as a period drama. We don't feel smothered in huge hair styles, and Lucy's dresses aren't there to make a statement, like the women's braying attire in "American Hustle" (2013). Liman has more potent ploys at his disposal, like the cinematography of César Charlone, who shot "City of God" (2002), and who endows the new film, especially in its early patches, with the hot-but-faded glow that you get from an old transparency. ("Kodachrome, they give us those nice bright colors," Paul Simon sang, in 1973.) Above all, there is Tom Cruise, whose career was in the ascendant, with "Risky Business" (1983) and "Legend" (1985), in the frantic years covered by the second half of "American Made." Because he has changed so little in the interim, and mounted so uncanny a resistance to the onslaught of time, we feel, with a jolt, that we are gazing up at a star as he both was and still is. Astronomers may flee the cinema in confusion.

Yet Liman, to his credit, is not content to revel in the shine of his leading man. "American Made" joins that small band of Cruise movies, like "Magnolia" (1999) and "Collateral" (2004), which summon the nerve to dig around—to test the armor of his geniality, and to deconstruct that celebrated grin. God help us, he even gets a tooth knocked out! (Two other characters remark upon the loss, aware that it's as rare as an eclipse.) You can smile your way into trouble, the

film suggests, and out of it, too, so what will it take, either on the private or the national scale, to wipe such confidence away? That is a question worth putting not merely to Barry, who is sought simultaneously by the F.B.I., the D.E.A., the A.T.F., and Arkansas State Police, but also to Ronald Reagan, a fellow paragon of good cheer. He presides, in frequent clips, over this unquenchably chipper and heartless yarn, and would have frowned at the glum note that is struck at the end, when we are shown archival footage of the Senate investigation into the Iran-Contra affair—the chief counsel at which, it so happens, was Arthur L. Liman, the father of the man who made this film. Quite true.

**I**t goes without saying that the aging Queen Victoria, in "Victoria & Abdul," is played by Judi Dench. The acting aristocracy of Great Britain is as adamantine, in its way, as the Royal Family, and any other performer would, one presumes, have been forbidden by parliamentary statute. Dench commands the role with ease and without vanity—allowing a blob of cream to disfigure the imperial visage, say, as she gobbles her profiteroles at a banquet. Her Majesty eats fast, and when she's finished everyone else must stop.

The action, if that is not too flattering a noun for the march-past of mildly diverting episodes to which we are treated, begins in 1887. Victoria, widowed since 1861, is, by her own account, cantankerous and fat; each morning, she submits to a discussion of her movements—a delicate matter, pertaining both to her bowels and to her social engagements for the day. Both seem re-

strictive to a fault. At one end of a vast table, with noble guests arrayed on either side, sits the lonely monarch, snoring. Suddenly, she awakes and locks eyes with a strapping attendant, Abdul Karim (Ali Fazal), who has just arrived from Agra, India. He is swiftly engaged as her footman and then as her *munshi*, or teacher, schooling her in the beauties of Urdu. She seems rejuvenated, but her joy is not shared by her private secretary (Tim Pigott-Smith), the Prime Minister (Michael Gambon), or her wastrel of an heir (Eddie Izzard), who will succeed her as Edward VII.

Directed by Frears and written by Lee Hall, the film is a sequel of sorts to John Madden's "Mrs. Brown" (1997), in which Dench was a younger Victoria. Both movies tell of an inconvenient crush, but the new one feels stuck in the groove, with a single theme—the unlikely half-romance, crossing the borders of age and race, and thwarted by the prejudices of the establishment—returning from scene to scene. The film's attempt to portray the Queen as more politically enlightened than her courtiers is kindly but unconvincing, and many of the actors bark and behave as if participating in a spoof. As for what Frears really makes of this ceremonious palaver, I would refer you to his innovative use of the Jell-O-Cam. We find ourselves planted immediately behind the royal dessert, sharing its point of view as it is borne aloft, richly colored and quivering, into Victoria's presence. The Empire is starting to wobble. ♦

**NEWYORKER.COM**

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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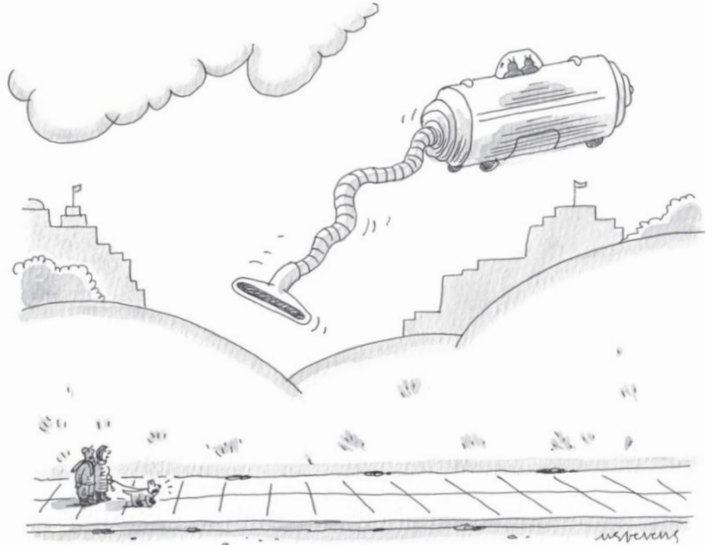




## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, October 1st. The finalists in the September 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 16th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

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### THE FINALISTS

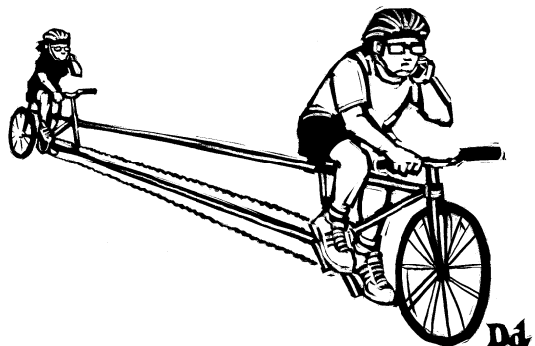


*“Hold on, the Senate Committee on Women's Health is getting out.”*  
Chris Janssen, San Jose, Calif.

*“Describe him.”*  
Tom Mardirosian, New York City

*“Never mind. It looks like they fixed the copier.”*  
Craig Moreland, Okemos, Mich.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“It was green when I went through it.”*  
Robert Gluck, Herndon, Va.

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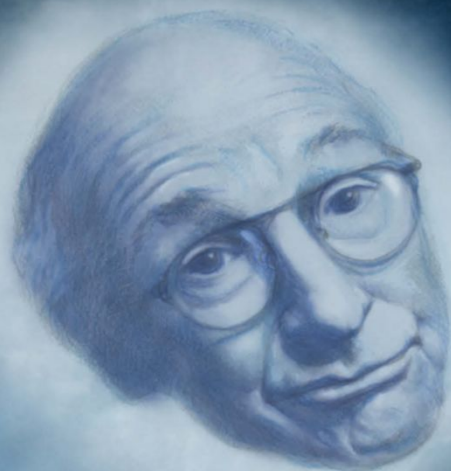
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