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# THE NEW YORKER





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# THE NEW YORKER

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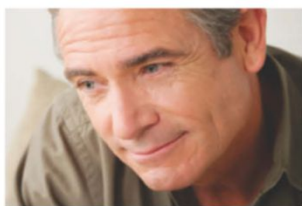
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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Yiyun Li** (*"To Speak Is to Blunder,"* p. 30) is the author of several books, the most recent of which, *"Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life,"* will be published in February.

**Dexter Filkins** (*"Before the Flood,"* p. 22), a staff writer, is the author of *"The Forever War,"* which won a National Book Critics Circle Award.

**Camille Bordas** (*Fiction,* p. 56) is a French writer. *"How to Behave in a Crowd,"* her first English-language novel, will be out next August.

**Joan Acocella** (*Dancing,* p. 74) has written for *The New Yorker* since 1992, and became the magazine's dance critic in 1998.

**Ian Frazier** (*Shouts & Murmurs,* p. 29) recently published *"Hogs Wild: Selected Reporting Pieces"* and is working on a book about the Bronx.

**Emma Allen** (*The Talk of the Town,* p. 19) has been a member of the magazine's editorial staff since 2012.

**Amy Davidson** (*Comment,* p. 17), a staff writer, is a regular contributor to *Comment*. She also writes a column for [newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com).

**Adrian Tomine** (*Cover*) is a cartoonist and an illustrator. His most recent book is *"Killing and Dying."*

**Peter Hessler** (*"The Shadow General,"* p. 44), a staff writer living in Ridgway, Colorado, is writing a book about the five years he spent reporting from Egypt.

**Jonathan Galassi** (*Poem,* p. 40) is the author of the novel *"Muse,"* which was published last year.

**David Owen** (*The Talk of the Town,* p. 21) is the author of the forthcoming book *"Where the Water Goes: Life and Death Along the Colorado River,"* based on his *New Yorker* article *"Where the River Runs Dry."*

**Michael Specter** (*"Rewriting the Code of Life,"* p. 34) has been a staff writer since 1998. He is working on a book about the rapidly changing science of editing genes.

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### PODCAST

In the latest episode, Camille Bordas reads *"Most Die Young,"* her short story in this week's issue.



### PHOTO BOOTH

A selection of *New Yorker* photographs of cultural and political events, taken during the past year.

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# THE MAIL

## TURKEY'S PREACHER

Dexter Filkins's article on the Muslim scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen, the founder of the social and religious movement Hizmet, of which I am a participant, misrepresents Gülen and leaves unchallenged a series of claims against him ("Turkey's Thirty-Year Coup," October 17th). Filkins refers to statements that Gülen made decades ago regarding Jews, but does not explain the evolution of his views, which Gülen has clarified in other interviews, or mention his consistent criticism of terrorist attacks in Israel and support for interfaith dialogue. Gülen has also repeatedly condemned the July 15th attempted coup against Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and he has vehemently denied any involvement. This article perpetuates many of the dangerous myths and false allegations against Gülen that President Erdoğan has used to justify his authoritarian crackdown. Gülen is a peaceful, pro-democracy Muslim scholar and preacher. He has advocated for U.S. leadership in the world, for religious and cultural tolerance, and for women in leadership positions. He has been recognized by former leaders of Turkey as a Muslim intellectual committed to democracy, the rule of law, and moderate secularism. *Y. Alp Aslandogan, Executive Director Alliance for Shared Values New York City*

Filkins has produced an important story on Turkey. I appreciate the country's promise as a secular, moderate, tolerant, Muslim-majority nation perched at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, surrounded as it is by querulous nation-states. And so the increasing concentration of power in the current President is worrisome, Gülenists or no Gülenists.

*Sally Peabody  
Medford, Mass.*

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## THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

Kelefa Sanneh writes that "what gets left out of our immigration arguments"

is the tension between compassion for others and the need to define community for ourselves ("Coming to America," October 31st). But, by focussing entirely on what we should do when immigrants arrive at our doorstep, he overlooks the equally important question of what we are doing to drive them from home. The recent surge of desperate families and children fleeing Central America is partially a result of our government's support for the corrupt oligarchs in that region who have suppressed democracy, brutalized their people, and profited from the drug violence. Similarly, treating the question of whether to accept ten thousand Syrian refugees as an issue of charity skirts our responsibility for exacerbating the turmoil in the Middle East that has displaced millions. We leave foreign policy out of the immigration debate at our own moral peril.

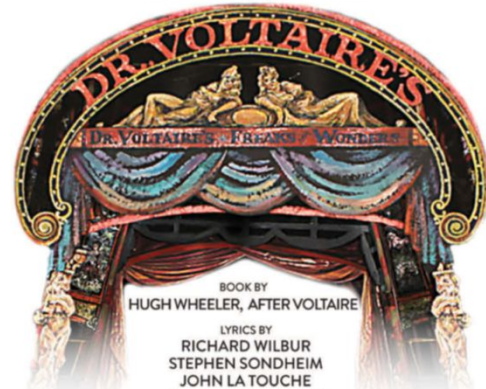
*Jeff Faux, Distinguished Fellow  
Economic Policy Institute  
Washington, D.C.*

In his otherwise thoughtful and informative piece, Sanneh fails to mention our legal obligation under U.N. protocol to grant protection to bona-fide refugees. Nor does he explore the moral obligation of a country whose willful invasion of Iraq led in significant ways to Syria's utter destruction. Sanneh does point out that most scholars agree that our reluctance to grant entry to Jews fleeing Germany in the nineteen-thirties contributed to a national change of heart after the war and to our passage of the Displaced Persons Act of 1948; the U.S. admitted hundreds of thousands of "boat people" in the years following our withdrawal from Vietnam. The Syrian people deserve no less.

*David Fenner  
Seattle, Wash.*

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

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# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



August Wilson's life work was his "Century Cycle," a ten-play portrait of black life in Pittsburgh's Hill District, each set in a different decade. ("Fences," the nineteen-fifties entry, is now a movie.) Until this month, only one had not played on Broadway: "**Jitney**," about gypsy-cab drivers in the seventies. Manhattan Theatre Club's production, directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson and featuring John Douglas Thompson, Carra Patterson, and André Holland, starts previews Dec. 28, at the Samuel J. Friedman.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC



# THE THEATRE

## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

### Coil 2017

P.S. 122's annual festival returns, with works including Yehuda Duenyas's "CVRTAIN," which uses virtual reality to create a cheering audience of thousands; Forced Entertainment's "Real Magic," an absurdist take on the art of illusion; and Yara Travieso's "La Medea," which recasts the Euripides tragedy as a live TV tell-all. For the full program, visit [ps122.org](http://ps122.org). (*Various locations. 212-352-3101. Opens Jan. 3.*)

### The Present

Cate Blanchett and Richard Roxburgh star in the Sydney Theatre Company production of Andrew Upton's play, based on an early Chekhov work (known as "Platonov") and directed by John Crowley. (*Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.*)

## NOW PLAYING

### The Band's Visit

How do you make a musical comedy about boredom, drabness, and disappointment? This delightful new show, adapted from the 2007 (nonmusical) film—about an Egyptian police band that travels to Israel to play a concert but ends up stranded for a night in the wrong town in the middle of nowhere—toys with that conundrum to hilarious and often hypnotic effect. Tony Shalhoub gets top billing for his unshowy performance as the band's repressed conductor, but the star is Katrina Lenk, as Dina, a world-weary local who shows him the sights, such as they are. David Yazbek's songs are charming, Tyler Micoleau's lighting is precisely evocative, and Scott Pask's rotating sets are ingenious. But it all works because David Cromer's direction is patient enough to allow the silence and space in which intimacy blooms. (*Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111.*)

### Dear Evan Hansen

This new musical (directed by Michael Greif, with music and lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul and a book by Steven Levenson) has a long stretch of brilliance, but it is ultimately undone by pop psychology. Evan (Ben Platt) is seventeen and in high school. Shyness causes his shoulders to hunch up, and he avoids eye contact with any interlocutor, even his mother, Heidi (Rachel Bay Jones). A classmate, Connor (Mike Faist), crosses a line, and, in the aftermath of his actions, the musical becomes a profound evocation of how the need to belong can be as ugly as the need to exclude. Platt's characterization is almost beyond belief, one of those supersonic performances that makes you sit up in your chair. The holes in the formulaic second half don't so much diminish his performance as smudge it a little, like a beautiful charcoal drawing that's been handled too much. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/19 & 26/16.) (*Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.*)

### His Royal Hipness Lord Buckley

The influential standup comic Lord Buckley, who died in 1960, was a hybrid creature, with the bearing and intonations (and tuxedo) of a mid-Atlantic

aristocrat and the vernacular of a mid-century African-American jazzbo. With a deep fluency in Buckley's actual routines, and a steady awareness that the theatre is "fifteen-hundred and eighty-three feet from Trump Tower," Jake Broder runs a convincing simulation of what Buckley's cabaret act might have sounded like in 2016. The chief prerequisite for digging this show is a tolerance for endless streams of beatnik wordplay (a thought is a "wig bubble," Jesus Christ is "The Nazz," and so forth). The reward is a downright virtuosic performance from Broder, including a surprisingly adept turn on saxophone, and a killer accompanying jazz trio: Mark Hartman on piano, Brad Russell on upright bass, and, especially, Daniel Glass on drums. (*59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Through Jan. 1.*)

### The Illusionists: Turn of the Century

Despite running in one of Broadway's greatest theatres, this briskly paced magic anthology makes you feel like you're at ye olde county fair—in the best possible way. The over-all mood is vaguely steam-vaudevillian, if vaudeville acts had references to credit cards. With eight different acts, the show can't avoid being uneven, but at its best it mixes cornball humor (Dana Daniels's comic magician, the Charlatan, and his psychic parrot, Luigi, are especially entertaining), physics-defying feats (Charlie Frye—the Eccentric—displays superhuman hand-eye coordination, juggling disparate objects), and "how the heck did they do that?" exploits. That last category is occupied by the Austrian duo of Thommy Ten and Amélie van Tass, of "America's Got Talent." These "clairvoyants" are so slickly convincing that you might be tempted to throw rationality to the wind and remove those quotation marks from their job description. (*Palace, Seventh Ave. at 47th St. 877-250-2929. Through Jan. 1.*)

### In Transit

An easy ride in search of a destination, this sweet and slight a-cappella musical follows several New Yorkers trapped in life's turnstile. Jane (a marvelous Margo Seibert) is stuck in a temp job, Nate is out of a banking job, Ali is obsessed with an ex, and Trent and Steven have pre-wedding jitters. Under Kathleen Marshall's effectual, off-dry direction, these individual stories never gain dramatic heft. The premise is flimsy, the set is chintzy, and the feel-good moral—"Jane, just be on the A"—sounds like clearance-sale Zen. But the cast is appealing, and the harmonies, arranged by Deke Sharon, are goose-bump-inducing. The show charms its hometown crowd with gibes about repairs to the Q line and a pizza-rat prop. The biggest laugh line comes when a well-meaning mother bids her son, "Don't let the bed bugs bite," and he replies, "We don't joke about that in New York." (*Circle in the Square, 235 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.*)

### Martin Luther on Trial

Somewhere between Heaven and Hell, Satan, acting as prosecutor, has organized proceedings against the German gadfly monk for crimes against God. St. Peter presides; Luther's wife, Katharina von Bora, serves as defense counsel. Hitler, Freud, Pope Francis, and many other bold-faced names are called as witnesses, and in the course of their testimony a complicated portrait

of the defendant emerges: brave and brilliant and principled but also arrogant and angry and spiteful. Flashbacks offer sensitive insights into Luther's tussles with authority and scripture. Yet the play, by Chris Cragin-Day and Max McLean, is essentially a religious pageant, albeit an unusually wry and well-acted one. (The most heavy-handed aspect is the sound design, evoking "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.") It exists to explore a very specific theological argument—and if that argument doesn't interest you neither will the show. (*Pearl, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-563-9261.*)

### Othello

David Oyelowo and Daniel Craig play the Moor and Iago, respectively, in Sam Gold's interesting version of Shakespeare's poem about possession, race, and jealousy, and it's those two stars, working without vanity, who do so much to increase our understanding of the language. Set in various contemporary Army barracks, the production closes the viewer into a world where masculinity is the dominant force, and where women are either put on a pedestal or considered expendable. Rachel Brosnahan is a very good Desdemona, and it's her strength and clarity that make Craig's Iago mad with jealousy. But it's a cold rage, which makes it that much more scary, while the complicated innocence of Oyelowo's Othello draws us in moment by moment without sacrificing the character's mighty power or his self-protective wit. (*New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475.*)

### The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart

A boozy gloss on border ballads with a sprinkling of Kylie Minogue, David Greig's captivating play, presented by the National Theatre of Scotland, takes the form of a deeply weird folk session. Prudencia (Melody Grove), a priggish Ph.D. student fleeing a humiliating academic conference, is seeking shelter when she falls into the arms of the Devil (Peter Hannah), who doesn't like to let go. Greig's script, much of it written in rhymed couplets, is sometimes smug in its modernizing of classic motifs. But Alasdair Macrae's musical direction enchants, and Wils Wilson's irrepressible staging beguiles. Audiences are enticed with whiskey shots, trays of cheese sandwiches, and good-natured invitations to assist the five actors—who also form the superb band—as they dash and whirl between tables in the speakeasy space at the home of "Sleep No More." (*The Heath at The McKittrick Hotel, 542 W. 27th St. 212-564-1662.*)

## ALSO NOTABLE

**The Babylon Line** Mitzi E. Newhouse. • **Bright Colors and Bold Patterns** Barrow Street Theatre. *Through Dec. 30.* • **A Bronx Tale** Longacre. • **Chris Gethard: Career Suicide** Lynn Redgrave. • **The Dead, 1904** American Irish Historical Society. • **The Encounter** Golden. • **Falsettos** Walter Kerr. • **Fiddler on the Roof** Broadway Theatre. *Through Dec. 31.* • **Finian's Rainbow** Irish Repertory. • **The Front Page** Broadhurst. • **Holiday Inn** Studio 54. • **Jitney** Samuel J. Friedman. • **Les Liaisons Dangereuses** Booth. • **Matilda the Musical** Shubert. *Through Jan. 1.* • **Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812** Imperial. • **Oh, Hello on Broadway** Lyceum. • **Othello: The Remix** Westside. • **Ride the Cyclone** Lucille Lortel. *Through Dec. 29.* • **Something Rotten!** St. James. *Through Jan. 1.* • **Sweet Charity** Pershing Square Signature Center. • **Tiny Beautiful Things** Public. *Through Dec. 31.* • **The Wolves** The Duke on 42nd Street. *Through Dec. 29.*

# ART

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Metropolitan Museum

“Native American Masterpieces from the Charles and Valerie Diker Collection”

Beaded moccasins from a Muscogee artist; a panoramic drawing on muslin, by a Lakota witness of the Battle of Little Bighorn; an 1885 shield painted with a bird motif, from Standing Rock, North Dakota, are among the treasures on view. But the finest art works and artifacts in this collection come from Alaska and Canada’s northwest coast. A Tlingit woven hat decorated with bold geometric motifs and snow goggles inlaid with walrus ivory evoke daily life. A strikingly minimal elongated mask from the Chugach people has a narrowly incised triangular moue, while a dance mask by a Yup’ik artist is far more ornate. The face is grasped by carved, painted wooden fingers and ringed by the small heads of seals and birds, playing visual games with both scale and species. *Through March 19.*

### Museum of Modern Art

“Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round So Our Thoughts Can Change Direction”

The more serious you are about modern art, the more likely you are to be stupefied by this retrospective, elegantly curated by Anne Umland, of the merrily nihilistic Frenchman who strewed the first half of the twentieth century with the aesthetic equivalent of whoopee cushions. As a painter, a poet, a graphic artist, an editor, and

a set designer, Picabia mastered, and mocked, canonical styles, with an emphasis on Dada—a movement in which he co-starred with his friend Marcel Duchamp, and which raised travesty to a beau ideal. The exhibition climaxes a period of rediscovery of Picabia’s work, in which scholars have noticed that the anti-academic artist met, in advance, just about every academic criterion of postmodernism. Most of what’s on view crackles with immediacy, popping free of its time to wink at the present, but not much of it truly pleases. Was Picabia an outlier of modernism? Or was modernism the background accompaniment for his one-man band? MOMA suggests the latter, notably in the section devoted to Cubist works. The writhing shapes in “Udnie (Young American Girl; Dance),” from 1913, spectacularized Cubism as a look—an engine of style—that shrugged off the residual figuration and the analytical rigor of Picasso and Braque. The show’s subtitle, about the expedient shape of our heads, is a bon (or *mauvais*) mot typical of Picabia, who aspired to an art that, he declared, would be “un-aesthetic in the extreme, useless and impossible to justify”—a formulation that secretes an aesthetic, a function, and a justification all its own. *Through March 19.*

### Whitney Museum

“Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2015”

The title of this absorbing feat of curatorial restraint, which unfolds in a well-designed network of dark passageways and spacious view-

ing rooms, alludes to both a parallel universe imagined by H. P. Lovecraft and the amusement park in Edwin S. Porter’s glittering panoramic short film “Coney Island at Night,” from 1905, the earliest work on view. Charting technological advances and artistic movements alike, the curator Chrissie Iles displays formal experiments, avant-garde provocations, and critiques of pop spectacle alongside such charming items as concept drawings for Disney’s 1940 “Fantasia.” That groundbreaking concert film was a forerunner of surround sound, but the allegory presented by Mickey, as the Sorcerer’s Apprentice, enchanting a broom and conjuring a catastrophe, now seems even more prescient. From Bruce Conner’s hypnotic montage “Crossroads,” constructed, in 1976, from footage of underwater atomic test explosions, to the dystopian video installation “Factory of the Sun,” which Hito Steyerl made in 2015, artists both pre- and post-Internet powerfully engage with cinematic technologies as products of cataclysmic war and surveillance. Though there’s far more than an afternoon’s worth of material here, Steyerl’s stylish viewer-implicating fiction—a kind of “Dance Dance Revolution” exposé set in a near-future drone apocalypse—should not be skipped. *Through Feb. 5.*

### Dia:Chelsea

“Hanne Darboven: Kulturegeschichte, 1880–1983”

The German conceptualist’s must-see magnum opus is a systematic deluge. The century-sweeping time line of the work’s title is a conceptual feat; in fact, it was made between 1980 and 1983. Some fifteen hundred identically framed works are arranged in huge grids that promise but deny organizational logic. Bright covers of the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, chronicling endless war, abut postcards of mountains and reproductions of modern art. Tidy handwritten notes reveal Darboven to be an obsessive documentarian; photos of New York City doorways suggest a strange surveillance project; the recurring image of an old-fashioned camera is paired with publicity shots of stars, from Shirley Temple to Pat Benatar. This transfixing excess of ephemera becomes a backdrop for nineteen strange sculptural elements, disparate artifacts united by their creepy anthropological aura. A carved pair of shackled slaves occupies one corner; a mannequin couple wearing jogging suits poses elsewhere. The artist, who died in 2009, at the age of sixty-seven, developed her idiosyncratic processes of collecting and timekeeping with admirable rigor. In this astounding installation, Darboven painstakingly undermined the objective pretenses of museums and archives, exposing historical memory as haphazard and highly subjective. *Through July 30.*

### New-York Historical Society

“The Battle of Brooklyn”

The largest battle of the American Revolution was waged on streets that are now home to artisanal boutiques, and it wasn’t pretty. Duelling portraits of two men named George—the sad-faced king in military uniform, the wooden-toothed general on horseback—preface this interesting exhibition about the first weeks after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, when British broadsides warned colonists “of the fatal Calamities which are the inevitable Consequences of Sedition and Rebellion,” and John Adams, in a letter, to George Washington,



The 1919 drawing “Flight of Forms,” by Ivan Puni (born Jean Pougny, in Finland), is on view in *A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde*, at MOMA.



called for a defense of New York as the “key to the whole continent.” The Battle of Brooklyn, fought on August 27, 1776, is less famous than Lexington and Saratoga, and a diorama on view shows why: we got creamed. His Majesty’s Army and Hessian auxiliaries cornered the Americans at Gowanus and Red Hook, and thousands of captured soldiers died on prison ships in Wallabout Bay. (A memorial in Fort Greene Park commemorates those casualties.) Weeks later, lower Manhattan was devastated by arson, and Nathan Hale gave his one life for his country somewhere near Bloomingdale’s. New York remained under British occupation to the end of the war, but the spirit of ’76 held; the exhibition includes a fragment of an equestrian statue of George III that once stood at Bowling Green, one of the rare chunks of lead that wasn’t melted for bullets. *Through Jan. 8.*

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

### Hurvin Anderson

This enigmatic but satisfying outing finds the British painter in a pastoral mode. His unempt, closely cropped paintings of trees employ an impressive range of approaches to applying paint; daubed, dripped, flicked, and smeared, the blues and greens cohere into trees while revealing the process of their creation. Less alluring are flat compositions of hurriedly arranged squares, the weakest of which feel like a Hans Hofmann redux. Two abstractions are titled “Ebony” and “Jet,” and two putty-colored paintings are overlaid with silk-screened portraits of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Anderson recognizes that identity and abstraction inform, rather than oppose, each other. *Through Jan. 14.* (Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623.)

### Susan Lipper

These unflinching photographs of impoverished white men, taken more than twenty years ago in the tiny West Virginia town of Grapevine Branch, feel disconcertingly timely. Without sympathy or sentimentality, the pictures convey desperation, violence, and startling intimacy: a man fingering a scar on his stomach from a bullet wound suggests St. Thomas doubting himself; a one-eyed man with a six-shooter towers in a doorway like an angel of death; marijuana smoke is blown from mouth to mouth, in a gesture as tender as a kiss. *Through Jan. 14.* (Higher Pictures, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-249-6100.)

### John McLaughlin

This serene show reintroduces New York to the California painter, who died in 1976 and whose spare abstractions predate minimalism by a decade. (The first major retrospective of his work is on view now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.) In the nineteen-fifties, when the Cedar Tavern boys were making their all-over messes, McLaughlin turned to solid, orthogonal blocks of white, gray, canary yellow, and Tiffany blue, balanced so adroitly that distinctions between foreground and background become moot. Though McLaughlin’s spare compositions point to the anti-formalism to come in American painting, they have roots in his study of Japanese art, and this show provides a handsome counterpoint in two Zen landscapes on hanging scrolls, centuries-old forebears of tranquility and self-denial. *Through Jan. 7.* (Van Doren Waxter, 23 E. 73rd St. 212-445-0444.)

### “Simon Starling: At Twilight”

The British artist, the winner of the 2005 Turner Prize, is adept at staging poetic collisions across time and space, working provocatively in a zone between invention and recreation that he describes as “creative misinterpretation.” Here he revisits W. B. Yeats’s 1916 dance-play “A Hawk at the Well,” an experimental merging of two traditions: Irish folklore and Japanese Noh theatre. Starling’s deeply researched, multipart installation begins in an elegant dark room, where Noh masks are mounted on blackened branches, as if beheaded. Stylized likenesses of Winnie the Pooh’s downcast friend Eeyore, as well as of Yeats’s collaborators (the modern dancer Michio Ito, the poet Ezra Pound) accompany the striking video piece “Hawk Dance,” from 2014-2016, a solo performance choreographed by Javier de Frutos and shot on a barren black stage. Purists beware: in the subsequent, genially lit section of his exhibition, antique Noh masks and historical documents—photographs, correspondence, art works—are shown alongside Starling’s own speculative and fanciful plans. The artist’s collaged studies illuminate his associative leaps and make charming sense of Eeyore’s understated presence among modernist giants. *Through Jan. 15.* (Japan Society, 333 E. 47th St. 212-832-1155.)

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Phillip Guston

Seeing is believing the savagery and pathos with which Guston limned Richard Nixon in these drawings, from 1971 and 1975, as avatars including a stone monument, a cop, a Klansman, Fu

Manchu, an astronaut, a sodomizer, a cookie, and a trash heap, always equipped with a penile nose, testicular jowls, and stubble. Loathing and a weird compassion mobilize Guston’s graphic genius, which is part Goya and part Picasso, with just a dash of R. Crumb. A valedictory painting of the weeping ex-President, with a monstrous phlebotic leg, veers in feeling between “serves him right!” and “alas!” *Through Jan. 14.* (Hauser & Wirth, 548 W. 22nd St. 212-977-7160.)

### Rothko: Dark Palette

Mark Rothko was a great artist with highfalutin aims, which he summarized, in 1956, as “tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on.” That’s a lot to claim for fuzzy rectangles on paper or canvas. But no other painter can occasion feelings so intense so directly. His pictures are in scale with the viewer’s body, but their color and brushwork have a disembodied effect. The drama persists, though at diminished power, in this show, which is long on doom. Except for one dusky picture, from 1955, it is made up of twenty mostly very large paintings made between 1957—when Rothko abandoned the yellows, bright reds, oranges, and other high-keyed colors of his masterworks of the early fifties in favor of blacks, burgundy, deep green, and other retentive hues—and 1969, the year before his suicide, at the age of sixty-six. It’s not that the pictures bespeak depression. If anything, they seem manic, with a will to prove the conviction that Rothko had expressed in 1956: “The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.” Distressed by evidence to the contrary, he left off courting transcendence and started trying to force it. *Through Jan. 7.* (Pace, 510 W. 25th St. 212-255-4044.)

# DANCE

### New York City Ballet / “George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker”

Balanchine’s classic 1954 ballet has a bit of everything: cozy family dances, conflict, drama—enter Dewdrop with her urgent leaps—and sugarplums, too. (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Dec. 28-31.)

### Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo

This all-male troupe, founded in 1974, performs a new take on the “Pas de Six” from Bournonville’s “Napoli,” the undying slapstick of the troupe’s “Swan Lake, Act II,” and “Paquita.” (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 28-31.)

### Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre

The company’s annual holiday encampment at City Center wraps up with the final chances to see the season’s premieres: Kyle Abraham’s “Untitled America,” which wallows beautifully in the suffering caused by mass incarceration, and Hope Boykin’s “r-Evolution, Dream,” which finds inspiration in homiletic verse and in a terrific jazz score by Ali Jackson. On New Year’s Eve, a high-lights program concludes, as ever, with “Revelations.” (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 28-31.)

### Noche Flamenca

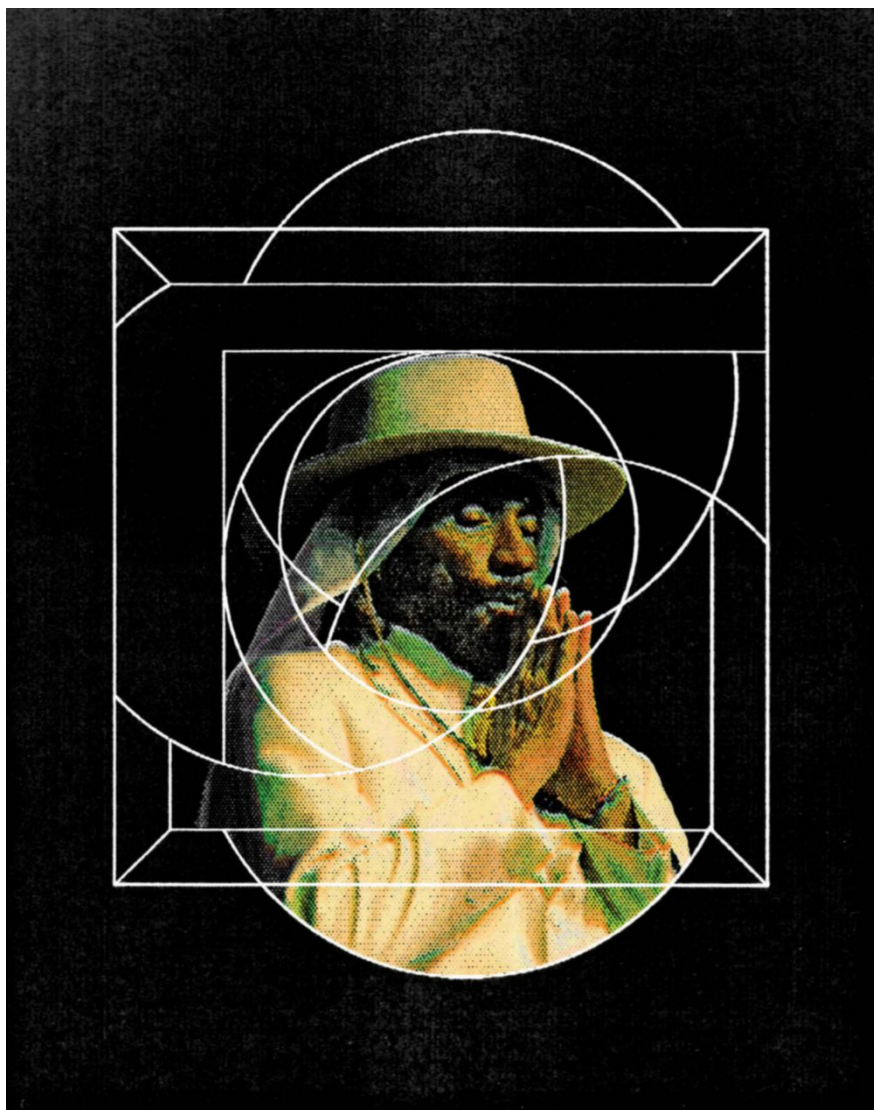
With the volcanic talent of Soledad Barrio as its core, this exceptional troupe can get away with some

average material and dubious ideas. “La Ronde” is an interlocking chain of underwhelming duets on the theme of subconscious desire. “Creación” continues the ensemble’s as-yet-unconvincing attempts to expressively juxtapose flamenco and hip-hop; it’s a duet for Barrio and the exemplary hip-hop dancer TweetBoogie which draws on the lives of these two women, mothers, and indomitable artists. (West Park Presbyterian Church, 165 W. 86th St. 212-352-3101. Dec. 28-31 and Jan. 2. *Though Jan. 7.*)

### American Dance Platform

Alicia B. Adams, the vice-president of international programming and dance at the Kennedy Center, has selected eight companies for this week-long festival, arranged in rotating double-bill programs. The series opens with Dušan Týnek’s 2010 work “Middlegame,” which turns the battle of sexes into a Central European chess match, and three pieces by Company [E], a little-known troupe from Washington, D.C. Other intriguing selections include the San Francisco-based group RAWdance’s “Double Exposure,” which was created by twelve choreographers (Ann Carlson and David Rousève among them); “Agua Furiosa,” an Afro-Cuban riff on racism, drought, and “The Tempest,” by Contra-Tiempo, from Los Angeles; and Ragamala Dance Company, an excellent Indian-American ensemble out of Minneapolis. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 3. *Through Jan. 8.*)

# NIGHT LIFE



The Bowery Electric hosts Paul (H.R.) Hudson, the front man of Bad Brains, on Dec. 29.

## Bad Mind

*Paul (H.R.) Hudson, the don of hardcore, steps up once again.*

IN A PHOTO published in 1982 by the small zine *Maniac!*, Paul Hudson, known then as H.R., stood over a pile of bricks and soil in a scraggly garden, his legs spread apart and every inch of his shirtless upper body tightly flexed. He called it his “last official punk pose,” and in the accompanying interview he explained why he was stepping away from his band, Bad Brains, changing his name to Joseph I, and starting a new, Rastafarian-influenced

reggae outfit, Zion Train. “I was desperately searching for revolution and truth and freedom. I thought I could find it in punk rock,” he said. “It took me about three years to discover that I was just beating my head against a wall.”

As teen-agers in Washington, D.C., in 1978, Hudson, his brother Earl, and his friends Gary Miller and Darryl Jenifer set out to form the fastest band in the world. Taken with the inventive fusion of Chick Corea and Stanley Clarke and the jackhammer riffs of the Sex Pistols and the Damned, the group combined jazz-like precision with rock

showmanship to help birth what became known as the hardcore genre. Hudson extolled the power of positive thoughts and minimal desires on early songs like “Attitude” and “Don’t Need It,” and his intoxicating stage presence made the message stick—he hurled himself into crowds, convulsed on stage floors, and even back-flipped on beat, all with a controlled snarl that earned him the title Throat.

While Bad Brains grew, Hudson’s mind writhed. In the new documentary “Finding Joseph I,” the director James Lathos traces the psychological issues, including rumored schizophrenia, that plagued the singer well into adulthood, ultimately sabotaging many career opportunities. As years passed, Hudson’s performances became increasingly erratic. By the mid-nineties, he had left and rejoined Bad Brains several times, often between arrests. Just a few months ago, his wife announced that he’d been diagnosed with SUNCT syndrome, a condition that causes severe migraines.

The enigmatic singer, who plays the Bowery Electric on Dec. 29, remains beguiling at sixty years old. In October, Bad Brains was nominated for inclusion in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which has scarcely acknowledged hardcore. “I never thought people cared enough to make us a Hall of Fame nominee,” Hudson remarked. But his earliest writings grow more prescient by the day: “My, my, my, how low can a punk get?” he once asked. On another cut, “You Are a Migraine,” he personified the swelling headaches that would torment him decades later. Still, it’s his snarkest screed that may have aged most richly: on “Just Another Damn Song,” a tongue-in-cheek stomp-out trimmed with cowbell, Hudson coyly pants, screams, and sighs, quipping, toward the end, “Oh, I’m getting tired.” If he’s mocking punk posturing, he sells it all the way—his agency, to this day, lies in the fact that only he knows for sure.

—Matthew Trammell



## ROCK AND POP

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

**Black Lips**

Like the Clermont Lounge Strip Club and Mr. Big Dick Walking Stick, this garage-rock four-piece has become a strange Atlanta institution, and, after nearly twenty years, the band can still shock. A day after Donald Trump was elected, the group fired out an "anarcho-style punk song," with an accompanying image of the Reichstag burning in Berlin, the 1933 incident that led to the Nazi Party seizing power in Weimar Germany. The song was one of their best in years, but there was significant backlash to the image. The group's response? "We can't do anything right, so we gave up trying to not offend everyone." Fair enough. On New Year's Eve, they hold court at this charming South Williamsburg hangout, promising a handful of special guests and an open vodka-and-rum bar from eight to ten. (*Baby's All Right*, 146 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718-599-5800. Dec. 31.)

**Guided by Voices**

When this no-frills Ohio outfit first emerged from the arty underground, with the album "Bee Thousand," in 1994, its songs, most of which barely crossed the two-minute mark, sounded like they had been scraped together with whatever happened to be nearby—tinny microphones, battle-scarred guitars, a bargain-bin four-track recorder. The group's name suggested poltergeists, yet its lyrics were yearning and human: "I am a scientist, I seek to understand me / I am an incurable and nothing else behaves like me," the vocalist Robert Pollard crooned on "I Am a Scientist." While many of the band's original members have left, it continues to record in the same way, and at a similarly feverish pace. Fans can join the group, and the avant-garde pop outfit **The Moles**, to jumpstart the New Year at Music Hall of Williamsburg. (66 N. 6th Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. Dec. 31.)

**Justice**

Many musicians, as they advance in their careers, use the knowledge they've picked up along the way to spin new kinds of gold in the studio. That's not the case for the freewheeling French house-punk duo Justice, however. The group's Xavier De Rosnay recently told *Rolling Stone* that he and his musical partner, Gaspard Augé, while gearing up to record their latest album, didn't try to apply new techniques to the electronic music they've been fine-tuning for more than a decade. In fact, they did the opposite, wholeheartedly attempting "to forget what we know, or what we think we know." Their third album, "Woman," is a patchwork of textured techno and brawny bass lines that harken back to the days when disco reigned on the dance floor. At Pier 94, they'll be d.j.'ing a pre-New Year's fête, showing fans and fellow-revellers what a good dose of unlearning can do. (711 12th Ave., at 55th St. and the West Side Highway. piers9294.com. Dec. 30.)

**Patrick Noecker**

Troost, a narrow watering hole, has upped its game in the past half-decade, and on the right night it's the best bar in Greenpoint, staffed by a cast of friendly bartenders mixing thought-

ful cocktails and pulling the area's only fast taps of prosecco, Fernet-Branca, and pre-mixed Negronis. It also has free live music nearly every weeknight. This month, the talented multi-instrumentalist Patrick Noecker (formerly of These Are Powers and Liars) is curating on Fridays, and this week he closes out the year with a performance of his solo music, joined by **Sugar Life** and **Sto Len** (of the Cinders Art Collective), with d.j. sets by **Bobbi Lupp**o and Noecker's group, **RAFT**, devoted to musicians who died in 2016. (1011 Manhattan Ave., Brooklyn. 347-889-6761. Dec. 30.)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

**The Bad Plus**

"It's Hard," the trio's most recent album, re-fashions pop material in the once-daring formula that brought the band to prominence in 2003, with the release of "These Are the Vistas." Yet this adventurous ensemble has never become formulaic; the sterling musicianship of the pianist Ethan Iverson, the bassist Reid Anderson, and the drummer David King (all of whom also contribute their own bracing original work to this show) insures vitality and relevance. (*Village Vanguard*, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Dec. 27-Jan 1.)

**Sheila Jordan and Cameron Brown**

A singer meets a bassist, and daring jazz ensues. Jordan has been turning vocal conventions on

their head since the early sixties; Brown is a veteran stylist who has honed a rare and invigorating symbiosis with his occasional duo partner. (*Cornelia Street Café*, 29 Cornelia St. 212-989-9319. Dec. 31.)

**Brian Lynch**

Woody Shaw, a formidable and inventive trumpeter who met his untimely death in 1989, was a key influence for Lynch, himself a trumpeter of scope and ambition. "Madera Latino," Lynch's surprisingly affecting tribute to Shaw, approaches his work from a Latin-jazz angle, incorporating a genre that Lynch—an integral member of Eddie Palmieri's inclusive ensembles—has long been steeped in. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Jan. 3-4.)

**Janis Siegel**

A mainstay of the popular vocal-jazz unit the Manhattan Transfer, Siegel has also maintained a solo career that places her own finely shaded singing in the spotlight. Her specialty is a repertoire that roams far and wide through jazz, pop, and Broadway ranges. (*Mezzrow*, 163 W. 10th St. mezzrow.com. Dec. 31.)

**Dr. Lonnie Smith Octet**

This eccentric keyboard wizard is indeed a Dr. Feelgood of the jazz organ, a virtuosic mix master who blends R. & B., blues, and post-bop with insouciant delight. His meaty octet utilizes guitar, percussion, and a four-piece horn section to stir up a mighty noise. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Dec. 28-Jan. 1.)

## MOVIES

## OPENING

**Paterson** Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 28. (In limited release.)

## NOW PLAYING

**Collateral Beauty**

This leaden fantasy, the latest installment in the year's dead-child movies, debases a strain of true emotion and wastes a cast of extraordinary actors. Will Smith plays Howard, a hearty, humane advertising executive who, after the death of his six-year-old daughter, rejects his friends, divorces his wife, and—apparently worst of all—neglects his business. When Howard ignores a lucrative buy-out offer, Whit (Edward Norton), his best friend and business partner, contrives to get him declared mentally incompetent, and the ploy's the thing. In his grief, Howard has been writing defiant letters to three abstractions, Time, Love, and Death; Whit hires three actors (played by Keira Knightley, Helen Mirren, and Jacob Latimore) to impersonate those abstractions and answer Howard's letters in person. Whit is, as one member of the trio says, gaslighting his best friend. The setup is ludicrously rickety, but a director with imagination and style might have kept it buoyant; this one, David Frankel, sinks it under a burden of excessive and superfluous sentiment. With Kate Winslet and Michael Peña, as executives with troubles of their own; Naomie Harris, as another bereaved

parent; and Ann Dowd, as a private eye.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

**Happy Hour**

The grand five-hour span of this melodrama by Ryusuke Hamaguchi follows four friends, thirty-seven-year-old Japanese women living in Kobe, who are planning an overnight trip to a nearby spa town. With this slender thread of action, Hamaguchi interlaces varied realms of experience, joining friendship and work to romantic love and political power. Sakurako is a stay-at-home mother married to an overworked bureaucrat. Fumi, an arts administrator, is married to an editor who's working perhaps too closely with a young woman writer. Akari, a tough-minded and plainspoken nurse, is divorced and lonely. The unemployed Jun has left her husband, and their hearing in divorce court is a brilliant set piece of emotional manipulation and confrontational agony. Hamaguchi turns the fierce poetry of their pugnacious dialogue into powerful drama that's sustained by a precise visual architecture. He tethers the teeming details of daily life to vast social structures, depicting a land where ideas and feelings are dominated by law and tradition. The movie's core is the women's struggle to forge their identities and destinies in the face of these implacable forces.—*R.B.* (*Museum of the Moving Image*; Dec. 31.)

**Hidden Figures**

A crucial episode of the nineteen-sixties, centered on both the space race and the civil-rights



struggle, comes to light in this energetic and impassioned drama. It's the story of three black women from Virginia who, soon after Sputnik shocked the world, are hired by NASA, where they do indispensable work in a segregated workplace. Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe), endowed with engineering talent, has been kept out of the profession by racial barriers; Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) heads the office of "calculators," or gifted mathematicians, but can't be promoted owing to her race; and the most gifted of calculators, Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), is recruited for the main NASA rocket-science center, where, as the only black employee, she endures relentless insults and indignities. Working with a nonfiction book by Margot Lee Shetterly, the director, Theodore Melfi (who co-wrote the script with Allison Schroeder), evokes the women's professional conflicts while filling in the vital strength of their intimate lives; the film also highlights, in illuminating detail, the baked-in assumptions of everyday racism that, regardless of changes in law, ring infuriatingly true today. With Kevin Costner, as Katherine's principled boss; Mahershala Ali, as her suitor; and Glen Powell, as John Glenn, a hero on the ground and in space.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

### I, Daniel Blake

Ken Loach's stirring and deeply empathetic drama, about the obstacles and humiliations faced by British citizens when applying for benefits, is centered on a sixty-ish carpenter, Daniel Blake (Dave Johns), in Newcastle. Unable to work because of a recent heart attack, he is nonetheless thrown back into the work force by bureaucratic fiat. An old-school craftsman who's never used a computer or written a résumé, Daniel endures the rigors and the indignities of searching for a job that, on doctors' orders, he can't accept—and when he admits as much the government pulls away his safety net. Along the way, Daniel befriends Kate (Hayley Squires), a single mother newly arrived from London, and becomes an indispensable presence for her two young children, but Kate's own troubles with the benefits office deepen grievously. A spirit of indignation and revolt energizes the drama, but Loach is so keen on engendering sympathy and inflaming political sensibilities that he leaves his working-class characters' complex humanity and discourse aside and instead spotlights his own virtuous intentions and demands. His Britain comes off as a land without populism.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

### Julieta

The latest film from Pedro Almodóvar is more temperate than what we grew accustomed to in his melodramatic prime, but it is just as sumptuous in its color scheme and no less audacious in shouldering a burden of plot beneath which other directors would sag. The source is an unlikely one: three stories by Alice Munro, which follow a single figure through motherhood and loss. Julieta—played in her youth by Adriana Ugarte and as an older woman by Emma Suárez—is a teacher of classical literature and myth. She has a child by a man whom she meets on a train (the scene is much lustier than it is on the page) and moves to be with him on the coast. But one sorrow after another intervenes, and it is only in maturity, after a chance encounter, that she starts to solve the puzzle of what feels like a broken life. Even then, the film is surprisingly open-ended; it leaves you wondering what mysterious path Almodóvar will take next. Fans will

rejoice in the return of Rossy de Palma, one of his muses, although the role she plays here—a frizzy Mrs. Danvers—may come as a shock. In Spanish.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 12/19 & 26/16.) (In limited release.)*

### La La Land

Breezy, moody, and even celestial, Damien Chazelle's new film may be just the tonic we need. The setting is Los Angeles, with excursions to Paris and Boulder City, and the time is roughly now, though the movie, like its hero, hankers warmly after more melodious times. Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) is a jazz pianist who dreams of opening a club but, in the meantime, keeps himself afloat with undignified gigs—rolling out merry tunes, say, to entertain diners at Christmas. Enter Mia (Emma Stone), an actress who, like Kathy Selden in "Singin' in the Rain," is waiting for that big break. Haltingly, they fall in love; or, rather, they rise in love, with a waltz inside a planetarium that lofts them into the air. The color scheme is hot and startling, and the songs, with music by Justin Hurwitz and lyrics by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, ferry the action along. If the singing and the dancing lack the otherworldly rigor of an old M-G-M production, that is deliberate; these lovers are much too mortal for perfection. With John Legend, as a purveyor of jazz-funk, and J. K. Simmons (who commanded Chazelle's "Whiplash"), as a withering maître d'.—*A.L. (12/12/16) (In wide release.)*

### Live by Night

Ben Affleck—as director, screenwriter, and star—revels in the juicy historical details of this Prohibition-era gangster drama (adapted from a novel by Dennis Lehane), but fails to bring it to life. He plays Joe Coughlin, a disillusioned First World War veteran and small-time Boston criminal who tries to keep apart from both the city's Irish gang, run by Albert White (Robert Glenister), and its Italian one, headed by Maso Pescatore (Remo Girone). But, after being brutally beaten for romancing Albert's mistress, Emma Gould (Sienna Miller), Joe goes to work for Maso in Tampa, taking over the rum racket and falling in love with a local crime lord, Graciella Suarez (Zoe Saldana), a dark-complexioned Cuban woman—and their affair provokes the wrath of the K.K.K. The drive for power, the craving for love, the hunger for revenge, and a rising sense of justice keep the gory and grandiose gangland action churning and furnish a hefty batch of plot twists and reversals of fortune. But Affleck's flat and flashy storytelling teasingly omits the best and the boldest behind-the-scenes machinations that Joe and his cohorts pull off, depicting instead the noisy but dull fireworks that result.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

### No Home Movie

This intensely dramatic video journal by the late director Chantal Akerman, her last film, is a ravaged vision of exile—of having no home—as well as a home movie. From a lone tree buffeted noisily by wind in a desolate field, Akerman cuts to a lush green garden—the backyard of her ailing, elderly mother's apartment, in Brussels. With a small camera cannily affixed to a tripod, Akerman films their extended discussions about family lore and history—her mother's arrival in Belgium as a Polish-Jewish refugee during the Second World War, her arrest by the S.S. and subsequent deportation to Auschwitz, and Akerman's experience of

Judaism in postwar Brussels (where she was born, in 1950). The bold videography captures moments of a flayed intimacy, as when Akerman yearningly Skypes with her mother, displays her own shadow wavering on a dark-green lake, or plunges alone through the murky darkness of an empty apartment. The dual portrait of mother and daughter, of lives unmoored, by accident or by design, bares the solitude and the mourning implicit in Akerman's do-it-yourself style.—*R.B. (Museum of the Moving Image; Jan. 1.)*

### Manchester by the Sea

Kenneth Lonergan's new film is carefully constructed, compellingly acted, and often hard to watch. The hero—if you can apply the word to someone so defiantly unheroic—is a janitor, Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck), who is summoned from Boston to the coast of Massachusetts after the death of his brother Joe (Kyle Chandler). This is the definition of a winter's tale, and the ground is frozen too hard for the body to be buried. Piece by piece, in a succession of flashbacks, the shape of Lee's past becomes apparent; he was married to Randi (Michelle Williams), who still lives locally, and something terrible tore them apart. Joe, too, had an ex-wife, now an ex-drinker (Gretchen Mol), and their teen-age son, Patrick—the most resilient character in the movie, smartly played by Lucas Hedges—is alarmed to learn that Lee is to be his legal guardian. What comes as a surprise, amid a welter of sorrow, is the harsh comedy that colors much of the dialogue, and the near-farcical frequency with which things go wrong. Far-reaching tragedy adjoins simple human error: such is the territory that Lonergan so skillfully maps out.—*A.L. (11/28/16) (In wide release.)*

### Rogue One: A Star Wars Story

The latest entry in the franchise is a pure and perfect product with all the heart and soul of a logo. It's the story of Galen Erso (Mads Mikkelsen), a scientist who's forced by the Empire to work on the Death Star, and his daughter, Jyn (Felicity Jones), who's suspected by the Rebel Alliance of sympathy for the Empire because of his work. But, after receiving her father's holographic message with insider information on how to destroy the Death Star, Jyn teams up with an international band of outsiders, including Captain Cassian Andor (Diego Luna), a blind monk and martial-arts whiz (Donnie Yen), an intrepid pilot (Riz Ahmed), and a tart-tongued robot (voiced by Alan Tudyk), to wage guerrilla war on the Empire. The action involves some serious unpleasantness—destruction, bloodshed, death—but the characters are so underconceived and the performances so constrained that none of it has any emotional impact. Even the special effects—the forte of the director, Gareth Edwards—offer few delights or thrills. The key plot point, involving the transmission of a giant data packet, seems ready-made for repackaging as a cellphone commercial. Only Greig Fraser's shadow-shrouded cinematography displays any imagination.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

### Silence

Martin Scorsese has never made a Western; his adaptation of Shusaku Endo's 1966 novel, set in the seventeenth century, is the closest thing to it. Two Portuguese priests, Sebastião Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) and Francisco Garrupe (Adam Driver), have heard rumors

that their teacher and confessor, Father Cristóvão Ferreira (Liam Neeson), a missionary in Japan, has betrayed his Christian faith, and they travel to search for him. En route, they learn of the bloody persecution that Christians face in Japan, and when they're smuggled into the country they, too, face the authorities' wrath. Rodrigues is the protagonist of this picaresque epic of oppression and martyrdom, which Scorsese ingeniously infuses with tropes from classic movies, as in the mannerisms of a good-hearted but weak-willed Christian (Yosuke Kubozuka) and a brutal but refined official (Issey Ogata), whose intricate discussions of religion and culture with Rodrigues form the movie's intellectual backbone. Many of the priests' wanderings have the underlined tone of mere exposition; but as Rodrigues closes in on Ferreira the movie morphs into a spectacularly dramatic and bitterly ironic theatre of cruelty that both exalts and questions central Christian myths. It plays like Scorsese's own searing confession.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

#### Toni Erdmann

Maren Ade's new film is a German comedy, two hours and forty minutes long, and much of it is set in Bucharest. These are unusual credentials, but the result has been received with rapture since it showed at Cannes. What it grapples with, after all, are matters of universal anxiety: the bonds, or lack of them, between parent and child, and the ways in which the modern world—in particular, the world of business—can exert a compression of the spirit. Sandra Hüller plays Ines, who works as a smoother of deals in the oil industry; her father is Winfried (Peter Simonischek), a shambling hulk who thinks that a set of false teeth is amusing, and who tracks her to Romania in a bid both to disrupt her life and, perhaps, to alleviate its ills. His method involves assuming a new identity (hence the title) and invading the space where his daughter makes her deals. We get, among other things, sexual humiliation involving petits fours, and a party that takes an unexpected turn. If the film has a fault, it lies with Ade's reliance on embarrassment as a weapon of attack. For a generation reared on "The Office," that may not be a problem. In German.—*A.L.* (In limited release.)

#### 20th Century Women

In Santa Barbara in 1979, Dorothea Fields (Annette Bening) presides, with genial tolerance, over a mixed household. She is in her mid-fifties, with a teen-age son, Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann), who is nurturing an interest in feminism, and a couple of lodgers—Abbie (Greta Gerwig), a russet-haired photographer with violent tastes in music, and the more serene William (Billy Crudup), whose talents range from meditation and effortless seduction to fixing the ceiling. Mike Mills's movie, like his earlier "Beginners" (2010), is a restless affair, skipping between characters (each of whom is given a potted biography) and conjuring the past in sequences of stills. Plenty of time is also devoted to the friendship, threatened by looming desire, between Jamie and Julie (Elle Fanning), who is older and wiser than he is, but no less confused; at one point, they take his mother's car—a VW Beetle, naturally—and elope. Amid all that, the movie belongs unarguably to Bening, and to her stirring portrayal of a woman whose ideals have taken a hit but have not collapsed, and who strives, in the doldrums of middle age, to defeat her own disappointment.—*A.L.* (12/19 & 26/16) (In limited release.)

ILLUSTRATION BY BILL BRAGG

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### OPERA

#### Metropolitan Opera

With six productions apiece under their belts, the directors David McVicar and Bartlett Sher are most responsible for the look and feel of the Peter Gelb era: their stagings are unfailingly attractive and contemporary without being modernist or obscure. Sher adds to his tally with a straightforward take on Gounod's lofty romantic "**Roméo et Juliette**," with Diana Damrau and Vittorio Grigolo (an electric combination when they were paired in Massenet's "Manon") as its ill-fated lovers; Giandrea Noseda conducts. *Dec. 31 at 6:30.* • The soprano Patricia Racette expertly characterizes the depraved Judean princess of Richard Strauss's "**Salome**" in Jürgen Flimm's production, set in a glitzy Middle Eastern palace; lacking the vocal weight typically expected in the role, Racette morphs from pouty adolescent into calculating seductress on the strength of her lyric singing. The principals include Greer Grimsley (joining the cast, as Jochanaan), Gerhard Siegel, and Nancy Fabiola Herrera; Johannes Debus. *Dec. 28 at 8. This is the final performance.* • With its whimsical menagerie of puppets and liberal sprinkling of Masonic symbols, Julie Taymor's production of Mozart's

"**The Magic Flute**" returns to the Met for a round of family-friendly performances. The abridged, English-language staging stars a talented young cast led by Christopher Maltman, Ben Bliss, and Janai Brugger (in the role of Pamina, alternating with Caitlin Lynch); Antony Walker. *Dec. 29-30 at noon and Jan. 2 at 7.* • Kaija Saariaho's "**L'Amour de Loïen**"—the first opera by a woman offered by the company in more than a century—gets a fine production from Robert Lepage, who turns the Met's stage into a dazzling carpet of colors suggesting both the Mediterranean Sea and the soft, undulating waves of Saariaho's complex and alluring music. Eric Owens, Susanna Phillips, and Tamara Mumford (in especially fine form) take the opera's three roles; Susanna Mälkki. *Dec. 29 at 7:30. This is the final performance.* • The beloved tenor Plácido Domingo continues his vocal descent into baritone territory as the king of Babylon in Verdi's "**Nabucco**," bringing natural gravitas but little bite to the fallen ruler's tragedy. The soprano Liudmyla Monastyrskya swoops and lunges through Abigail's hair-raising music in a no-holds-barred style, but pulls back for quiet moments of spellbinding intensity. Also with superb performances from Jamie Barton (Fenena), Russell Thomas (Ismaele), and Dmitry Belosselskiy (Zaccaria); James Levine emphasizes the score's



Gounod's "Faust" is gaudy fun, but "Roméo et Juliette" is his supreme achievement for the lyric stage. The Met débuts a new production, featuring Diana Damrau and Vittorio Grigolo, on Dec. 31.

beauty as well as its might, turning the famous “Va, pensiero” (sung with golden tone by the Met chorus) into the work’s centerpiece. (Note: Željko Lučić, a stylish Verdian, replaces Domingo on Dec. 30.) Dec. 30 at 8 and Jan. 3 at 7:30. (*Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.*)

**Amore Opera: “Hansel und Gretel” and “Die Fledermaus”**

Having drifted into various downtown venues since its founding, in 2009, the second incarnation of the ragtag Amato Opera christens its new home, at the former Dicapo Opera space, with a festive week of double features. A ninety-minute, English-language version of Engelbert Humperdinck’s fairy-tale opera plays in the afternoons, and Johann Strauss II’s elegant Viennese comedy plays in the evenings, as well as on New Year’s Day. Dec. 28-Jan. 1. (*Theatre at St. Jean’s, 184 E. 76th St. amoreopera.org.*)

**New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players: “The Mikado”**

This operetta contains some of the loveliest music in the entire G. & S. canon, even as its libretto delivers stinging barbs to the pretensions of the British upper classes. But its ironic setting, a topsy-turvy Japanese fantasyland hardly free of condescension, has recently made it a bitter target of activists. This new production, which blends cultural elements of Victorian England and traditional Japan, amounts to a rescue mission. Albert Bergeret

conducts. Dec. 28-31. Through Jan. 8. (*Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. nygasp.org.*)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

**New York Philharmonic**

Music of the Americana school—and the Great White Way—dominates Alan Gilbert’s New Year’s Eve program with the Philharmonic, which features works by Copland (including selections from the ballet “Rodeo”) along with jewels from the catalogues of Lerner and Loewe (from “My Fair Lady”) and Rodgers and Hammerstein (from “The Sound of Music” and “Carousel”). The mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato and the baritone Paulo Szot are the evening’s special guests. Dec. 31 at 8. • When Gilbert wants to bring some jazz into the house, he goes down the street to Jazz at Lincoln Center, where Wynton Marsalis—a good composer and a towering bandleader—holds sway. The world première of Marsalis’s “The Jungle (Symphony No. 4),” a paean to the crazy energy of Gotham, is the centerpiece of Gilbert’s year-end subscription program, which also features encore performances of William Bolcom’s Trombone Concerto and an airing of a timeless New York portrait, Copland’s “Quiet City.” The Bolcom and Copland pieces spotlight three of the orchestra’s outstanding principals: the trombonist Joseph Alessi, the trumpeter Christopher Martin,

and, in her solo début, the English hornist Grace Shyrock. Dec. 28-29 and Jan. 3 at 7:30 and Dec. 30 at 8. (*David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.*)

RECITALS

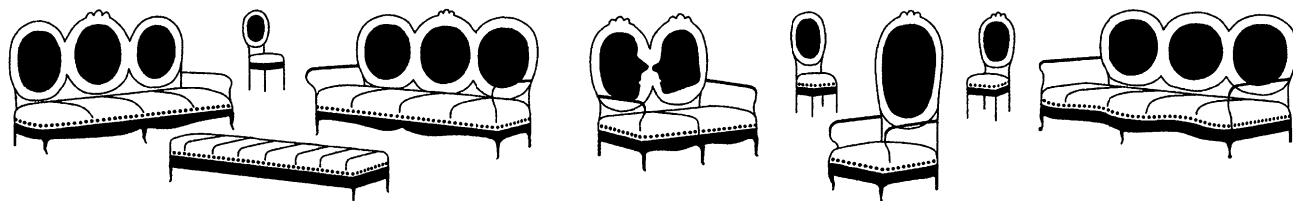
**Bargemusic**

The winter holidays at the barge are a mini Bach binge. New Year’s Eve brings the composer’s complete Sonatas for Violin and Keyboard, in the able hands of the violinist Mark Peskanov (the series’ director) and the pianist Jeffrey Swann. Dec. 31 at 7:30. (*Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. bargemusic.org.*)

**“Time’s Arrow” Festival: “A Creative Home”**

Trinity Church Wall Street’s January festival, devoted equally to music both ancient and modern, is getting an extra boost this year, with a new name and a new mission—celebrating the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the opening of St. Paul’s Chapel. The first concerts highlight vocal works by several respected young composer-performers who have worked in the church’s bustling music program for several years, including Doug Balliett, Caroline Shaw, and Caleb Burhans. The performers include the baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert, the soprano Sarah Brailey, and the pianist Timothy Long. Jan. 2 at 1 and 5. (*209 Broadway. No tickets required.*)

ABOVE & BEYOND



**Good Riddance Day**

Look around your apartment, dig through your desk, flip through your wallet—it shouldn’t take long to find a physical relic of 2016 that you’d like to leave behind. In a self-promotional public service, the information-destruction servicer Shred-It is offering New Yorkers the chance to purge their unwelcome artifacts before the ball drops, by handing them over to be permanently and securely shredded in the middle of Times Square. The remains will be recycled, unlike *año viejos*, the puppets of Latin America whose annual stuffing and burning are the inspiration for this event. (*Times Square Plaza. timessquareny.org. Dec. 28 at noon.*)

**New Year’s Eve Ride**

Most New Year traditions, whether a countdown with thousands or a kiss with one, call for a static gathering. But this annual group ride, now in its nineteenth year, invites participants to start 2017 in motion. Bikers and rollerbladers gather under the arch in Washington Square Park to ride, en masse, up through Madison Square Park and midtown, before winding up at the Belvedere Castle, in Central Park, where celebrations will commence under fireworks at the stroke of mid-

night. Time’s Up, a direct-action environmental organization, hosts the ride and welcomes festive dress, noisemakers, and party favors—those guests who skip the procession can still meet at Belvedere Castle shortly before midnight to join the outdoor dance party. (*Washington Square Park. times-up.org. Dec. 31 at 10.*)

READINGS AND TALKS

**New Year’s Day Marathon Benefit Reading**

The Poetry Project, founded in 1966 at this East Village landmark, set out to institutionalize the tradition of coffeehouse readings, which kept the neighborhood alive with ideas in the first half of the sixties. Of course, the practice extends well beyond that time and place—the project’s annual New Year’s Day marathon reading celebrates the near-infinite scope of the form. The organization invites more than a hundred and fifty artists, poets, and performers, including Grace Dunham and Penny Arcade, for its forty-third marathon reading: eleven hours, to be exact, with all proceeds going to paying writers throughout the year. (*St. Mark’s Church-In-the-Bowery, 131 E. 10th St. 212-674-6377. Jan. 1 at 3.*)

**Mid-Manhattan Library**

The town of Vlissingen, of New Netherland, would go on to become Flushing, Queens, but not before it was established with a charter granting “liberty of conscience,” the first acknowledgment of religious freedom in the American colonies. In 1657, about thirty residents of the small Dutch settlement filed a petition to Peter Stuyvesant to lift his ban on Quaker worship, resulting in the burgeoning country’s first institutional mandate of religious pluralism as law—freedom of religion was born in what would become one of the most religiously diverse neighborhoods in the country. Some four centuries later, R. Scott Hanson joined the Pluralism Project as a graduate student at Harvard University and became fascinated with the variety of faiths coexisting in Flushing, the home of the first Hindu temple in the U.S. Hanson discusses his new book, “City of Gods: Religious Freedom, Immigration and Pluralism in Flushing, Queens,” in which he examines religious diversity in the borough and across the country, from its colonial roots to the aftermath of September 11th. (*455 Fifth Ave. 212-340-0837. Dec. 27 at 6:30.*)

ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO AMARGO



# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Lenox Sapphire

341 Lenox Ave., at 127th St.  
(212-866-9700)

THERE ARE TWO reasons Phil Young is an uptown legend. First, for his work as a florist: for many years, he ran the Carolina Flower Shop, one of Harlem's oldest and most beloved stores. Second, for his drumming: in the early sixties, when Phil was in his teens, his band won a competition at the Apollo Theatre. The legendary blues and R. & B. singer Bobby (Blue) Bland happened to be there, and asked Young to tour with him in night clubs around the country. A music career drumming for the likes of George Benson and Dizzy Gillespie followed.

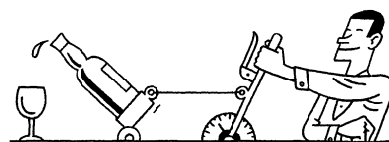
These days, Phil invites a group of his musician friends to play two sets of jazz, blues, and soul on Thursdays at Harlem's Lenox Sapphire, a Senegalese-American restaurant a few blocks from the Apollo. He calls the evening "The Gathering of the Harlem Hip." Big names like the saxophonist Patience Higgins can be found jamming with talented locals like John Felder, a golden-voiced mechanic who refers to himself as the "auto physician to the jazz community." Sometimes people just pitch up and start singing. There's no cover, the cocktails are sweet and strong, and the roiling music is even sweeter and stronger.

There's good food, too. Potent curries and stews share the menu with soul food and standard American fare like burgers and chicken soup. The African-inflected main courses are generally the best choices: for vegetarians, the Comoros Curry is flush with coconut. More filling, and perhaps more delicious, is a vegetable *maffé*, a type of West African peanut stew. For carnivores, there's also a lamb *maffé*, but first and foremost among the meat dishes are the Thiebu Djen, mildly spicy stewed fish served with a conical heap of rice and cassava, and the Thiebu Yapp (the same, with lamb).

You don't have to go to Lenox Sapphire on a Thursday to have a good time. A glass case full of pastries named after French things and people (the Louvre is an airy chocolate mousse, and the Napoleon is a pastry stuffed with vanilla cream) makes it a good place to stop for an afternoon snack. But Phil's evenings are special, full of a particular kind of magic that keeps heads bobbing late into the night. A few Thursdays ago, one of the restaurant's staff approached "Wicked" Gary Fritz, a percussionist who plays with the Hip, and asked when things were going to wind down. "Hey, man, it's only eleven-thirty," he laughed. "Last week it was well past midnight." (Entrées \$12-\$28.)

—Nicolas Niarchos

## BAR TAB



### Donna

27 Broadway, Brooklyn (646-568-6622)

This alluring corner hideaway is on Williamsburg's south side, where expensive cocktail bars have replaced the dwindling Puerto Rican neighborhood's once ubiquitous bodegas, barbershops, and social clubs. So it's fitting, if somewhat tragic, that the clientele drinking Donna's signature cocktail, a rum-heavy spin on the piña colada, are more likely to associate it with spring break than with its status as the national drink of America's largest territory. Donna's version is frozen and strong, but the clever inclusion of BrancaMenta makes it agreeably refreshing, if something entirely different from the original. Until recently, battery-powered tea lights on the tables were a quiet reference to the electrical fire, in 2013, that forced the bar to close just over a year after it opened. It was rebuilt exactly like the original, with etched glass, white-washed walls, and palm leaves, with the addition of an air-conditioner—though what good is a piña colada without some heat? One night, the bartender delivered a startling electric-blue concoction (Blue Curaçao, rum, peanut-milk syrup). It was rich and fruity, tasting just slightly of cotton candy. Better was the frozen strawberry Negroni, with puréed strawberries and orange juice that mitigated its potent bite, if only slightly. (Count Negroni would be pleased.) The Negroni could be topped with the house piña in a combination called the Milano Vice. A patron, who was sipping her third of these, wore a shirt that read "When God Created Man, She Was Only Joking." "In a quest to get over my breakup, I've been trying to drink every piña colada in New York," she said. "This is my favorite." Parting with the past is always hard, but hope of a kind is only a frozen cocktail or three away.—E. P. Licursi



What will he do?  
What won't he do?

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT  
MRS. OBAMA

“THE REASON WHY I said yes was because I am tired of being afraid,” Michelle Obama told a crowd in Council Bluffs, Iowa, during the State Fair, in August of 2007, explaining why she had signed on to a long-shot campaign to elect her husband, Barack Obama, President of the United States. She stood in a middle-school gym, surrounded by a mostly white audience that was only beginning to know her husband and had an even vaguer idea of who she was. The stage was a small, low platform, but Obama, dressed in black pants and T-shirt, with her hair pulled back in a bun, occupied it like a dancer, punctuating her seven-minute address with appealing turns and pauses, as her listeners responded. The decision to run, she said, had not been an easy one, particularly with two young daughters, and as she and her husband discussed it with others she had noticed a common theme. “They were *afraid*,” she said. There was “fear that we might lose. Fear that he might get hurt. Fear that this would be ugly. Fear that it would hurt our family.”

Nine years later, Michelle Obama ends her time as First Lady as one of the most popular political figures in recent memory. So it’s worth looking back on those fears, both to take the measure of her accomplishments and as a reminder of a certain national capacity for blindness. In a recent interview with *Vogue*, she said that, as a teen-ager on the South Side of Chicago, she had been told at school that she wasn’t “Princeton material.” During that first campaign, Obama, a graduate of Princeton and of Harvard Law, heard that she was not First Lady material. She was “angry,” “abrasive,” “nontraditional,” too big, too black, not someone Americans were “ready” for—not a lady, like Cindy McCain, the wife of her husband’s eventual Republican rival. When, in February of 2008, in a rare misstep, Obama said that her husband’s success in the early primaries had

meant that “for the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country, because it feels like hope is really making a comeback,” Mrs. McCain let it be known that she would never say such a thing. Following an event at which Michelle joked about Barack’s breakfast-making skills, Maureen Dowd wrote, in the *Times*, “Many people I talked to afterward found Michelle wondrous. But others worried that her chiding was emasculating.”

Sometimes, the message came in the form of a hint, but often it came in an outright slur. Future scholars of American conspiracy theories may be puzzled by the bizarre case of the “Whitey tape.” In the spring of 2008, there were widespread, and false, rumors of a video in which Michelle, furious (or whining, or scheming, or smug), used that word to incite a black audience and promised racial revenge. Referring to the tape, the Republican operative Roger Stone told Fox News, “I believe a network has it.” Stone later became an adviser to Donald Trump. While the birther movement, which Trump championed, painted Barack Obama as foreign, there was an effort to confine Michelle to a very American place: the ghetto.

There were echoes of that assumption even when the intent was to praise her. “Michelle Obama is by now so well assimilated that she can wear a dress and pearls that are photocopies of the clothes and jewels worn by Jackie Kennedy—and pull it off with grace and panache,” *Newsweek* observed in March, 2008, as if being a facsimile would, for someone like Obama, be the pinnacle of success. After eight years in which she has been acclaimed as an author of style, that sounds absurd.

The Kennedy name also evoked the familiar fear that “he might get hurt.” Barack Obama had to confront African-Americans’ reluctance to vote for him in the primaries out of a belief that the nomination would make him an



assassination target. (He received Secret Service protection earlier than the other candidates.) Before the South Carolina primary, Michelle was deployed, in part, to reassure black voters that it was a threat the family was ready to face. What she conveyed was that the campaign was an exercise not in potential martyrdom but in hopeful exuberance.

Her success in the White House has had as much to do with her comfort with herself as with what might be her central precept: never believe that there is a room you have no right to walk into. It's a message that she has delivered in speeches at historically black colleges and in her mentorship of girls. It has also come across in her work, with Jill Biden, to support military families. As the stages got bigger, Obama's oratory became more dominant and yet, at the same time, more intimate. In one of her enduring speeches, given at the 2012 Democratic National Convention, she revisited her fears that the Presidency would change her husband. What she had realized, she said, was that power doesn't change who you are—"it reveals who you are."

In her case, it revealed, by way of "Carpool Karaoke," what it's like to drive around with a First Lady singing "Get Ur Freak On." Her cool seems effortless, though her control of it is precise. Her iconoclasm gains strength from its fusion with irreproachability. She has been cheerfully scrupulous

about White House traditions and rituals, including such niceties as designing what will be known as the Obama China. The trim color is Kailua Blue, an homage to the waters off Honolulu, where her husband grew up. She brought out the new china for tea with Melania Trump, two days after the election. "Melania liked Mrs. O a lot!" President-elect Trump tweeted afterward. Indeed, Melania, in her Convention speech, had photocopied Michelle.

In Council Bluffs, Obama said, "I don't want my girls to live in a country, in a world based on fear." At the time, Malia was nine; Sasha was six. Obama was still imagining what the future held for her daughters, and for the daughters of all Americans, when she said, in a speech in October, that Trump's comments about women had "shaken me to my core." She became one of Hillary Clinton's most tireless advocates in the final weeks of the campaign. Given the outcome, there may be something melancholy about the echoes of the Iowa speech in the pleas she made to voters, urging them not to give in to the fears that Trump's candidacy thrived on. Perhaps they did. But no one should doubt that Michelle Obama's courage has left an indelible mark. Her time as First Lady changed this country and clarified its vision. And she has been one of the revelations.

—Amy Davidson

## RUBBERNECKING DEPT. VIGIL



**I**N 1979, DONALD TRUMP and the City of New York cut a deal. His flagship skyscraper, Trump Tower, could be fifty-eight stories tall—about twenty stories taller than would normally be allowed so close to Central Park—if parts of the lobby, balcony, and terraces were designated as "privately owned public spaces," accessible to anyone who wandered in. So now, as a daily trickle of businessmen, politicians, and celebrities pass through the marble lobby on their way upstairs, to pay homage to the President-elect, a crowd of spectators—reporters, tourists, Trump supporters, Trump opponents—is allowed to gather and enjoy the circus.

On a recent Wednesday morning, about two dozen members of the press clustered behind a velvet rope, pointing their cameras at a bank of four gold-plated elevators. "The tourists are out early today," one reporter said. She gestured across the lobby, where three dozen visitors were cordoned off behind an-

other velvet rope, next to an Ivanka Trump jewelry boutique.

"I feel bad for them," another reporter said. "They're on vacation in New York—they could be doing anything! It's, like, 'Well, kids, we were going to go to the Met today, but instead we're gonna stand in a lobby and try to take pictures of some senators.'"

"They think it's going to be like yesterday," Tamara Gitt, a Fox News producer, said. The previous day, the guest list had included Bill Gates, who talked to Trump about "innovation"; two retired football players, Jim Brown and Ray Lewis, who talked to Trump about "urban development"; and Kanye West, who talked to Trump about "life" and "multicultural issues." After West's meeting, Trump had come down to the lobby with him and addressed the reporters. Gitt said, "I'm here every day, and, trust me, most days are not like yesterday. I think people are gonna be disappointed."

On a balcony overlooking the lobby, a Starbucks played smooth jazz. On the lower level, where Trump announced his campaign for President, last June, was a Trump Store (for sale: Trump ties, Trump money clips, Trump colognes, called Empire and Success), the Trump Grill (the taco bowl costs eighteen dollars), and Trump's Ice Cream Parlor. "Would you

guys judge me if I got some ice cream right now?" a field producer named Marcus DiPaola asked. It was 8:30 A.M. "I've been doing a lot of stress eating." As he walked past, his friends in the press pool pelted him with mock questions: "Sir! Who are you here to meet with today, sir?" DiPaola stepped into an elevator, smiled wanly, and gave them the finger as the doors closed.

The Trump Bar opened at noon, and one of the first customers was the street performer known as the Naked Cowboy. His normal turf is Times Square, but he's been spending a lot of time at Trump Tower. He ordered—"Vodka with a splash of orange juice"—and took a corner stool. Over his shoulder were a TV and a magnum of Trump Champagne. He wore his signature getup—cowboy boots, cowboy hat, and Fruit of the Loom briefs with "TRUMP" on the rear—plus a silk boxer's robe decorated with the Stars and Stripes. "I wear it while I'm indoors, out of respect," he said. "I have an affinity with Trump. I get him. We're both media promoters, media whores, whatever you want to call it. People get hung up on political stuff, but I don't care. Black, white, gay, transvestite—just stand up and make something of yourself. Look, my wife's a Mexican immigrant. She still doesn't have her



papers. Maybe she'll be the next to be deported, who knows? I don't think he'd do that. But if he does, hey, that's fate. Plus, it's a nice thing to have hanging over her head—you know, 'Do the dishes, or else.'"

The big event of the day, scheduled for 2 P.M., was a "tech summit" with executives from I.B.M., Amazon, Facebook, and about ten other companies. Elon Musk, the C.E.O. of Tesla, dashed into an elevator before photographers could get a clear shot of him. Tim Cook, the C.E.O. of Apple, used a private entrance. Executives from Twitter weren't invited, a Trump spokesman told the press, because "the conference table was only so big."

The reporters began to pack up for the day, and the Secret Service cleared the lobby for a Trump Organization Christmas party. Among the refreshments was a spread of sushi with miniature American flags stuck in the crushed ice. Faith Kemp and Donna Roan, sisters-in-law from Virginia, lingered in the tourist area. "Seems like everyone's waiting for nothing at all," Roan said.

"You know how Americans are—we see a line and get in it," Kemp said.

"Tell you what, we're not seeing Trump or Kanye today," Roan said.

"I don't know, I like the energy, the possibility," Kemp said. "I think this is my favorite thing we've done in the city so far."

—Andrew Marantz

## RECYCLING REPORT LUXURY ELVES



AS SNOW SETTLED on the silent New York Stock Exchange one recent Sunday, a nearby boutique was abuzz with activity. Inside the Hermès store, Pascale Mussard, the fifty-nine-year-old great-great-great-granddaughter of the saddle-maker Thierry Hermès, presided over the petit h Holiday Factory, where fans of the brand toiled at craft tables, in the presence of hundred-thousand-dollar handbags. Mussard, an impish woman in lime-green cashmere and an orange

smock, looked on as customers took scraps of "ex-scarves," as she called them, backed with silver and gold foil, and cut and bent them into angel-shaped holiday ornaments with felt-ball heads, which they could then take home free of charge.

"The leftover of any product of Hermès has in itself a quality that you must look at and try to find a use for," Mussard said, as she fondled a silk square. Mussard's nickname, growing up, was the Little Hoarder. Roving around the company's workshops, she collected re-



jects (dinged pocketbooks, scarves with a snagged string) and other detritus. "At one point, I had it everywhere—at home, in my car," she recalled. "I prefer to say 'sleeping material' rather than 'discarded.'"

In 2010, she created petit h, which now has an atelier in Pantin, France—Hermès headquarters—where the company's artisans can comb through Mussard's trash trove and, somewhat scandalously in the world of luxury goods, turn the scraps into whimsical *objets*. For instance, leather bits previously destined for the garbage become pinwheels (\$335) or a forty-three-thousand-dollar bear; swatches of cast-off scarves can be sewn into a shopping tote (\$550); and crystal shards can dangle from an eight-thousand-dollar mobile. Mussard smiled affectionately at her diligent elves, and left to catch a plane home to Belgium.

Meanwhile, a customer named Jill Cannon sat down at a craft table with her seven-year-old daughter, Nyla, whom she "unschools" at home. "We live in the neighborhood," Cannon said. "My daughter wants to be a fashion designer. She's the one who's, like, 'We need to go to Hermès! I want to go to DVF!'" In a

stage whisper, Cannon added, "I can't go shopping here, let's put it that way."

Nyla, wearing a fuzzy vest, pom-pommed hat, and hot-pink zebra-print glasses, showed off one of her angels, which she'd topped with a crown. "I'm going to look at the ornaments again," she said, heading over to a display of little leather sleighs and silk Christmas trees (price range: \$100-\$670). She yelled, "Mommy, I found one that will cost a lot."

Her mother was talking to a craft instructor about the distinction between homeschooling and unschooling. "A lot of homeschooling is very structured, with a curriculum," Cannon said. "Unschooling is child-led. I'm her facilitator. I want Nyla to be exposed to everything."

Another shopper, a financial analyst named Cathie Yiu, buckled her son into his stroller with an iPhone game and began flipping through scarf scraps (those with the Hermès logo were coveted). She said, "I like their creativity. Recycle—that's a big thing!"

Livia Cheung, a woman in fur and Van Cleef & Arpels jewels, carrying a green crocodile Birkin bag, breezed in with her husband and three-and-a-half-year-old son in tow, and got down to business. "They don't have the petit h in the States regularly," she explained. "They have a shop in Paris," on the Rue de Sèvres. "I've been. It's amazing. I have a few charms. Just a mix of little pieces here and there."

Did that make her a big Hermès fan? "Everyone who buys Hermès is a big fan," she said. "I have more than ten bags." Her first was a white Birkin. "People say you don't buy white; you *totally* buy white." She selected an Hermès-orange felt head for her angel, not noticing its resemblance to the President-elect. "It'll make it pop."

Angela Hart and a friend, visiting from San Francisco "on a little girls' shopping weekend," dropped in to buy a handbag.

"Hermès Christmas tree—that's what I want. That's my goal in life," Hart said.

"There was a woman who had an assembly line going yesterday," said Jim Noonan, a former crafter for Martha Stewart, who had been hired by Hermès for the holidays. "Her husband was tracing shapes, she was cutting them out, and I was putting them together. And she told me she was 'doing an Hermès

tree,' and I was, like, Oh, that's cute. And then I realized, Oh, I'm doing an Her-mès tree for her."

"Uh-oh," Nyla's mom, Jill Cannon, said to Hart, with a nod toward Nyla, who was bouncing up and down. "She sees your Chanel bag. She's going crazy."

Hart bent down and told Nyla, "Oh, you need one for Christmas!"

—Emma Allen

## BROTHERHOOD OF MAN DEPT. FIRST-TIME CALLER



IN LATE AUGUST, just as Donald Trump was making his improbable pitch to black voters ("What the hell do you have to lose?"), an unusual and tender video began to make the viral rounds. It showed Heather McGhee, the president of the progressive think tank Demos, responding to a caller on C-SPAN's "Washington Journal." McGhee is black. The caller was white, and, he said, prejudiced against black people, because of things he'd seen in the news. But he didn't want to be. "What can I do to change?" he asked plaintively. "You know, to be a better Amer-

ican?" McGhee, moved, offered some advice: get to know black people, read up on black history, stop watching the nightly news. Eight million people viewed the video, leaving comments like "Hear, hear, hear every sweet, nourishing drop of that!"

Not long ago, the caller, a fifty-eight-year-old disabled Navy veteran named Garry Civitello, flew to Washington, D.C., from his home in Fletcher, North Carolina, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, to spend a little time with McGhee.

Since their on-air exchange, McGhee has spoken frequently about "Garry from North Carolina," presenting him as a counter-Trumpian symbol of decency, hope, and racial reconciliation. The two have developed, they say, a genuine relationship. Civitello joined Twitter to establish contact with McGhee. They have talked on the phone about a dozen times. Civitello describes his prejudices, and McGhee suggests ways to transcend them, talking to him, he says, "the way a doctor would talk to a patient." They've covered personal matters, too: McGhee, who is thirty-six, got married last fall; Civitello lives alone with a parti-colored border collie named WoWo.

In Washington, they met for a drink at the Willard InterContinental hotel, a block from the White House. They sat

on a red love seat, next to a busy staircase festooned with tinsel.

"I've been reading a lot," Civitello said. He wore khaki pants and sneakers, and spoke with an easygoing drawl. Shortly after calling C-SPAN, Civitello went to a used-book store. "So I go to the girl at the cash register—a little hippie girl in Asheville," he said. "I'd found a couple of these black-studies books, and I go, 'I'm practicing to not be prejudiced!' And she's on the register, like"—he softened his voice—"Well, that's a good thing." He bought an 1843 account of the African slave trade; the autobiography of the civil-rights leader J. L. Chestnut, Jr.; "The Complete Idiot's Guide to African American History"; and three books by Cornel West, whose work he now adores. A week before the election, McGhee visited Civitello in North Carolina and brought him two more books.

"It was 'Just Mercy,' by Bryan Stevenson," McGhee said. "And also 'The New Jim Crow,'" Michelle Alexander's book about mass incarceration.

Civitello's reading, he says, has transformed him. "My fears, my anxieties—those still linger. But I'm starting to see root causes. I was assuming people were being lazy. Or they didn't care. They were being irresponsible in society. Now I'm finding out, no, they can't get loans in banks—they have to use pawnshops. And I inherited a house!"

McGhee touched his arm. "Garry, I'm so proud."

Civitello has employed a number of methods to realign his thinking. He avoids TV shows that focus on inner-city crime or traffic in minority stereotypes, like "The Real Housewives of Atlanta." ("It doesn't portray black women very well at all.") He has begun taking iPhone photos of the many Confederate flags that fly near his home town. ("I wasn't paying attention to it before.") And he has a system to transform his social interactions. Using a scale of one to ten—one being awful, ten being great—he grades his expectation of how friendly a black person will be toward him. Then he grades the reality. His main laboratory is the V.A. hospital in Asheville.

"At first, I was giving people threes," he said.

"These are your prejudgments of them," McGhee said.



KUPER

*"Look—we'll whistle when it's fifteen dollars an hour."*



“Right. My prejudices. Then I have a little conversation with them, like, ‘Wow, the traffic really got bad out this way,’ and they’ll say, ‘Yeah, it really did. How long you been living here?’ All of a sudden, I’m having a laugh with them, and I’m giving them eights and nines!”

“This was not a system I recommended,” McGhee said. “This is Garry’s invention.”

In the lobby above them, a group of carollers from a local girls’ school began to sing. McGhee mentioned that Martin Luther King, Jr., finished writing his “I Have a Dream” speech at the hotel.

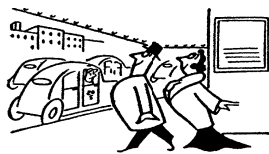
“I read that,” Civitello said. “He finished it, then he walked over to the Lincoln Memorial. He could have sat somewhere around here, man. He could have come down these steps. Who knows? It’s really a privilege to be here. I thank you, Heather.”

“Absolutely, Garry,” she said.

They walked upstairs to listen to the singing.

—Daniel Smith

## FROM THE VAULT WHAT SHE SAID



RUTH DRAPER WAS born in New York in 1884. When she was very young, she entertained her siblings by sitting on a window seat in the nursery of her family’s brownstone, on East Forty-seventh Street, and imitating grownups they knew, among them the tailor who made their clothes. By the time she was in her mid-thirties, she was performing, alone, on stages all over the world. She wrote all her own material. She abhorred publicity and gave virtually no interviews until the end of her life, when a new manager insisted, yet she filled theatres, often for long runs, on Broadway, in the West End, and elsewhere. Uta Hagen went to see her sixty times. The English critic Bernard Levin wrote that she induced “real hallucination” in her audiences, making them see characters who weren’t there. Alexander Fleming was so taken with one of her performances, in London in 1946, that

he gave her a specimen of his original penicillin culture.

Draper died in 1956. During recording sessions a couple of years before, she made audiotapes of a number of her monologues for RCA—the principal surviving samples of her art. That the recordings are available today is owing largely to the determination of Susan Mulcahy, a writer and editor (and a former editor of the *Post’s* Page Six), who came across them in the late eighties, and released two compilations on CD. She is now working on a biography of Draper. “Even young people know who Sarah Bernhardt was, or, at least, they associate her name with high drama,” Mulcahy said recently. “But if you’ve ever seen Bernhardt’s old film clips or heard her audio recordings—they’re all laughable.” Most of Draper’s performances, in contrast, are difficult to place in time, even though much of the material is a century old. Some of her characters are clearly of their era, including the wealthy Manhattan matron in her piece “The Italian Lesson,” but the writing, the acting, and especially the sense of humor are remarkably timeless. Mike Nichols used to tell the actors he directed to study everything about her.

On a recent Wednesday morning, Mulcahy visited the New-York Historical Society, where many of Draper’s papers are stored. She opened a box containing a dozen or so small appointment books, from the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties, and found a copy of an 1880 Baedeker guide to Italy, bound in soft red leather—one of the few props that Draper used. “It was for a piece called ‘In a Church in Italy,’ which she first performed in 1925,” Mulcahy explained. She opened the book to an insert, which Draper had typed on the back of a page from the program for a Lillian Hellman play. “It’s one of the few times she had anything like a script,” Mulcahy continued. “She kept all her monologues in her head.”

“In a Church in Italy” lasts about twenty-five minutes and consists of five sketches—two in Italian, one in German, and two in English. (Draper also sometimes performed in French and in made-up versions of several other languages, among them Swedish, Ar-

abic, and “Slavic.”) In the final sketch, an American woman reads, and comments on, selections from the Baedeker to a group of fellow-tourists. The Baedeker says that the church in question was built around 1436, on the site of a ninth-century Romanesque church destroyed by fire. “But I would rather have seen the old church,” the woman tells her companions. “I like the old things best.”

Over lunch, a little later, Mulcahy



Ruth Draper

took out her phone and played one of her favorite discoveries so far: a brief interview with Draper on a BBC program about Henry James, whom she had known. (James’s father was a friend of Draper’s grandfather, and James once wrote a stilted, highly Jamesian monologue for her, which she never performed.) Draper recounts a walk she took with James at a house party, also attended by Edith Wharton, shortly before he died. She describes his “rather ponderous manner of speaking” and various odd motions he made with his right hand as he spoke—exactly the sort of close observations, Mulcahy said, that underlay all her performances. Draper, in the interview, then says that she had once asked James whether he thought she ought to pursue a career as a conventional actress, perhaps by attending drama school. “He took a long while to answer,” she recalls. Then she lowers her voice: “‘No—my dear child. You—you have woven—you have woven your own—you have woven your own beautiful—beautiful little—Persian carpet. *Stand on it.*’”

—David Owen

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

# BEFORE THE FLOOD

*A failing dam threatens millions of Iraqis.*

BY DEXTER FILKINS

ON THE MORNING of August 7, 2014, a team of fighters from the Islamic State, riding in pickup trucks and purloined American Humvees, swept out of the Iraqi village of Wana and headed for the Mosul Dam. Two months earlier, ISIS had captured Mosul, a city of nearly two million people, as part of a ruthless campaign to build a new ca-

Tigris, rising three hundred and seventy feet from the riverbed and extending nearly two miles from embankment to embankment. Behind it, a reservoir eight miles long holds eleven billion cubic metres of water.

A group of Kurdish soldiers was stationed at the dam, and the ISIS fighters bombarded them from a distance and

Biden telephoned Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdish region, and urged him to retake the dam as quickly as possible. American officials feared that ISIS might try to blow it up, engulfing Mosul and a string of cities all the way to Baghdad in a colossal wave. Ten days later, after an intense struggle, Kurdish forces pushed out the ISIS fighters and took control of the dam.

But, in the months that followed, American officials inspected the dam and became concerned that it was on the brink of collapse. The problem wasn't structural: the dam had been built to survive an aerial bombardment. (In fact, during the Gulf War, American jets bombed its generator, but the dam remained intact.) The problem, according



*According to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers assessment, "Mosul Dam is the most dangerous dam in the world."*

liphate in the Middle East. For an occupying force, the dam, twenty-five miles north of Mosul, was an appealing target: it regulates the flow of water to the city, and to millions of Iraqis who live along the Tigris. As the ISIS invaders approached, they could make out the dam's four towers, standing over a wide, squat structure that looks like a brutalist mausoleum. Getting closer, they saw a retaining wall that spans the

then moved in. When the battle was over, the area was nearly empty; most of the Iraqis who worked at the dam, a crew of nearly fifteen hundred, had fled. The fighters began to loot and destroy equipment. An ISIS propaganda video posted online shows a fighter carrying a flag across, and a man's voice says, "The banner of unification flutters above the dam."

The next day, Vice-President Joe

to Azzam Alwash, an Iraqi-American civil engineer who has served as an adviser on the dam, is that "it's just in the wrong place." Completed in 1984, the dam sits on a foundation of soluble rock. To keep it stable, hundreds of employees have to work around the clock, pumping a cement mixture into the earth below. Without continuous maintenance, the rock beneath would wash away, causing the dam to sink and then break apart.



But Iraq's recent history has not been conducive to that kind of vigilance.

In October, Iraqi forces, backed by the United States, launched a sprawling military operation to retake Mosul, the largest city under ISIS control. The battle has sometimes been ferocious, with Iraqi soldiers facing suicide bombers, bombardments of chlorine gas, and legions of entrenched fighters. Although some Iraqi leaders predicted a quick success, it appears that the campaign to expel ISIS will be grinding and slow. And yet the biggest threat facing the people of northern Iraq may have nothing to do with who controls the streets.

In February, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad issued a warning of the consequences of a breach in the dam. For a statement written by diplomats, it is extraordinarily blunt. "Mosul Dam faces a serious and unprecedented risk of catastrophic failure with little warning," it said. Soon afterward, the United Nations released its own warning, predicting that "hundreds of thousands of people could be killed" if the dam failed. Iraq's leaders, apparently fearful of public reaction, have refused to acknowledge the extent of the danger. But Alwash told me that nearly everyone outside the Iraqi government who has examined the dam believes that time is running out: in the spring, snowmelt flows into the Tigris, putting immense pressure on the retaining wall.

If the dam ruptured, it would likely cause a catastrophe of Biblical proportions, loosing a wave as high as a hundred feet that would roll down the Tigris, swallowing everything in its path for more than a hundred miles. Large parts of Mosul would be submerged in less than three hours. Along the riverbanks, towns and cities containing the heart of Iraq's population would be flooded; in four days, a wave as high as sixteen feet would crash into Baghdad, a city of six million people. "If there is a breach in the dam, there will be no warning," Alwash said. "It's a nuclear bomb with an unpredictable fuse."

SINCE CIVILIZATION DAWNED in the Middle East, five and a half thousand years ago, the region's politics and economy have centered on its two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The rivers, which enter Iraq from the

north and converge two hundred and fifty miles south of Baghdad, form an extraordinarily fertile valley in an otherwise dry part of the world. For centuries, populations flourished by tilling the rich alluvial soil left behind each spring by floodwaters receding from the plains between Baghdad and the Persian Gulf. But the rivers also wreaked havoc, delivering too much water or not enough, and the settlements on their banks lurched between periods of drought and flood.

In the nineteen-fifties, governments in the region moved to assert greater control over the rivers with aggressive programs of dam construction. Dams regularize the flow of water, discourage floods, and, by storing water in reservoirs, minimize the impact of droughts. They also give whoever controls them power over the flow of water downstream, rendering other countries vulnerable.

In 1975, when both Syria and Turkey were completing dams on the Euphrates, and the reservoirs behind them began to fill, the river downstream dried up, forcing tens of thousands of Iraqi farmers to abandon their land. "You could walk across the Euphrates, it was so dry," an Iraqi engineer who worked on the Mosul Dam told me. The same year, Turkey began surveying sites for another dam, just north of the border it shares with Iraq, on the Tigris River. Iraqi officials feared that, during the months or years when the new dam's reservoir was being filled, many thousands of acres of farmland would have to be abandoned.

At the time, Saddam Hussein's government was launching a hugely ambitious program of infrastructure development. The regime was awash in money; a previous government had nationalized the oil industry and renegotiated its relationships to the Western companies that had once controlled it. Saddam decided to build dams on both the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Western specialists began making surveys to find the most favorable site, but few places had the right topography for a reservoir: low-lying land, preferably surrounded by mountains. The geology presented even greater problems. Water in dam reservoirs creates tremendous pressure, and only solid rock can stop it from leaking underneath the

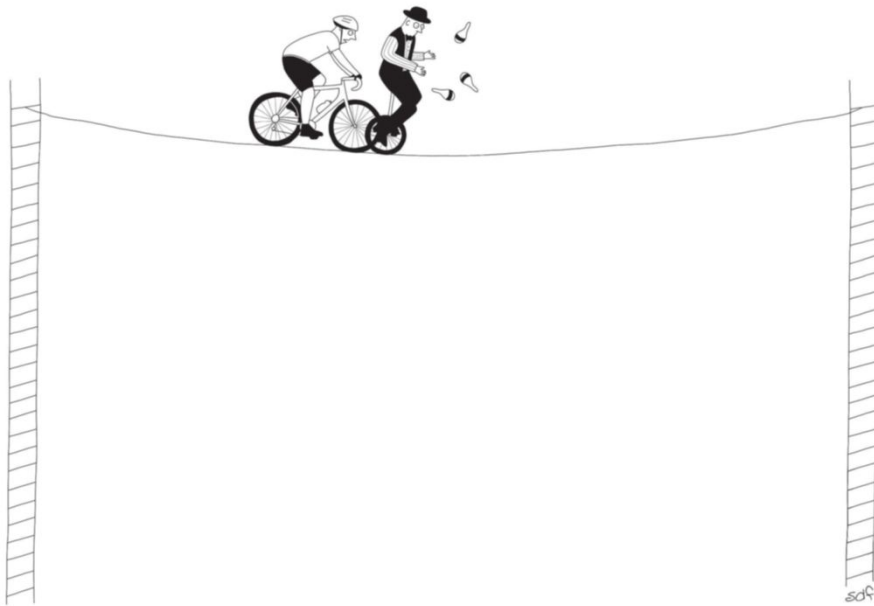
dam. The surveys revealed a multilayer foundation of anhydrite, marl, and limestone, all interspersed with gypsum—which dissolves in contact with water. Dams built on this kind of rock are subject to a phenomenon called karstification, in which the foundation becomes shot through with voids and vacuums. According to former Iraqi officials who worked on the project, successive teams of geologists reached the same conclusion: no matter where they looked, the prevalence of gypsum would make maintaining a dam difficult.

The government settled on a site north of Mosul, which had the largest potential reservoir of any of the locations the geologists had scouted. "The engineers wanted to show Saddam that they could build something huge," an Iraqi official who had worked on the dam told me. The location also offered the opportunity to open up tens of thousands of acres north of the dam to irrigation and agriculture, in a series of projects the government called al-Jazeera, or "the peninsula."

In 1981, Saddam ordered the construction to begin—urged on, according to another former senior Iraqi official, by the military situation. (The official, who lives in Baghdad, spoke to me on condition of anonymity, fearing that he would lose his pension if he spoke out.) A year before, Saddam had launched a huge invasion of Iran, hoping to seize its oilfields and possibly to overthrow its government. But the Iranians pushed back, and the war became a bloody stalemate, with fighting concentrated along the border, near the southern city of Basra.

As the Iraqi soldiers dug in, they were vulnerable to the fluctuations of the Tigris. In 1954 and again in 1969, floods had swept through the south of Iraq, separating Basra from the rest of the country. "Historically, when there is above-average flooding on the Tigris, southern Iraq becomes one large lake," the retired official told me. Iraq's leaders feared that they were due for another flood, which would strand the Army. "It was of the utmost importance to begin construction of the dam as quickly as possible," the official said.

The decision to build the dam started a decades-long argument over who is responsible for the looming



*“On your left.”*

disaster. Nasrat Adamo, a former senior official at the Iraqi Ministry of Irrigation, told me that a consortium of Swiss firms hired to oversee the process assured government officials that the gypsum problem could be managed. “We listened to the top experts,” he said. “Everybody agreed that this would not be too serious.” Adamo remains bitter. “The Iraqi government—in a way, I think they were cheated,” he told me. But other people who were involved in building the dam argued that the Iraqis should have been more cautious: the Swiss explained clearly that the site was problematic, and geologists working in the area had raised concerns for decades. They also noted that Soviet and French companies bidding on the project had asked for further surveys and been told that there wasn’t time. Iraqi officials were terrified of disappointing Saddam. Adamo told me that the Minister of Irrigation feared for his life: “If the dam failed, he would be hanged.”

The dam was built in three years, largely by workers from China. Today, a stone memorial on top of the dam commemorates nineteen Chinese nationals who died during its construction; the memorial, inscribed in English and Chinese but not in Arabic, does not give the cause of their deaths. Alwash, the Iraqi-American hydrolog-

ical engineer, told me that, in Iraq, when laborers fell into wet cement during large infrastructure projects, it was common for the work to carry on. “When you’re laying that much cement on a dam, you can’t stop,” Alwash said. In 1985, the reservoir filled up, and the structure—named the Saddam Dam—began holding back the Tigris.

**S**HORTLY AFTER THE dam went into use, Nadhir al-Ansari, a consulting engineer, made an inspection for the Ministry of Water Resources. “I was shocked,” he told me. Sinkholes were forming around the dam, and pools of water had begun bubbling up on the banks downstream. “You could see the cracks, you could see the fractures underground,” Ansari said. The water travelling around the dam, known as “seepage,” is normal in limited amounts, but the gypsum makes it potentially catastrophic. “When I took my report back to Baghdad, the chief engineer was furious—he was more than furious. But it was too late. The dam was already finished.”

To control the erosion, the government began a crash program of filling the voids with cement, a process called “grouting.” Meanwhile, Iraqi officials rushed to build a second dam, near a town called Badush, which could help prevent flooding in case the Mosul

Dam collapsed. By 1990, just six years later, the new dam was forty per cent complete. Then Saddam sent his Army into Kuwait, sparking the Gulf War, and he ordered all the earthmoving equipment stripped from the Badush site and sent to the front lines. When the United States and its allies arrived to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait, they bombed all the equipment. After the war, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Association discovered stockpiles of nuclear materials near Badush, apparently part of Saddam’s secret weapons program. The U.N. imposed economic sanctions on Iraq, impoverishing the country for a decade. Work on Badush never resumed. “Nobody wanted to go anywhere near the place,” Adamo told me. “This is the story of Iraq.”

When the Americans invaded in 2003, they discovered a country shattered by sanctions. Power plants flickered, irrigation canals were clogged, bridges and roads were crumbling; much of the infrastructure, it seemed, had been improvised. The U.S. government poured billions of dollars into rebuilding it, and in 2006 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began several assessments of the Mosul Dam. The first report was dire, predicting “mass civilian fatalities” if it failed. “In terms of internal erosion potential of the foundation, Mosul Dam is the most dangerous dam in the world,” it said.

Iraqi officials were publicly skeptical, but, under pressure from the Americans, they agreed to lower the maximum depth of the reservoir by about thirty feet, to take pressure off the dam wall. At the same time, American officials also began urging Iraq to modernize the equipment used to reinforce the foundation. In 2011, the Iraqi government chose an Italian engineering company, Trevi S.p.A., to begin a restoration, but the discussions broke down. A spokesman for Trevi told me he didn’t know why. A senior American official who has spent years working in Iraq confided that the deal may have stalled after Trevi refused an Iraqi demand for a kickback. “It was too big for the Italians to make,” the official told me.

In November, 2015, Mohsen al-Shammari, then the Minister for Water



Resources, told reporters that there was no chance that the dam would collapse: “Whoever is saying it’s about to collapse is only talking.” Shammari is a follower of Moqtada al-Sadr, the fiery cleric whose soldiers fought the United States during the occupation. Sadr’s followers refuse to meet with American officials, and so, until a new water minister, Hassan al-Janabi, took office earlier this year, no Iraqi minister responsible for the Mosul Dam had spoken to an American official in five years. Even Janabi, who American officials say is fully aware of the problems at the dam, dodged the issue when I asked about it this summer. “I have not inspected the dam personally, so I cannot say for sure if there are any problems there,” he said. “Call me after I have gone there and inspected it.”

In private, some Iraqis pose conspiracy theories. “I know a lot of Iraqis who think this is just a big psyops operation by the U.S. government—senior officials, not just Iraqis on the street,” a former American official told me. Part of the problem, he argued, is a tradition of inertia, begun during Saddam’s dictatorship, in which officials live in fear of being penalized for taking initiative. “Iraqis will ignore the problem until the day the dam collapses,” he told me. “I’ve seen it over and over and over again. If the boss says there’s no problem, then there is no problem. And the day there *is* a problem, it’s, like, ‘Help!’”

Riyadh al-Naemi, the dam’s director, looks like a holdover from the Baathist era. He wears a stout mustache, talks like a technocrat, and starts answering a visitor’s questions before he’s finished asking. Naemi has spent his career at the Mosul Dam; he was a young engineering graduate when it opened, and he remembers the day Saddam paid a visit, shortly after the Iran-Iraq War ended. Naemi has heard all the predictions of the dam’s imminent demise. “Sure, we have problems,” he says. “But the Americans are exaggerating. This dam is not going to collapse. Everything is going to be fine.”

Naemi told me that some American officials had come to him earlier this year to warn that the dam was going to break, and confronted him with satellite photos that showed water

from the reservoir seeping through the sides of the dam. “I told them it was not important,” he said. “I explained to them that there was no problem—and they agreed with me.” The senior American official, frustrated at the years of inaction, told me that the Americans were not persuaded by Naemi: “He is not going to tell us the sky is falling. We shared the data that showed the risks of the dam, and it’s terrifying.”

The potential disaster has presented American officials with a public-relations quandary: the people they are trying to help won’t publicly concede that there’s a problem. In response, U.S. officials have gone silent. It took me more than a hundred phone calls, e-mails, and visits before a single American official was granted permission to speak to me on the record; even then, three other State Department officials listened in on the conversation. “We don’t want to publicly embarrass the Iraqis,” the senior American official told me.

**A** WALK AROUND THE Mosul Dam gives you a sense of its scale and its problems. Four massive towers, part of the hydroelectric system, mark the western end. To the north is the reservoir, a deep-blue pool reaching to the gorge’s walls, miles away; to the south,

the Tigris continues its long meander to the Persian Gulf. Along the edges of the dam, little springs spurt from the ground. Here and there are gauges and cameras, part of a system that collects real-time information—water pressure, temperature, chemistry—that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers monitors around the clock.

At the bottom of the wall, where the Tigris gushes out, are two control gates, which allow water to be drained from the reservoir quickly, in case heavy rainfall or snowmelt builds up pressure on the dam wall. When I visited, in September, one of the gates was broken: stuck shut. The controllers have resorted to the working gate at least four times since ISIS was driven away from the dam. The final safety valve is a spillway—three hundred feet wide, half a mile long—that the dam’s controllers can throw open to prevent an imminent breach.

The work of maintaining the dam is performed in the “gallery,” a tunnel that runs inside the base, four hundred feet below the top. To get there, you enter through a portal near the river’s edge and walk down a sloping corridor into the center of the dam. The interior is cool and wet and dark. It feels like a mine shaft, deep under the earth. You can sense the water from



*“At this stage of your life, you need a hobby—one that will produce income.”*

the reservoir pressing against the walls.

Inside the gallery, the engineers are engaged in what amounts to an endless struggle against nature. Using antiquated pumps as large as truck engines, they drive enormous quantities of liquid cement into the earth. Since the dam opened, in 1984, engineers working in the gallery have pumped close to a hundred thousand tons of grout—an average of ten tons a day—into the voids below.

Up close, the work is wet, improvisatory, and deeply inexact. Gauges line the walls of the gallery, programmed to detect changes in pressure; water seeps through cracks in the floor. Ordinarily, the pressure is much higher on the upstream side—because the water is pressing against the dam wall. If the pressure readings on the two sides of the gallery begin to converge, water is probably passing underneath. “That means there’s a leak,” Hussein al-Jabouri, the deputy director of the dam, said, waving at a gauge.

Like his boss, Jabouri has worked at the dam since he was a young engineering graduate. Now, he told me, he is as sensitive to the dam’s changes as the electronic gear buzzing around him. Jabouri gave a signal—“Come”—and a crew of engineers wheeled one of the giant pumps into position. At his feet, all along the gallery floor, were holes that serve as guides for the industrial drills the engineers use to probe the voids.

At Jabouri’s command, the engineers began pushing a long, narrow pipe, tipped with a drill bit, into the earth. The void they were hunting for was deep below—perhaps three hundred feet down from where we were standing. After several minutes of drilling, a few feet at a time, the bit pushed into the void, letting loose a geyser that sprayed the gallery walls and doused the crew. The men, wrestling the pipe, connected it to the pump. Jabouri flicked a switch, and, with the high-pitched whine of a motorcycle engine, the machine reversed the pressure and the grout began to flow, displacing the water in the void. “It’s been like this for thirty years,” Jabouri said with a shrug. “Every day, nonstop.”

When I visited, only four grouting machines, instead of the usual eleven, were in use. The engineers operating them can’t see the voids they are filling and have no way of discerning their size or shape. A given void might be as big as a closet, or a car, or a house. It could be a single spacious cavity, requiring mounds of grout, or it could be an octopus-like tangle, with winding sub-caverns, or a hairline fracture. “We feel our way through,” Jabouri said, standing by the pump. Generally, smaller cavities require thinner grout, so Jabouri started with a milky solution and increased its thickness as the void took more. Finally, after several hours, he stopped; his intuition, aided by the pressure gauges, told him that the cavity was full. “It’s a crapshoot,” Alwash told me. “There’s no X-ray vision. You stop grouting when you can’t put any more grout in a hole. It doesn’t mean the hole is gone.”

Theoretically, it’s possible that all the voids underneath the Mosul Dam could be filled—that all the gypsum could be replaced with grout. “Not in our lifetimes,” an Army Corps of Engineers specialist told me. In the meantime, he said, “there are just enormous quantities of gypsum that are washing away.”

WHEN ISIS FIGHTERS took the dam, in 2014, they drove away the overwhelming majority of the dam’s workers, and also captured the main grout-manufacturing plant in Mosul. Much of the dam’s equipment was destroyed, some by ISIS and some by American air strikes. The grouting came to a standstill—but the passage of water underneath the dam did not.

Iraqi and American officials are reluctant to discuss how long the grouting was suspended. Naemi, the dam’s director, maintained that it stopped for less than three weeks, while the battle for the dam was raging. American officials said they weren’t sure. Jabouri, the deputy director, told me that work had ceased entirely for about four months. Adamo, who said that he’d been in regular contact with the engineers at the dam, told

me, “The grouting work stopped for eighteen months.”

It’s one of the ironies of Iraq’s political situation that the dam’s turbines still provide electricity to Mosul, which is now under ISIS control; intelligence reports indicate that ISIS has earned millions of dollars by taxing the electricity. After the peshmerga captured the dam two years ago, Kurdish officials intended to shut down the turbines, but American officials told them that this would add more water to the reservoir, making the dam more likely to burst. So ISIS continued to profit from the dam. “We wanted to strangle them, but we weren’t allowed,” a Kurdish official told me.

When the dam was recaptured, American engineers and scientists worried that the lapse in grouting had hastened the erosion of the dam’s foundation. Using satellite photos and data from gauges around the dam, they tried to assess its condition. According to a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers report, numerous voids had opened up below the dam—as much as twenty-three thousand cubic metres’ worth. “The consensus was that the dam could break at any moment,” John Schnittker, an economist who has been working on water issues in Iraq for more than a decade, said.

In the language of hydraulic engineering, the process eroding the foundation is known as “solutioning.” If that problem is not addressed, what happens next is “piping”: water begins to travel between the voids, moving horizontally beneath the dam. To illustrate, American engineers have devised a triangular chart. The process begins, at the apex, with solutioning, advances through cavity formation and piping, and ends with core collapse and, finally, dam breach—like a Florida sinkhole opening up, unannounced, beneath a shopping center. Engineers jokingly refer to the chart as the “triangle of death.” Schnittker told me, “Once piping begins, there is no going back. In twelve hours, the dam is gone.”

In 2010, an Iraqi graduate student commissioned a bathymetric survey of the reservoir floor, which is more than a hundred and sixty feet underwater. The survey showed a surface pockmarked with sinkholes, some of





them sixty-five feet wide. “The danger is that the cavities underneath the dam will become much, much larger,” Adamo, the former deputy director of dams, told me.

In January, a team of American scientists reported that a thirty-metre-wide block on the western side of the dam had tilted, with one end sinking into the earth a tenth of an inch. (The State Department has refused to make the report public.) It was the fourth time the dam had moved since November, 2015. To engineers, uneven movement of a dam means that the ground underneath may be falling away; the uneven pressure could ultimately cause a breach.

Naemi, the dam’s overseer, said that the dam was merely “settling” into the earth. But most dams stop settling within a few months after they are built. Outside experts, including Ansari, told me that for the dam to move that much was highly irregular. “That’s more than it’s moved in thirty years,” he said. Alwash, the Iraqi civil engineer, told me, “Something has changed. The underlying soil is readjusting itself because of the voids.”

A second report, also kept from the public, was equally alarming. Like the first, it concluded that sections of the dam were moving unevenly, that water was passing through the foundation rapidly, and that water downstream contained high concentrations of dissolved gypsum—evidence of large voids. A chart compared the relative chances of collapse of a number of dams worldwide, and the likely death toll. A small number of dams were grouped toward the middle of the chart, indicating a moderate level of risk; the Mosul Dam stood by itself, nearly off the chart. “No dam in the world has all the conditions for imminent failure, except the dam in Mosul,” Adamo said.

**I**N THE NINETEEN-SEVENTIES, the U.S. government built a dam on the Snake River in Idaho, atop a foundation of deeply fractured layers of basalt and rhyolite. As in Mosul, experts expressed concerns but decided that aggressive grouting would allow the dam to function normally.

The Teton Dam opened in the fall of 1975; the following June, cracks appeared in the main wall, and water from



the reservoir began to leak through. Within hours, the cracks spread, the dam disintegrated, and a wall of water poured forth. The wave swept aside everything in its path, including two towns, at least eleven people, and thousands of cattle. The water knocked loose a large clutch of felled trees from a nearby forest, which washed downstream and crashed into a gasoline storage tank. The leaking gas burst into flames, and the fire, as it spread, destroyed several hundred homes that had been spared by the flood.

The U.S. Embassy’s report on the Mosul Dam envisions a similar scenario, magnified by the dam’s greater size and the densely populated areas downstream. A “tsunami-like wave” would rush through Mosul, carrying away everything in its path, including bodies, buildings, cars, unexploded bombs, hazardous chemicals, and human waste. The wave would almost certainly catch most of the people trying to outrun it. Residents of Mosul, scrambling on foot and by car through a citywide traffic jam, would need to travel at least three and a half miles to survive. In less than an hour, those who remained would be under as much as sixty feet of water.

With Mosul and other nearby villages occupied by ISIS, an orderly evac-

uation would be unlikely; the prospect of large numbers of people fleeing cities under ISIS control would pose its own security challenges. “Some evacuees may not have freedom of movement sufficient to escape,” the report said. An inland tidal wave could displace the 1.2 million refugees now living in tents and temporary quarters in northern Iraq, adding to the chaos.

The wave, the Embassy’s report predicted, would move rapidly through the cities of Bayji, Tikrit, and Samarra, wiping out roads, power stations, and oil refineries; damage to the electrical grid would probably leave the entire country without power. At least two-thirds of Iraq’s wheat fields would be flooded.

South of Samarra, residents would likely have to get farther away to avoid flooding, since the land begins to flatten out, making the floodplain wider. Shallow floods, the State Department said, could not be ignored. “Less than six inches of moving water is strong enough to knock a person off his feet,” the statement said.

Within four days, the wave would reach Baghdad, depositing as much as sixteen feet of water in many areas of the city, probably including the airport and the Green Zone, the site of government buildings and most of the embassies. The

report said the majority of the city's six million residents would face Hurricane Katrina-like conditions: people forced from their homes, with limited or no mobility and no essential services.

The Iraqi government—embattled, paralyzed, ineffectual—seems highly unlikely to carry out meaningful evacuations or large-scale relief efforts in the event of a breach. “The sheer scale of a catastrophic outburst of the dam would overwhelm in-country capacities to respond,” the U.N. report said. Adamo, the former official, scoffed at the idea that the government could save anyone. “They have no plan,” he said. American officials, emphasizing the practical option of “self-evacuation,” have urged the Iraqis to place early-warning sirens along the Tigris. Thus far, two have been installed. “They’re really, really loud,” the senior American official told me; they can be heard for miles. Still, as people flee, the sick, disabled, and elderly would likely be left behind. With the Baghdad International Airport flooded, meaningful relief from outside the country might be days away. The U.N. predicted that most of the population affected by the flood would not receive any assistance for at least two weeks, and probably much longer. About four million Iraqis—an eighth of the country’s population—would be left homeless.

By the time the flood wave rolled past Baghdad and exhausted itself, as many as one and a half million people could be dead. But, some experts told me, the aftermath would prove even more harrowing. “I am not really worried about the dead—because they’re dead,” Alwash said. “What worries me is everyone else. How do you feed six million people in Baghdad when it’s flooded? How do you give them electricity? Where do they go?”

**N**ADHIR AL-ANSARI, the engineer who made the first inspection of the Mosul Dam, now lives in Luleå, Sweden. Adamo, the former chief engineer, lives in Norrköping, about six hundred and fifty miles to the south. The two remain obsessed with the dam, haunted by decisions made more than thirty years ago. They confer on the phone daily and get together to discuss the situation; they sometimes reach out to engineers who

work at the dam. Adamo keeps an up-to-date maintenance log in his office in Norrköping. Neither he nor Ansari is optimistic that the Iraqi government will be able to solve the problem in time. “I am convinced the dam could fail tomorrow,” Adamo said.

Perhaps the simplest solution is to scrap the dam entirely and make a deal to lease Turkish dams north of the border. But the political instability in the region makes such an accord practically impossible. Another option is to re-start construction of the half-completed dam at Badush, but the smaller reservoir would likely require tens of thousands of acres of land to be removed from cultivation. A third option, which has lately gained currency, is to erect a “permanent” seal of the existing dam wall—a mile-long concrete curtain dropped eight hundred feet into the earth. This would cost an estimated three billion dollars. The Iraqi government—nearly paralyzed by internal conflicts—seems unlikely to impose a solution anytime soon.

Early in 2016, under American prodding, the Iraqis reopened negotiations with Trevi S.p.A., the Italian firm. In September, a team of engineers, hired at a cost of three hundred million dollars, arrived at the dam to perform a crash repair job. Their main task is to install updated equipment, designed to fill the voids beneath the dam more precisely, and to repair the broken control gate. Under the contract, the Italians will do the grouting for a year, and then leave the equipment with their Iraqi counterparts. The engineers say that they are confident they can prevent the dam’s foundation from washing away. But Pierluigi Miconi, Trevi’s project manager, told me that some of the voids may require tens of thousands of gallons of grout. In some cases, he said, it may take days to fill a single void. “This is an urgent project,” he said.

Last year, Alwash, the Iraqi-American civil engineer, was told by an official of the European Union that the dam is most susceptible to failure in the spring, when the snow melts and the Tigris is at its highest. The officials who first argued for the construction of the Mosul Dam, back in the eighties, were motivated by similar concerns about snowmelt—and they were proved right. In

1988, there was a huge melt, which would almost certainly have flooded the southern marshes if the dam had not contained the worst of it. Last spring, the Iraqi government prepared by lowering the maximum water level in the reservoir, to ease severe pressure on the dam wall. This year, such a precaution could dramatically lessen the number of people at risk—to about three hundred and sixty-four thousand.

The Trevi engineers, scrambling to keep the dam functioning, are operating in a militarized environment. Hundreds of Italian and Kurdish soldiers patrol the area, on alert for an attack by ISIS. In September, the Italian media reported that ISIS fighters were preparing an operation to recapture the dam. The following month, Kurdish forces fired a missile at a team of ISIS commandos who were approaching with a load of explosives.

For local residents, the threat of imminent violence has outweighed the threat from the dam. In Wanke, a small farming community about three miles downstream of the dam, ISIS positions are visible from the riverbank. When I visited, I found Mohammed Nazir, a Kurdish farmer, irrigating his field. For years, he told me, Wanke was a mixed Arab-Kurdish community. But when ISIS fighters swept in, during the summer of 2014, many of his Arabic neighbors stepped forward to help the invaders. “They told us, ‘This is not a Kurdish town anymore,’” Nazir said. “It was humiliating. They started ordering us around. I knew their children. I went to their weddings. They betrayed everything in life.”

Nazir and his family escaped to a nearby village, where they lived with relatives for a year and a half before ISIS was expelled from Wanke. When the family moved back, Nazir found that his Arab neighbors had fled with the retreating invaders. “They are not welcome back here,” he said.

Nazir knows that, if the dam fails, Wanke could be under sixty feet of water in a matter of minutes. But, he told me, neither he nor anyone else in the village thinks much about it. People in his part of the world are accustomed to having their lives upended. “We survived Saddam, we survived ISIS, and we will survive the Mosul Dam,” he said. ♦



## INCIDENT REVIEW

BY IAN FRAZIER

AFTER WATCHING A double feature of “Sully” and “Star Trek Beyond”:

*From the proceedings of the National Transportation Safety Board:*

Report on the Flight of the Starship Enterprise Through the Nebula to Rescue a Stranded Crew on a Mystery Planet; the Subsequent Crash; and the Actions of the Crew of the Enterprise, Up to and Including Its Return to Yorktown, the Resupply Planet. Submitted to the United States Congress and the Rulers of the Federation.

*Summary of events leading up to the incident:*

On January 14th, at 10:55 A.M., the Starship Enterprise took off from LaGuardia Airport on a flight to the nebula. Three minutes and four seconds after takeoff, geese were struck, and Krall, a lizard-type alien, after crashing his own spacecraft into the Enterprise, went running around inside shooting at crew members with some kind of ray gun and looking for an ancient relic that would give him the power to dematerialize things.

At 11:03 A.M., Captain James T. Kirk of the Enterprise made a Mayday call to the tower at LaGuardia and was advised to return to the airport, with emergency vehicles standing by.

At 11:04.57 A.M., Capt. Kirk radioed the tower and explained about the lizard alien and said he did not think he could get to LaGuardia under the circumstances. Tower advised him to try Teterboro Airport, in Teterboro, New Jersey, or Liberty International Airport, in Newark.

At 11:06.17 A.M., after consulting with Commander Spock and getting into a fistfight with Krall, Capt. Kirk informed the tower that, instead of landing at Newark or Teterboro, he was going to try to head for the nebula.

At 11:12.03 A.M., the tower lost radio contact with the Enterprise.

*From the transcript of the inquest:*

FIRST COMMISSIONER: Captain Kirk, I am wondering why you did not simply return to LaGuardia Airport at the very beginning of the incident.

CAPT. KIRK: I made the best decision I could at the time. Also, Krall was making these horrible breathing noises (*imitates the noises*).

SECOND COMMISSIONER: Captain, we'd like to play for you a video from our flight simulator, demonstrating that the Enterprise could have returned to LaGuardia Airport safely, had you followed tower's advisement to do so. Can we play the video, please? As you see, here our simulator pilots are taking off . . . Now they



hit the geese . . . Now Krall crashes into the Enterprise . . . Now he shoots at crew members with his ray gun . . . Here he is holding you up against the cockpit wall with his massive claw . . . Here the Enterprise begins to turn . . . And here it lands safely at LaGuardia Airport.

CAPT. KIRK: With all due respect—

THIRD COMMISSIONER: Excuse me, but I wish to follow up with further simulator-test data that pertains to events on the so-called mystery planet. Again, the simulator suggests that your decisions were ill considered. Here we see Captain Kirk discover a motorcycle in a wrecked starship . . . Here we see him ride around among Krall's guards in order to allow his crew to escape . . . Here the motorcycle begins to turn . . . And here it enters a wormhole and lands safely at LaGuardia Airport.

CAPT. KIRK: If I may—

FIRST COMMISSIONER: We request that you kindly hold your comments until we have shown all the data. The next and, frankly, most troubling simulator test shows what appears to be a serious lapse

in judgment. Here you are on Yorktown, the supply planet, chasing Krall, who has the ancient artifact and intends to dematerialize everybody with it. Now you and Krall begin another fistfight . . . He falls through a space hatch and is sucked into deep space . . . You begin to fall through the space hatch yourself . . . Mr. Spock and Bones come flying into the space hatch in a little spaceship . . . They rescue you . . . And, the next thing we see, you and your fellow crew members are drinking and celebrating in a lounge.

CAPT. KIRK: In this case, the simulator has reproduced exactly what did, in fact, occur, so I don't understand your question.

SECOND COMMISSIONER: After Spock and Bones rescued you, why did you not order them to return safely to LaGuardia Airport?

FIRST COMMISSIONER: Do you have something against LaGuardia Airport, Captain?

CAPT. KIRK: No, Madame Commissioner, I do not. Although it is a third-galaxy airport and its runways are too short, I will make use of it or any other airport I am ordered to use, because I am a starship captain, as was my father before me. What I do object to is judgment without informed deliberation. Our mission to the mystery planet was successful. I came to terms with the ghost of my father. Spock was able to get back together with Uhuru. The universe did not get dematerialized. Insurance will pay for a new Enterprise, which, frankly, needed replacing. I stand by every decision that I made. (*Spontaneous applause.*)

THIRD COMMISSIONER: Captain Kirk, after much discussion among ourselves, we, the members of the National Transportation Safety Board, have decided that you performed your duties in an exemplary fashion. You are free to go, with our heartfelt thanks.

FIRST COMMISSIONER: But, before you leave, will you do us one favor?

CAPT. KIRK: What is that?

FIRST COMMISSIONER: Will you please just go out to LaGuardia Airport and at least take a look around? It's really not that bad. There's an Artichoke Pizza there now. For us?

(*Suddenly the face of Krall, hideously huge, appears on the screen behind the commissioners. Panic, bystanders screaming.*)

FACE OF KRALL: Splendid, splendid! (*Laughs maniacally.*) ♦

## TO SPEAK IS TO BLUNDER

*Choosing to renounce a mother tongue.*

BY YIYUN LI



**I**N A DREAM the other night, I was back in Beijing, at the entrance of my family's apartment complex, where a public telephone, a black rotary, had once been guarded by the old women from the neighborhood association. They used to listen without hiding their disdain or curiosity while I was on the phone with friends; when I finished, they would complain about the length of the conversation before logging it in to their book and calculating the charge. In those days, I accumulated many errands before I went to use the telephone, lest my parents notice my extended absence. My allowance—which was what I could scrimp and save from my lunch money—was spent on phone calls and stamps and envelopes. Like a character in a Victorian novel, I checked our mail before my parents did

and collected letters to me from friends before my parents could intercept them.

In my dream, I asked for the phone. Two women came out of a front office. I recognized them: in real life, they are both gone. No, they said; the service is no longer offered, because everyone has a cell phone these days. There was nothing extraordinary about the dream—a melancholy visit to the past in this manner is beyond one's control—but for the fact that the women spoke to me in English.

Years ago, when I started writing in English, my husband asked if I understood the implication of the decision. What he meant was not the practical concerns, though there were plenty: the nebulous hope of getting published; the lack of a career path as had been laid out in science, my first field of postgraduate

study in America; the harsher immigration regulation I would face as a fiction writer. Many of my college classmates from China, as scientists, acquired their green cards under a National Interest Waiver. An artist is not of much importance to any nation's interest.

My husband, who writes computer programs, was asking about language. Did I understand what it meant to renounce my mother tongue?

Nabokov once answered a question he must have been tired of being asked: "My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom." That something is called a tragedy, however, means it is no longer personal. One weeps out of private pain, but only when the audience swarms in and claims understanding and empathy do people call it a tragedy. One's grief belongs to oneself; one's tragedy, to others.

I often feel a tinge of guilt when I imagine Nabokov's woe. Like all intimacies, the intimacy between one and one's mother tongue can be comforting and irreplaceable, yet it can also demand more than what one is willing to give, or more than one is capable of giving. If I allow myself to be honest, my private salvation, which cannot and should not be anybody's concern, is that I disowned my native language.

In the summer and autumn of 2012, I was hospitalized in California and in New York for suicide attempts, the first time for a few days, and the second time for three weeks. During those months, my dreams often took me back to Beijing. I would be standing on top of a building—one of those gray, Soviet-style apartment complexes—or I would be lost on a bus travelling through an unfamiliar neighborhood. Waking up, I would list in my journal images that did not appear in my dreams: a swallow's nest underneath a balcony, the barbed wires at the rooftop, the garden where old people sat and exchanged gossip, the mailboxes at street corners—round, green, covered by dust, with handwritten collection times behind a square window of half-opaque plastic.

Yet I have never dreamed of Iowa City, where I first landed in America, in 1996, at the age of twenty-three. When asked about my initial impression of the place, I cannot excavate anything from memory



to form a meaningful answer. During a recent trip there from my home in California, I visited a neighborhood that I used to walk through every day. The one-story houses, which were painted in pleasantly muted colors, with gardens in the front enclosed by white picket fences, had not changed. I realized that I had never described them to others or to myself in Chinese, and when English was established as my language they had become everyday mundanities. What happened during my transition from one language to another did not become memory.

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK about my decision to write in English. The switch from one language to another feels natural to me, I reply, though that does not say much, just as one can hardly give a convincing explanation as to why someone's hair turns gray on one day but not on another. But this is an inane analogy, I realize, because I do not want to touch the heart of the matter. Yes, there is something unnatural, which I have refused to accept. Not the fact of writing in a second language—there are always Nabokov and Conrad as references, and many of my contemporaries as well—or that I impulsively gave up a reliable career for writing. It's the absoluteness of my abandonment of Chinese, undertaken with such determination that it is a kind of suicide.

The tragedy of Nabokov's loss is that his misfortune was easily explained by public history. His story—of being driven by a revolution into permanent exile—became the possession of other people. My decision to write in English has also been explained as a flight from my country's history. But unlike Nabokov, who had been a published Russian writer, I never wrote in Chinese. Still, one cannot avoid the fact that a private decision, once seen through a public prism, becomes a metaphor. Once, a poet of Eastern European origin and I—we both have lived in America for years, and we both write in English—were asked to read our work in our native languages at a gala. But I don't write in Chinese, I explained, and the organizer apologized for her misunderstanding. I offered to read Li Po or Du Fu or any of the ancient poets I had grown up memorizing, but instead it was arranged for me to read poetry by a political prisoner.

A metaphor's desire to transcend di-

minishes any human story; its ambition to illuminate blinds those who create metaphors. In my distrust of metaphors I feel a kinship with George Eliot: "We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them." My abandonment of my first language is personal, so deeply personal that I resist any interpretation—political or historical or ethnographical. This, I know, is what my husband was questioning years ago: was I prepared to be turned into a symbol by well-intentioned or hostile minds?

CHINESE IMMIGRANTS of my generation in America criticize my English for not being native enough. A compatriot, after reading my work, pointed out, in an e-mail, how my language is neither lavish nor lyrical, as a real writer's language should be: you write only simple things in simple English, you should be ashamed of yourself, he wrote in a fury. A professor—an American writer—in graduate school told me that I should stop writing, as English would remain a foreign language to me. Their concerns about ownership of a language, rather than making me as impatient as Nabokov, allow me secret laughter. English is to me as random a choice as any other language. What one goes toward is less definitive than that from which one turns away.

Before I left China, I destroyed the journal that I had kept for years and most of the letters written to me, those same letters I had once watched out for, lest my mother discover them. What I could not bring myself to destroy I sealed up and brought with me to America, though I will never open them again. My letters to others I would have destroyed, too, had I had them. These records, of the days I had lived time and time over, became intolerable now that my time in China was over. But this violent desire to erase a life in a native language is only wishful thinking. One's relationship with the native language is similar to that with the past. Rarely does a story start where we wish it had, or end where we wish it would.

ONE CROSSES THE border to become a new person. One finishes a manuscript and cuts off the characters. One adopts a language. These are false and forced frameworks, providing illusory free-

dom, as time provides illusory leniency when we, in anguish, let it pass monotonously. "To kill time," an English phrase that still chills me: time can be killed but only by frivolous matters and purposeless activities. No one thinks of suicide as a courageous endeavor to kill time.

During my second hospital stay, in New York, a group of nursing students came to play bingo one Friday night. A young woman, another patient, asked if I would join her. Bingo, I said, I've never in my life played that. She pondered for a moment, and said that she had played bingo only in the hospital. It was her eighth hospitalization when I met her; she had taken middle-school courses for a while in the hospital, when she was younger, and, once, she pointed out a small patch of fenced-in green where she and other children had been let out for exercise. Her father often visited her in the afternoon, and I would watch them sitting together playing a game, not attempting a conversation. By then, all words must have been inadequate, language doing little to help a mind survive time.

Yet language is capable of sinking a mind. One's thoughts are slavishly bound to language. I used to think that an abyss is a moment of despair becoming interminable; but any moment, even the direst, is bound to end. What's abysmal is that one's erratic language closes in on one like quicksand: "You are nothing. You must do anything you can to get rid of this nothingness." We can kill time, but language kills us.

"Patient reports feeling . . . like she is a burden to her loved ones"—much later, I read the notes from the emergency room. I did not have any recollection of the conversation. *A burden to her loved ones*: this language must have been provided to me. I would never use the phrase in my thinking or my writing. But my resistance has little to do with avoiding a platitude. To say "a burden" is to grant oneself weight in other people's lives; to call them "loved ones" is to fake one's ability to love. One does not always want to be subject to self-interrogation imposed by a cliché.

WHEN KATHERINE MANSFIELD was still a teen-ager, she wrote in her journal about a man next door playing "Swanee River" on a cornet, for what seemed like weeks. "I wake up with the

'Swanee River,' eat it with every meal I take, and go to bed eventually with 'all de world am sad and weary' as a lullaby." I read Mansfield's notebooks and Marianne Moore's letters around the same time, when I returned home from New York. In a letter, Moore described a night of fund-raising at Bryn Mawr. Maidens in bathing suits and green bathing tails on a raft: "It was Really most realistic . . . way down upon the Swanee River."

I marked the entries because they reminded me of a moment I had forgotten. I was nine, and my sister thirteen. On a Saturday afternoon, I was in our apartment and she was on the balcony. My sister had joined the middle-school choir that year, and in the autumn sunshine she sang in a voice that was beginning to leave girlhood. "Way down upon the Swanee River. Far, far away. That's where my heart is turning ever; That's where the old folks stay."

The lyrics were translated into Chinese. The memory, too, should be in Chinese. But I cannot see our tiny garden with the grapevine, which our father cultivated and which was later uprooted by our wrathful mother, or the bamboo fence dotted with morning glories, or the junk that occupied half the balcony—years of accumulations piled high by our hoarder father—if I do not name these things to myself in English. I cannot see my sister, but I can hear her singing the lyrics in English. I can seek to understand my mother's vulnerability and cruelty, but language is the barrier

I have chosen. "Do you know, the moment I die your father will marry someone else?" my mother used to whisper to me when I was little. "Do you know that I cannot die, because I don't want you to live under a stepmother?" Or else, taken over by inexplicable rage, she would say that I, the only person she had loved, deserved the ugliest death because I did not display enough gratitude. But I have given these moments—what's possible to be put into English—to my characters. Memories, left untranslated, can be disowned; memories untranslatable can become someone else's story.

Over the years, my brain has banished Chinese. I dream in English. I talk to myself in English. And memories—not only those about America but also those about China; not only those carried with me but also those archived with the wish to forget—are sorted in English. To be orphaned from my native language felt, and still feels, like a crucial decision.

WHEN WE ENTER a world—a new country, a new school, a party, a family or a class reunion, an army camp, a hospital—we speak the language it requires. The wisdom to adapt is the wisdom to have two languages: the one spoken to others, and the one spoken to oneself. One learns to master the public language not much differently from the way that one acquires a second language: assess the situations, construct sentences with the right words and the correct syntax, catch a mistake

if one can avoid it, or else apologize and learn the lesson after a blunder. Fluency in the public language, like fluency in a second language, can be achieved with enough practice.

Perhaps the line between the two is, and should be, fluid; it is never so for me. I often forget, when I write, that English is also used by others. English is my private language. Every word has to be pondered before it becomes a word. I have no doubt—can this be an illusion?—that the conversation I have with myself, however linguistically flawed, is the conversation that I have always wanted, in the exact way I want it to be.

In my relationship with English, in this relationship with the intrinsic distance between a nonnative speaker and an adopted language that makes people look askance, I feel invisible but not estranged. It is the position I believe I always want in life. But with every pursuit there is the danger of crossing a line, from invisibility to erasure.

There was a time when I could write well in Chinese. In school, my essays were used as models; in the Army, where I spent a year of involuntary service between the ages of eighteen and nineteen, our squad leader gave me the choice between drafting a speech for her and cleaning the toilets or the pigsties—I always chose to write. Once, in high school, I entered an oratory contest. Onstage, I saw that many of the listeners were moved to tears by the poetic and insincere lies I had made up; I moved myself to tears, too. It crossed my mind that I could become a successful propaganda writer. I was disturbed by this. A young person wants to be true to herself and to the world. But it did not occur to me to ask: Can one's intelligence rely entirely on the public language; can one form a precise thought, recall an accurate memory, or even feel a genuine feeling, with only the public language?

My mother, who loves to sing, often sings the songs from her childhood and youth, many of them words of propaganda from the nineteen-fifties and sixties. But there is one song she has reminisced about all her life because she does not know how to sing it. She learned the song in kindergarten, the year Communism took over her home town; she can remember only the opening line.

There was an old woman in the



*"How do you feel about staying in power?"*



hospital in New York who sat in the hallway with a pair of shiny red shoes. I feel like Dorothy, she said as she showed me the shoes, which she had chosen from the donations to patients. Some days, her mind was lucid, and she would talk about the red shoes that hurt her feet but which she could not part with, or the medication that made her brain feel dead and left her body in pain. Other days, she talked to the air, an endless conversation with the unseen. People who had abandoned her by going away or dying returned and made her weep.

I often sat next to this lonesome Dorothy. Was I eavesdropping? Perhaps, but her conversation was beyond encroachment. That one could reach a point where the border between public and private language no longer matters is frightening. Much of what one does—to avoid suffering, to seek happiness, to stay healthy—is to keep a safe space for one's private language. Those who have lost that space have only one language left. My grandmother, according to my mother and her siblings, had become a woman who talked to the unseen before she was sent to the asylum to die. There's so much to give up: hope, freedom, dignity. A private language, however, defies any confinement. Death alone can take it away.

**M**ANSFIELD SPOKE OF her habit of keeping a journal as "being garrulous. . . . I must say nothing affords me the same relief." Several times, she directly addressed the readers—her posterity—in a taunting manner, as though laughing at them for taking her dead words seriously. I would prefer to distrust her. But it would be dishonest not to acknowledge the solace of reading her words. It was in the immediate weeks after the second hospitalization. My life was on hold. There were diagnoses to grapple with, medications to take, protocols to implement, hospital staff to report to, but they were there only to eliminate an option. What to replace it with I could not see, but I knew it was not within anyone's capacity to answer that. Not having the exact language for the bleakness I felt, I devoured Mansfield's words like thirst-quenching poison. Is it possible that one can be held hostage by someone else's words? What I underlined and

reread: Are they her thoughts or mine?

There is nought to do but WORK, but how can I work when this awful weakness makes even the pen like a walking stick?

There is something profound & terrible in this eternal desire to establish contact.

It is astonishing how violently a big branch shakes when a silly little bird has left it. I expect the bird knows it and feels immensely arrogant.



One only wants to feel sure of another. That's all.

I realise my faults better than anyone else could realise them. I know exactly where I fail.

Have people, apart from those far away people, ever existed for me? Or have they always failed me, and faded because I denied them reality? Supposing I were to die, as I sit at this table, playing with my indian paper knife—what would be the difference. No difference at all. Then why don't I commit suicide?

**W**HEN ONE THINKS in an adopted language, one arranges and rearranges words that are neutral, indifferent even.

When one remembers in an adopted language, there is a dividing line in that remembrance. What came before could be someone else's life; it might as well be fiction.

What language, I wonder, does one use to feel? Or does one need a language to feel? In the hospital in New York, one of my doctors asked me to visit a class studying minds and brains. Two medical students interviewed me, following a script. The doctor who led the class, impatient with their tentativeness, sent them back to their seats and posed questions more pointed and unrelenting. To answer him, I had to navigate my thoughts, and I watched him and his students closely, as I was being watched. When he asked about feelings, I said it was beyond my ability to describe what might as well be indescribable.

If you can be articulate about your thoughts, why can't you articulate your feelings? the doctor asked.

It took me a year to figure out the

answer. It is hard to feel in an adopted language, yet it is impossible in my native language.

**O**FTEN I THINK that writing is a futile effort; so is reading; so is living. Loneliness is the inability to speak with another in one's private language. That emptiness is filled with public language or romanticized connections.

After the dream of the public telephone, I remembered a moment in the Army. It was New Year's Eve, and we were ordered to watch the official celebration on CCTV. Halfway through the program, a girl on duty came and said that there was a long-distance call for me.

It was the same type of black rotary phone as we had back at the apartment complex, and my sister was on the line. It was the first long-distance call I had received in my life, and the next time would be four years later, back in Beijing, when an American professor phoned to interview me. I still remember the woman, calling from Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, asking questions about my interests in immunology, talking about her research projects and life in America. My English was good enough to understand half of what she said, and the scratching noises in the background made me sweat for the missed half.

What did my sister and I talk about on that New Year's Eve? In abandoning my native language, I have erased myself from that memory. But erasing, I have learned, does not stop with a new language, and that, my friend, is my sorrow and my selfishness. In speaking and in writing in an adopted language, I have not stopped erasing. I have crossed the line, too, from erasing myself to erasing others. I am not the only casualty in this war against myself.

In an ideal world, I would prefer to have my mind reserved for thinking, and thinking alone. I dread the moment when a thought trails off and a feeling starts, when one faces the eternal challenge of eluding the void for which one does not have words. To speak when one cannot is to blunder. I have spoken by having written—this piece or any piece—for myself and against myself. The solace is with the language I chose. The grief, to have spoken at all. ♦

# REWRITING THE CODE OF LIFE

*Through DNA editing, researchers hope to alter the genetic destiny of species and eliminate diseases.*

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

**E**ARLY ON AN unusually blustery day in June, Kevin Esvelt climbed aboard a ferry at Woods Hole, bound for Nantucket Island. Esvelt, an assistant professor of biological engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was on his way to present to local health officials a plan for ridding the island of one of its most persistent problems: Lyme disease. He had been up for much of the night working on his slides, and the fatigue showed. He had misaligned the buttons on his gray pin-striped shirt, and the rings around his deep-blue eyes made him look like a sandy-haired raccoon.

Esvelt, who is thirty-four, directs the “sculpting evolution” group at M.I.T., where he and his colleagues are attempting to design molecular tools capable of fundamentally altering the natural world. If the residents of Nantucket agree, Esvelt intends to use those tools to rewrite the DNA of white-footed mice to make them immune to the bacteria that cause Lyme and other tick-borne diseases. He and his team would breed the mice in the laboratory and then, as an initial experiment, release them on an uninhabited island. If the number of infected ticks begins to plummet, he would seek permission to repeat the process on Nantucket and on nearby Martha’s Vineyard.

More than a quarter of Nantucket’s residents have been infected with Lyme, which has become one of the most rapidly spreading diseases in the United States. The illness is often accompanied by a red bull’s-eye rash, along with fever and chills. When the disease is caught early enough, it can be cured in most cases with a single course of antibiotics. For many people, though, pain and neurological symptoms can persist for years. In communities throughout the Northeast, the fear of ticks has changed the nature of

summer itself—few parents these days would permit a child to run barefoot through the grass or wander blithely into the woods.

“What if we could wave our hands and make this problem go away?” Esvelt asked the two dozen officials and members of the public who had assembled at the island’s police station for his presentation. He explained that white-footed mice are the principal reservoir of Lyme disease, which they pass, through ticks, to humans. “This is an ecological problem,” Esvelt said. “And we want to enact an ecological solution so that we break the transmission cycle that keeps ticks in the environment infected with these pathogens.”

There is currently no approved Lyme vaccine for humans, but there is one for dogs, which also works on mice. Esvelt and his team would begin by vaccinating their mice and sequencing the DNA of the most protective antibodies. They would then implant the genes required to make those antibodies into the cells of mouse eggs. Those mice would be born immune to Lyme. Ultimately, if enough of them are released to mate with wild mice, the entire population would become resistant. Just as critically, the antibodies in the mice would kill the Lyme bacterium in any ticks that bite them. Without infected ticks, there would be no infected people. “Take out the mice,” Esvelt told me, “and the entire transmission cycle collapses.”

Esvelt has spoken about Lyme dozens of times in the past year, not just on Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard but at forums around the world, from a synthetic-biology symposium in Chile to President Obama’s White House Frontiers Conference, in Pittsburgh. At every appearance, Esvelt tells the audience that he wants his two young children—he has a three-year-old son and a daughter who is almost one—to

grow up in a Lyme-free world. But that’s not really why he speaks at infectious-disease meetings, entomology conventions, and international conservation workshops. He has embarked on a mission that he thinks is far more important.

Esvelt and his colleagues were the first to describe, in 2014, how the revolutionary gene-editing tool CRISPR could combine with a natural phenomenon known as a gene drive to alter the genetic destiny of a species. Gene drives work by overriding the traditional rules of Mendelian inheritance. Normally, the progeny of any sexually reproductive organism receives half its genome from each parent. But since the nineteen-forties biologists have been aware that some genetic elements are “selfish”: evolution has bestowed on them a better than fifty-percent chance of being inherited. That peculiarity makes it possible for certain characteristics to spread with unusual speed.

Until CRISPR came along, biologists lacked the tools to force specific genetic changes across an entire population. But the system, which is essentially a molecular scalpel, makes it possible to alter or delete any sequence in a genome of billions of nucleotides. By placing it in an organism’s DNA, scientists can insure that the new gene will copy itself in every successive generation. A mutation that blocked the parasite responsible for malaria, for instance, could be engineered into a mosquito and passed down every time the mosquito reproduced. Each future generation would have more offspring with the trait until, at some point, the entire species would have it.

There has never been a more powerful biological tool, or one with more potential to both improve the world and endanger it. Esvelt hopes to use the technology as a lever to pry open



*A powerful new biological tool could be used to make white-footed mice immune to the bacterium that causes Lyme disease.*



what he sees as the often secretive and needlessly duplicative process of scientific research. “The only way to conduct an experiment that could wipe an entire species from the Earth is with complete transparency,” he told me. “For both moral and practical reasons, gene drive is most likely to succeed if all the research is done openly. And if we can do it for gene drive we can do it for the rest of science.”

At the meeting on Nantucket, Esvelt assured residents that he and his team fully understood the implications of manipulating the basic elements of life. He said that he regards himself not just as a biologist but as the residents’ agent; if they stop showing interest in the research, he will stop the experiments. He also insists that he will work with absolute openness: every e-mail, grant application, data set, and meeting record will be available for anyone to see. Intellectual property is often the most coveted aspect of scientific research, and Esvelt’s would be posted on a Web site. And no experiment would be conducted unless it was approved in advance—not just by scientists but by the people it is most likely to affect. “By open, I mean all of it,” Esvelt said, to murmurs of approval. “If Monsanto”—which, fairly or not, has become a symbol of excessive corporate control of agricultural biotechnology—“did something one way,” he said, “we will do it the opposite way.”

There are fewer than a million white-footed mice on Nantucket, so a gene drive won’t even be necessary to insure the spread of Lyme-resistant genes. Esvelt plans to release enough genetically modified mice, tens of thousands of them, to overwhelm the wild population. (Since he could never house that many mice in his lab at M.I.T., he recently mentioned the idea of breeding them on a container ship.) That approach, however, would never work for Lyme on the mainland, where there are more than a billion white-footed mice scattered up and down the Eastern seaboard.

The battle against Lyme disease is just an early stage in an unprecedented effort to conquer some of mankind’s most pervasive afflictions, such as malaria and dengue fever. Despite a signifi-

cant decline in deaths from these diseases over the past decade, they still threaten more than half the world’s population and, together, kill nearly three-quarters of a million people each year. Malaria alone kills a thousand children every day.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has invested tens of millions of dollars in the research of a team called Target Malaria led by Austin Burt, at Imperial College, in London. In labo-



ratory tests, the group has already succeeded in using CRISPR to edit the genes of *Anopheles gambiae* mosquitoes, which carry the parasite that causes malaria, so as to prevent females from producing fertile eggs. In theory, as those mosquitoes spread across the countries of sub-Saharan Africa and mate, the population will begin to shrink. A few weeks ago, the Tata Trusts of Mumbai announced that it would fund a similar project in India.

Gene drives could also be used to help wipe out schistosomiasis, a parasitic disease, carried by blood flukes, that affects hundreds of millions of people each year and kills as many as two hundred thousand. In addition, the new technology could eliminate a variety of invasive species—from pests that eat up thousands of acres of crops to the mosquitoes spreading avian malaria so rapidly among the native birds on Hawaii that the Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy routinely refer to the state as “the bird-extinction capital of the world.”

For Esvelt, though, those achievements seem almost like secondary benefits. “For a lot of people, the goal is to eradicate malaria, and I am behind that a hundred per cent,” he said. “The agricultural people have the New World screwworm”—a particularly destructive pest also known as the blowfly—“they’d love to get rid of in South America. Everyone has a thing

he really wants to do. And it makes sense. But I would submit that the single most important application of gene drive is not to eradicate malaria or schistosomiasis or Lyme or any other specific project. It is to change the way we do science.”

That is the message that Esvelt has been selling in his talks throughout the world, and the initial response, on Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard—even from people who attended the meetings in order to object to the proposal—has been overwhelmingly positive. “I came here thinking I would say, ‘Absolutely not,’” Danica Connors, an herbalist and shamanic practitioner who opposes genetically modified products, said at the Nantucket meeting. “I am the first person to say that, tinker with Mother Nature, we are going to break it.” But she told Esvelt that she loved “the fact that you are a young scientist saying, ‘I want this to be a non-corporate thing and I want this to be about the people.’” Seeming to surprise even herself, she said, “You know, I want to see where you go with this. I am actually very excited.”

**M**ANY CHILDREN GROW up enamored of dinosaurs. Most move on, but Kevin Esvelt became transfixed at a young age by the idea that these extinct creatures were somehow related to us. As a boy, in Seattle, he read Michael Crichton’s book “Jurassic Park,” which sparked his interest in biotechnology. “The real conversion came when I was ten or eleven,” he told me last year, the first time we met, in his office at M.I.T. “My parents took me to the Galápagos. After that trip, I knew what I wanted to do.”

The Galápagos trip led him, inevitably, to read the works of Charles Darwin. “I became fascinated with the idea that you have these complex systems that constantly evolve, and all in the language of DNA,” he said. “I decided I wanted to spend my life learning how to rewrite the genes of organisms to make some extremely useful and interesting things. When you’re a kid, of course, you might be more excited about the interesting than the useful.”

Esvelt’s father was an executive with the Bonneville Power Administration, and his mother taught elementary

school. When Kevin was twelve, his family moved from Seattle to Portland, where he attended a small private school. “They thought it would provide a better environment for me,” he said. “I wasn’t the most socially connected child. I was reasonably athletic, and got along well enough with other kids, so I wasn’t quite on the nerd outer limits. But I certainly preferred books to people.”

After graduating from Harvey Mudd College, an engineering school with a strong humanities program, Esvelt moved to Harvard, to the laboratory of David Liu, a professor of chemistry and chemical biology who is best known for his work on the directed evolution of biological and synthetic molecules. Graduate students normally try to publish in professional journals as often as possible, as it is essential for landing prestigious jobs. Yet Esvelt produced no papers in the first five and a half of the six years he spent at Harvard. “Kevin told me on the day we met that he wanted to forgo smaller projects to accomplish something of genuine impact,” Liu told me this summer, when I visited him in his office at Harvard. “I had never heard anything like this from a first-year graduate student.” Liu, who is also a senior faculty member at the Broad Institute of M.I.T. and Harvard, said, “It stunned me. Kevin struck me as somebody who had all the skills and all the ambition he needed, but he also had just the right amount of naïve fearlessness.”

For his doctoral thesis, Esvelt tackled one of synthetic biology’s most significant constraints. Evolution unfolds over millions of years, and it can take a thousand generations before even the slightest genetic change becomes permanent. Scientists who want to redesign or augment nature need a much shorter time frame. With Liu’s supervision, Esvelt developed a technique to trick certain viruses into evolving proteins so rapidly in the laboratory that researchers could observe dozens of rounds of molecular evolution in a single day. The work earned him the Harold M. Weintraub Award, one of the country’s most coveted prizes for graduate research in the biological sciences.

In 2012, Esvelt assumed a postdoctoral position at Harvard’s Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering. He began to work with George Church, who is among the world’s most renowned—and outspoken—geneticists, and runs one of the largest academic laboratories in the country. Esvelt and Church established an unusual rapport, and they went on to collaborate on a number of studies, including the seminal 2014 paper that described the way CRISPR could combine with gene drives to alter many types of wild populations.

Despite his awards, publications, and influential mentors, Esvelt struggled to find a job that would help him achieve his goals as a scientist and as a public educator. To many institutions, he seemed like a strange hybrid. He had certainly demonstrated great talent as a researcher, but he had also decided to become a sort of proselytizer. He long ago concluded that telling the story of science, and the choices it presents, is just as valuable as anything he might accomplish in a lab. Élite scientists often look down on that kind of advocacy and see it as sanctimonious. “Carl Sagan, to this day, has a reputation in the science community as some-

one who was obviously a great science communicator,” Esvelt said. “But people will say he wasn’t that important a scientist. That is insane. Look at his publication record. He was a fabulous scientist.”

Many universities were discouraging, in large part because they weren’t sure what to do with him. “Most places told me, ‘We are fine with you speaking out about open science, but not on our time,’” Esvelt said. This meant that, when it came to tenure decisions and professional evaluations, he would be judged solely on his work in the lab. “I just didn’t fit into any of their normal silos,” he said.

I first met Esvelt when he was still working in Church’s laboratory. He is intensely focussed and rail thin, even though his exercise routine seems limited to fidgeting, which he does constantly. He regards meals, particularly lunch, as a distraction, and often downs some Soylent-like mixture at his desk. Like many of his scientific colleagues, Esvelt is not burdened by a lack of self-regard. Earlier this year, I heard one of his colleagues describe a well-known but particularly shy scientist as extremely arrogant. Esvelt burst out laughing when I told him about the



*“No, we’re good. This gentleman accidentally touched my breast and I accidentally broke his nose.”*

conversation. “I am a thousand times more arrogant than he is,” he said, not entirely without pride. Nonetheless, Esvelt’s goals are essentially those of an effective altruist. One of his favorite Web sites, scienceheroes.com, ranks scientists by the number of lives that were saved by their invention. Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch, the inventors of synthetic fertilizer, which has helped feed the world for more than a century, rank first, having together saved 2.72 billion lives. Louis Pasteur, who developed the germ theory of disease, doesn’t even make the top ten. “It’s an impossible list to crack,” Esvelt said, the first time he showed me the site.

Last year, Esvelt took a position at M.I.T.’s Media Lab, which seemed to me an odd fit. Although the lab is influential, I had always assumed that it was more focussed on technology, art, design, and computer learning than on biology or genetics. “You have a dated view of this place,” Joi Ito, who has been the lab’s director since 2011, told me.

“Kevin fits here perfectly,” he said. We were sitting in his office, which looks out on the Charles River. The day was so muggy that there wasn’t a single jogger on the street or a scull crew on the river. Ito sees CRISPR as a logical step in the rapid march of digital progress. “It is a part of a long-term

democratic trend where diminishing costs drive innovation,” he said. “Cheaper prices drove computers out of the walls of these big companies—because you suddenly didn’t need all that money anymore. When you take away money, you take away the requirement for permission.” He compared what was going on in biotechnology with the emergence of e-mail. “Suddenly, a janitor had the ability to communicate with the chairman of the board,” he said. “The filters disappeared. We are seeing the same thing today with CRISPR and biotechnology.”

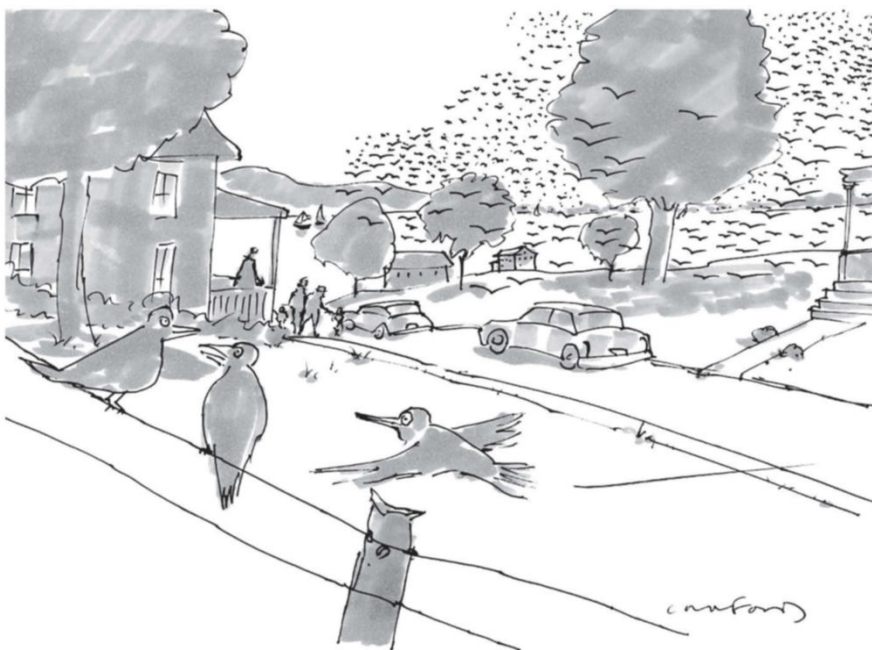
**I**T MAY BE years before animals or plants with CRISPR gene drives are released into natural environments. There will be many regulatory, political, and social hurdles to negotiate along the way. Esvelt predicts that it will be nearly a decade, if all goes well, before Lyme-resistant mice appear on Nantucket or Martha’s Vineyard. But the scientific obstacles are disappearing rapidly. That makes it at least possible to envisage a day when gene-drive technology will be deployed to vanquish diseases that have killed billions of people, deter devastating pests, and protect endangered species like the black-footed ferret. (Plague has brought the ferrets to the edge of extinction, but it should now be possible to edit their

genes to make them immune.) To consider implementing such fundamental scientific changes, though, will require a tectonic shift in public attitudes about the natural world.

One of Esvelt’s goals at M.I.T. is to facilitate that shift. Part of his job, as he sees it, is to challenge what he describes as “the ridiculous notion that natural and good are the same thing.” Instead, he told me, we ought to think about intelligent design as an instrument of genetics. He smiled because the phrase “intelligent design” usually refers to the anti-Darwinian theory that the universe, with all its intricacies and variations, is too complex to have arisen by chance—that there had to be a guiding hand. The truth is more prosaic, and also more remarkable: for four billion years, evolution, driven by natural selection and random mutation, has insured that the most efficient genes would survive and the weakest would disappear. But, propelled by CRISPR and other tools of synthetic biology, intelligent design has taken on an entirely new meaning, one that threatens to transcend Darwin—because evolution may soon be guided by us.

For Esvelt, that moment can’t come soon enough. “Natural selection is heinously immoral,” he said, invoking Tennyson’s view that nature is “red in tooth and claw.” Unlike Rousseau, Esvelt sees nothing “blessed” about man in his natural state. In fact, romantic notions of a natural world defined by innocence and harmony repel him. “The idea that nature is the essence of goodness, is purity and truth, is so foreign to my perception of the world that I can’t even conceive of how people can think that way,” he said. “There is such a fantastic degree of suffering out there.”

He went on to say that humans no longer need to be governed by nature, or rely on brutal and ruinous methods to control it. “When nature does something that hurts us, we respond with chemistry and physics,” he said. “We spread toxic pesticides that kill problematic pests, and often kill most of the other insects in the area as well. To get rid of mosquitoes, we use bulldozers to drain swamps. It works. But it also destroys wetlands and many other species. Imagine that an insect is eating



*“Tell you the truth—I ain’t feelin’ all that Hitchcockian.”*



your crops. If you have a gene drive and you understand how olfaction works in that pest, you could just re-program it to go on its merry way. The pest would still be in the ecosystem, but it would just dislike the taste of your crop. That is a much more elegant way of interacting with nature than anything we do now.”

Virtually any technology that can serve a species can also harm it, however, either by accident or by design. A scientist capable of rewiring a mosquito to prevent it from spreading malaria, dengue, Zika, or any other infectious disease would almost certainly have the skill to turn that insect into a weapon. Earlier this year, James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, listed gene editing as a potential weapon of mass destruction. Some scientists felt that he was being hyperbolic, but the authors of a report on gene drives issued this year by the National Academy of Sciences wrote, “It is not inconceivable that rather than developing a resistant mosquito, one could develop a more susceptible mosquito capable of transmitting a specific pathogen.” In other words, terrorists might be able to add to the saliva of a mosquito a gene that makes toxins, which it would transmit along with malaria. Just before Thanksgiving, the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology warned the White House directly that it is no longer difficult to imagine how somebody might, simply by editing a gene, transform a common virus into a biological weapon. “My greatest fear,” Esvelt told me one day, “is that something terrible will happen before something wonderful happens. It keeps me up at night more than I would like to admit.”

Until recently, the tools of molecular biology were expensive, and few people had access to them—not to mention the ability to resurrect dead viruses or build new ones. CRISPR has already begun to change that, and will undoubtedly speed progress in many fields. But with accessibility comes a growing risk of accidents, and of sabotage. These days, sequences of DNA can be ordered on the Internet for pennies. For under a thousand dollars, any eager amateur—no matter his level of



skill or training—could acquire a virus and everything needed to edit it at his kitchen table.

For centuries—from Goethe’s “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” and “Faust” to “Frankenstein,” “Jurassic Park,” and beyond—people have harbored a persistent fear that some powerful form of life, manufactured by man with good intentions but excessive hubris, might one day slip beyond our control. No previous scientific advance, not even splitting the atom, has made this fear more palpable. Yet the research community often regards itself as the only acceptable arbiter of the way new inventions should be used. That puts Esvelt in an unusual position, because, while he is a compelling advocate for gene-drive technology, he is also its most insistent voice of alarm. “This is where my problem begins,” he told an audience earlier this year, at a forum in Cambridge. “Because, as a single scientist, I can alter an organism in a laboratory that will have more of an effect on all your lives than anything the legislature across the river can do.

“What does that mean for our democratic ideals?” he asked.

In order to flourish, Esvelt argues, the field will require a radical new approach to scientific experiments. “In medicine, we demand informed consent before we do research,” he says. “That has become standard. But in the laboratory we don’t even tell each other what we’re doing. There is very little openness. That is going to have to change.”

Laboratory research in the United States is hardly ungoverned. Experiments must be approved by institutional review boards, and researchers routinely exchange data—there are conferences every week in nearly every scientific discipline for that very purpose.

And yet the system of incentives that drives academic advancement—grants, publications, and tenure decisions—rarely rewards openness. “If you are in academia, you are constantly reinforced for maintaining some level of secrecy,” Dan Hartman told me recently, when I visited him at the Gates Foundation, where he leads the team

that provides technical support for clinical trials and quantitative research. "That is the way the incentive system works. You are supposed to keep your research to yourself until you publish. Even then, you decide what to publish—what to reveal and what to keep secret." Beginning in January, the Gates Foundation will require the data from all studies it funds to be published in journals that are open and freely available to anyone who wants to read them. "To do anything less is crazy," Hartman said. "Seeing data from studies that didn't work can often be as useful as seeing data from those that did."

Esvelt believes that we will have to go much further before scientists understand how to communicate with the societies they serve. To illustrate that point, he often cites one of modern science's most chilling statements. "When you see something that is technically sweet," J. Robert Oppenheimer testified in his own defense at a security hearing in 1954, "you go ahead and do it, and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb." Esvelt says that, in a world where schoolchildren will soon be editing genes in biology class, this is exactly what needs to change. "We really need to think about the world we are entering," he said. "To an appalling degree, not that much has changed. Scientists still really don't care very much about what others think of their work."

**A**N HOUR OR SO before Esvelt's meeting on Nantucket, we joined one of his graduate students, Joanna Buchthal, and Sam Telford, an infectious-disease and global-health professor at Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine, for a sandwich and some reconnaissance on Alter Rock. (At a hundred feet above sea level, it is the island's highest point.) Telford, who is one of the world's foremost tick biologists, has been studying deer, mice, and the ticks that feed on them for more than thirty years.

With wire-rimmed glasses that nearly obscure his face, Telford looks like an academic Clark Kent. He was dressed in a green felt shirt, khakis, and Wellingtons. To ride with him to the

meeting, I had to wedge into the back seat of his car between two mouse cages, both of which were, thankfully, empty. As we peered across the moors and the cranberry bogs, out toward the Atlantic, Telford talked about the rising incidence of tick-borne illness. "I have been trying for years to convince people on this island that if you get rid of the deer you get rid of Lyme," he said. "That will never happen."

I asked him if he thought Esvelt's experiment would work. "I sure don't know a better place," he said. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a more ideal location in which to explore the boundaries—both physical and emotional—of such a far-reaching experiment. Islands are self-contained. Most Nantucket residents are well educated and in a good position to make rea-

## ORIENT EPITHALAMION

Fall will touch down in golden Orient,  
where ospreys float and peace comes dropping slow.  
There will be pumpkins by the ton at Latham's.  
The trees will re-rehearse their yearly show.

But now crape myrtle ornaments the village,  
rose of Sharon, autumn clematis.  
The oyster ponds are dark and tranquil mirrors  
basking in the sunlight's brazen kiss.

On Skipper's Lane, Sebastian and Sarah  
have packed up with their brood, as one expects,  
and Madeline and Chris, and Jane and Eddie.  
No more artists! No more architects!

Just Miriam and Grayson, Sylvia and Fredi.  
Gone: writers, agents, publishers, and all!  
The real people, proudly holding steady,  
will reap the blond munificence of fall.

Goodbye to the disturbances of summer,  
when Stevie's singers jazzed in Poquatuck  
and a Supreme Court Justice read our rights out  
to every citizen, man, doe, and buck.

Now egrets dot the marsh on Narrow River.  
The swan is hiding till she nests next spring.  
Virginia creeper reddens on the tree trunks.  
Goldenrod envelops everything,

soned decisions about whether to embark on an ecological study that might affect them all. And they are motivated by a pervasive fear of Lyme and by increasingly threatening pathogens, such as babesia and erlichiosis, that are carried by the same black-legged tick that transmits the Lyme bacterium. Even raising the millions of dollars it would cost to eliminate the disease on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard shouldn't be difficult.

Life without Lyme disease would bring relief to millions of Americans, but defeating mosquitoes, which have always been humanity's deadliest enemy, would be an accomplishment—and a challenge—of an entirely different order. Malaria alone—not to mention yellow fever, dengue fever, chikungunya, and several types of encephalitis—has

succeeding to swamp rose and honeysuckle  
and all the weeds that came and went in waves.  
The geese will soon be flying in formation  
the way the Tuthill slaves sleep in their graves.

Near the monarch station, the Holzapfels  
harvest their garlic. Milkweed is in flower.  
Leslie's pool is cooling down. The ferry  
disgorges only fifty cars an hour.

It's time for sweet bay scallops, now the jellies  
have turned tail in the Sound and run away.  
The Bogdens lay their conch pots every morning,  
and the water climbs in Hallock's Bay.

Charles the First is staking lilies. Sinan  
reduces his last oozings, hours by hours.  
Karen surveys the still street from her study.  
Charles the Second's arms are full of flowers.

And the wild turkeys make their first appearance,  
though Bay and Sound still glisten from the Hill.  
The vineyard grapes hang blithe and ripe and ruddy.  
Ann builds her house, and Barry marries Bill.

Wreath them with sea lavender and asters!  
Sing for the joys and years they have in store.  
Husband them; preserve them from disasters.  
Let there be jazzing in the deep heart's core—

and let the tide not overrun the causeway:  
may Orient be theirs forever more!

—Jonathan Galassi

killed billions of people. Creating a mosquito that could eliminate those diseases would rank, along with the eradication of smallpox, as one of public health's signature achievements.

And yet any group that unleashes a tool that could reconfigure an entire species is bound to encounter serious opposition. "You know, with G.M.O.s we were told, 'It's O.K., it's being done in a lab,'" Jim Thomas, a program director at the ETC Group, told me. The group, which monitors the impact of emerging biotechnologies, has long held that we should exercise more caution before releasing genetically engineered products. "Then it was: 'It's O.K., it's being done only in a limited way.' Then: 'It's O.K., because it won't survive in the wild.' And here you have a technology that is not only going to

survive in the wild—it is intended to take over in the wild."

In September, at a meeting of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Thomas's group and others proposed a moratorium on all gene-drive research. No major scientific organization has endorsed the idea, but even the suggestion stirs a common fear among scientists: that if, through secrecy, misunderstanding, desire for profit, or arrogance, this new approach to biology comes to be viewed more as a hazard than as a salvation, people will reject it. (Early this fall, the Broad Institute licensed its CRISPR technology to Monsanto for use in developing new seeds and better crops. But the deal came with a notable caveat: Monsanto will be prohibited from using CRISPR in gene drives.)

Every new technology—whether a genetically engineered food product or a self-driving car—forces us to assess both risks and benefits. In the case of gene drives, which could alter the ecological balance of an entire continent, that debate promises to become especially divisive, in part because the technology's greatest utility will almost certainly be in Africa. And there is a long, unsavory history of Western scientists using Africans as subjects without their permission, and often without their knowledge.

Ethical choices in medicine are rarely straightforward. During early AIDS-vaccine experiments in Uganda, many Western public-health officials vigorously debated the implications of testing a risky product on Africans. Some felt that it was unethical to carry out clinical trials on people who could not possibly give their fully informed consent. The consensus among many academic researchers was that medical ethics were universal; an experiment that was forbidden in America should also be forbidden in Uganda.

That is a noble sentiment, but not one you will often hear expressed in countries that are besieged by the many diseases that have all but disappeared from the developed world. As one public-health official in Kampala told me years ago, in discussing the ethics of AIDS-vaccine trials in his country, "Principles matter to us as much as they do to Americans. But we have been dying for a long time, and you cannot respond to death with principles."

SCIENTISTS HAVE BEEN trying to use the tools of genetics to control pests almost since the day, in 1953, when James Watson and Francis Crick described how the language of life is written in four chemical letters—adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine. In 1958, the American entomologists Edward F. Knipling and Raymond C. Bushland proposed a novel approach to eliminating the screwworm (*Cochliomyia hominivorax*), the only insect known to eat the live flesh of warm-blooded animals. The screwworm has infested cattle for centuries, and it can kill a cow in less than two weeks. Employing radiation, which served as a crude but effective form of birth control, Knipling



and Bushland sterilized millions of male screwworms. They released them to mate with females, who would then lay sterile eggs. Known as sterile-insect technique, it has been used widely ever since. Two years later, Knipling published an article, in the *Journal of Economic Entomology*, in which he suggested that it would be possible to use the same approach to force malarial mosquitoes and other pests to destroy themselves. Such a proposal would have required the release of billions of sterile mosquitoes, which, at the time, was not possible.

In 2003, more than forty years after Knipling's work with mosquitoes, Austin Burt published a paper in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* which set the trajectory for all that has followed in the field. Burt, who is a professor of evolutionary genetics at Imperial College, in London, suggested, for the first time, that scientists might deploy "selfish" genes to alter or eradicate species that "cause substantial harm to the human condition." If you cut DNA in particular locations, and inserted extra copies of the selfish genes, he wrote, those genes could be harnessed to eliminate undesirable genetic traits,

such as the ability of some mosquitoes to carry disease-causing parasites and viruses.

Burt quickly recognized the biggest risk posed by this type of genetic engineering: while nobody could question the value of eliminating a disease like malaria, it might not be possible to gauge the long-term ecological impact of eradicating an entire species, no matter how deadly. Burt suggested that controlling a dangerous insect or pest would not always require scientists to kill it. "One may not want to eradicate a population, but rather to transform it genetically so that it is less noxious," he wrote in a 2003 paper, "Site-Specific Selfish Genes as Tools for the Control and Genetic Engineering of Natural Populations."

At the time, the research faced two seemingly insurmountable problems. The laws of genetics, as laid out by Gregor Mendel, dictate that genes pass between generations in heritable and predictable ways. And Darwin's law of natural selection favors genes that help their hosts survive, whereas most engineered traits do not. So a change made by scientists might last for a few

generations, but eventually nature would prevail, eliminating any gene that did not improve the fitness of the organism.

CRISPR, however, privileges design over evolution—which is the central project of synthetic biology. Using CRISPR in a lab in London, Burt and a colleague, Andrea Crisanti, have built gene-drive systems to spread female infertility in mosquitoes. There are several steps and many trials left before anyone could entertain the idea of releasing them anywhere other than a highly controlled lab. But the team has developed a long-term plan to work with scientists in a variety of countries—Burkina Faso, Mali, and Uganda—to educate local communities. Ultimately, should the science prove worthy, they hope to offer the technology to other poor malarial countries in Africa, and train people so that they can decide for themselves whether and how they should proceed.

Kevin Esvelt had studied Burt's mosquito research, but realized that his approach would not quite work with Lyme disease. Editing the ticks themselves might be feasible, but it would be nearly impossible to release enough of them to have a meaningful impact. Esvelt was briefly stumped, but then he made an obvious connection: ticks get Lyme and other infectious diseases from white-footed mice. He would rewrite the DNA of the mice to become resistant to the Lyme bacterium. The mice would mate, and, before long, all offspring and all subsequent generations would be resistant, too.

With CRISPR and gene-drive technology, it might be possible for just one engineered mosquito, or fly, or any other animal or seed, to eventually change the fundamental genetics of an entire species. As Esvelt puts it, "A release anywhere could be a release everywhere." Recognizing the possibility of an irreversible error, however, he and Church, in their earliest experiments, began to build drives capable of restoring any DNA that had been removed. Both say that if an edit cannot be corrected it should not be attempted. They also suggest retaining, in its original form, some part of any population that has been edited—a kind of molecular Noah's Ark.

## CURIOUS GEORGE, DAD



Esvelt and his colleagues have developed a system to keep gene drives from spreading where they are not wanted. The plan, which he calls a daisy drive, separates the components of any gene drive into discrete parts—a genetic version of a multistage rocket. Each component contains one or more genes that contribute to the whole drive. For the system to continue to propagate, all parts need to be present. If they are not, the trait would vanish after a prescribed number of generations.

The approach, which is still in early development, could prove essential. Regulatory approvals and government licenses would have no effect on the migratory patterns or the mating habits of a mouse or a mosquito. Without some system of control, a conventional gene drive would keep spreading across state lines and international borders. If daisy drives work, they might prevent that.

The research is ingenious and promising, but it also suggests a mastery over nature that may be hard to achieve. Human generations are long, and genetic changes are slow. But with mosquitoes or mice or many of the invasive species that scientists hope to curb, the transformation could be swift. Also, genes do not always spread the way they are supposed to. Occasionally, a gene will move between species, through a process called horizontal gene transfer. A gene drive created to suppress one type of mosquito could jump to a different one, threatening it as well. Genes themselves also change constantly. If a particular gene-drive sequence mutates, it could end up affecting different targets, with consequences that would be hard to predict.

One day this summer, I had lunch with Aviv Regev in her office at the Broad Institute, where she is the chair of the faculty. Regev, one of the world's leading computational biologists, studies the ways in which the different cells in the human body function and interact in biological systems, like muscle tissues or organs. Regev compared gene-drive mechanisms, which alter the genetics of species, with cancer immunotherapy, where a person's immune cells are leveraged to attack his tumors. "With malignant cells, we can take one gene out and see what happens," she

said. "We can take another gene out and see what happens. But if we take both out we cannot predict the result. The whole is different from the sum of the parts. That is also true in species ecology."

Both systems are risky, she added, but in experimental cancer treatment doctors present options to a patient. "That treatment could kill a person or save him. But it is a personal decision made by somebody who is appropriately informed about the risks." She stressed that she was not opposed to gene-drive research.

"But gene drives affect entire communities, not single individuals," she said. "And it can be almost impossible to predict the dynamics of any ecosystem, because it is not simply additive. That is exactly why gene drives are so scary."

LATE IN JULY, Esvelt presented his data to Martha's Vineyard residents at a forum held at the Edgartown Public Library. He spoke to a standing-room-only crowd, made up of prosperous summer people, mostly middle-aged and evenly tanned—the kind of people who can afford to spend a perfect vacation afternoon inside, at a town meeting.

Esvelt explained his goal by saying, "I want to drag my entire field kicking and screaming into the open." As in Nantucket, the crowd loved the presentation and the sentiment behind it. I couldn't help thinking of a similar town meeting I had attended a few years earlier, in Key West. That meeting was also packed with prosperous residents, but they were there to denounce scientists from the British biotech company Oxitec, which wanted to test *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes that had been genetically modified to prevent the transmission of dengue. The previous year, the region had had its first outbreak in years, and Oxitec's presentation was made at the request of local mosquito-control officials.

I had just returned from Brazil, where I watched Oxitec scientists release millions of genetically modified mosquitoes into the atmosphere. Most

residents there—nearly all of whom knew the agony that dengue causes—were exceedingly grateful.

The difference between the reception that Esvelt received and the Oxitec inquisition could not have been more marked. To some degree, the reason is that Oxitec is a profit-seeking venture and Esvelt wears his political opposition to corporate science like a neon badge. But there is an even simpler reason that one community may embrace what another rejects: the people in Brazil fear dengue, and those in New England fear Lyme; they are desperate for relief. The sorts of ethical distinctions made in Key West, where dengue was only a distant prospect, seem silly to them.

We have engineered the world around us since the beginning of humanity. The real question is not whether we will continue to alter nature for our purposes but how we will do so. Using a mixture of breeding techniques, we have transformed crops, created countless breeds of animals, and converted millions of wooded acres into farmland. Gene drives are different; one insect could affect the future of our species. But it is a difference of power, not of kind.

"I've been trying to encourage my thoughts to coalesce into a more coherent picture of why I'm doing everything that I'm doing," Esvelt told me. "Someone recently coined the terms 'upwinger' and 'downwinger,' technologically, and I'm of course very much an upwinger. That's partly because I view us as not having much of a choice. That is, we are already so dependent on technology, and, what's more, we are dependent on future advances. We cannot simply stop here and last it out—that won't work. We need new advances. And my problem, philosophically, with that is that it means that the human cautionary instinct kicks in." He went on, "We say if it's risky we just shouldn't do it. And that's fine, so long as you're standing on firm ground. But that's the thing: we're not standing on firm ground. And the greatest danger we could face is to assume that not doing anything to nature is the safest course." ♦



# THE SHADOW GENERAL

*President Sisi has unwittingly revealed more about the way Egypt now works than anyone could have imagined.*

BY PETER HESSLER

THE EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who came to power in a coup that, in its aftermath, resulted in the massacre of more than a thousand supporters of his predecessor, has a reputation for speaking very softly. This quality often disarms foreigners. “When you talk to him, unlike most generals, he listens,” a European diplomat told me recently. “He’s not bombastic.” An American official told me that Sisi reminds her of a certain Washington archetype. “You have the political people who always want to be the loudest voice in the room,” she said. “And then there are people who are creatures of the system, who are just as capable but not necessarily the loudest.” She said of Sisi, “I also think the quiet, reserved posture is a forcing function to make people lean in and really think about what he’s saying. What signal is he trying to send? Is there a deeper meaning?”

Revolutions are often started by the bold and the outspoken, and then coöpted by those who are quiet and careful. A price is paid for early prominence; in many cases, the winners are the ones who wait. In February, 2011, when the Tahrir Square movement forced President Hosni Mubarak to resign, Sisi was the Army’s director of military intelligence, a position that was virtually invisible to the public. Five years earlier, he had completed a course at the U.S. Army War College, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, but he seems to have hardly crossed the radar of top American officials. “I can’t tell you I recall any kind of special attention in the intelligence summaries with regard to Sisi,” Leon Panetta, who became the U.S. Secretary of Defense during the year of Tahrir, and who previously directed the Central Intelligence Agency, told me. In 2013, Chuck Hagel succeeded Panetta at the Pentagon. “Our military people did not know him well,” Hagel

said of Sisi. Another U.S. official told me that biographical information about Sisi had been particularly thin. “People didn’t know a lot about his wife, people didn’t know a lot about his kids,” she said. “I don’t think that’s coincidence. I think it was an intentional aura that he constructed around himself.”

Mubarak held power for nearly thirty years without naming a successor, and he was toppled by a revolution that lacked leadership or organizational structure. Afterward, Egypt was ruled by a council of military officers who were supposed to oversee the transition to a civilian government. Sisi was the youngest member of this council, and reportedly he assumed a leading role in secret talks with the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that had been banned in Egypt until the revolution. The Brotherhood had always had tense relations with the military, but during the post-Tahrir period, as the group rose to power through a series of popular elections, there were signs that an arrangement was being worked out. “Sisi was the one negotiating with the Brotherhood,” a senior official in the State Department, who had contact with both the military and the Islamists during this period, told me recently. “His view, I think, was that he was trying to influence, control, and smooth out the political process.” A European diplomat described the arrangement as “a cohabitation.” He said, “As long as the Brothers didn’t interfere too much in the military matters, then the military would allow them to get on with the business of civilian government.”

Brotherhood leaders trusted Sisi in part because he was a devout Muslim. And, at least initially, the military leaders seemed to hold up their end of the bargain. In June, 2012, when Egypt’s first democratic Presidential election was won by Mohamed Morsi, a leader of the Brotherhood, the Army didn’t interfere. Not long after taking office,

Morsi forced the retirement of the Minister of Defense, along with the commanders of the Navy, the Air Defense, and the Air Force. This move was praised by young Egyptian revolutionaries, who saw it as a sign that Morsi was determined to reduce the Army’s influence. Many people were also encouraged by his choice of new Minister of Defense: Sisi. At the age of fifty-seven, Sisi replaced a seventy-six-year-old general, and the appointment seemed to reflect a transition to a younger, more enlightened officer corps.

It wasn’t long before Morsi attempted another bold move. In November, he issued a Presidential decree that granted him temporary powers beyond the reach of any court, as a way of preempting opposition to a new, Islamist-friendly constitution. This proved to be the turning point for the Brotherhood’s political fortunes. The group lost the support of most revolutionaries, and opposition grew steadily for the next six months, until many state institutions, including the police, essentially refused to work on behalf of Morsi’s government. Sisi made few public statements, but he opened a dialogue with Chuck Hagel, his counterpart at the Pentagon. In March, 2013, as the crisis was building, Hagel visited Cairo, where he met Sisi for the first time. “Our chemistry was very good,” Hagel, a decorated Vietnam veteran, told me. “I think he saw me as someone who understood the military, who understood threats and war.”

As the crisis worsened, Hagel became the only person in the U.S. government with whom Sisi would communicate. Hagel estimates that they had nearly fifty phone conversations. “We were literally talking, like, once a week,” he said. “These would be hour-long conversations, sometimes more.” Many people believe that the military had always planned to overthrow Morsi, but Hagel is convinced that Sisi initially had no





*Sisi rules over an increasingly troubled country. "I think he doesn't trust anybody except the Army," a reporter said.*

intention of taking power. Other diplomats agreed. “He’s not somebody who has spent his life lusting for power, lusting to become President,” a European diplomat who has met Sisi dozens of times told me. Several observers emphasized that motivations tend to be fluid during a period of political instability. “I’ve never been in the position of having millions of people tell me that I can change the country if I act,” a former senior official in the Obama Administration told me. “I don’t know what that would do to my psychology.”

On the last day of June, 2013, an estimated fourteen million people took to the streets in protest against the government. I asked Hagel what Sisi was saying during this time. “What can I do?” Hagel remembered. “I mean, I can’t walk away. I can’t fail my country. I have to lead; I have support. I am the one person in Egypt today that can save this country.”

Until the end, Brotherhood leaders seemed to believe that Sisi was on their side. “I think Morsi was pretty much totally taken by surprise when Sisi turned against him,” a senior official in the State Department told me. On July 3rd, soldiers took Morsi into custody, and Sisi appeared on television to announce that an interim government would rule until Egypt could hold elections and approve a new constitution. During the months that followed, Sisi enjoyed immense popularity, but he seemed intent on remaining a cipher. He rarely appeared in public, and he never joined a political party. When he ran for President, in the spring of 2014, he had no real platform. He didn’t attend any of his own campaign rallies. He never bothered to clarify some basic details about his life; his campaign’s official YouTube channel identified two conflicting birthplaces for him. Sisi has four adult children, but he has rarely referred to them in public, and his wife has been all but invisible.

But since becoming President he has unwittingly revealed more about himself and Egypt’s political structures than anybody could have imagined. A string of secretly recorded videos and audio-tapes, known as SisiLeaks, have featured the President talking openly about sen-

sitive subjects that range from manipulating the media to extracting cash from the Gulf states. Human-rights violations have become much worse than they were under Mubarak, and the economy is dangerously weak. During the past year and a half, a plane crash in Sinai, the murder of a foreign graduate student in Cairo, and public protests over the sovereignty of two Red Sea islands have illustrated the tragedy of a failed political movement. Everything that it took for a man like Sisi to rise in revolutionary Egypt—secrecy, silence, and commitment to the system—has also made it impossible for him to enact real change.

In October, 2013, in one of the earliest of the leaked videos, Sisi spoke at a closed meeting of military officers. “The whole state has been taken apart and is being rebuilt,” he says to the assembled men. He sighs deeply—in the video, Sisi’s eyes are alert and surprisingly gentle. He’s a small, balding, neckless man, and he wears a camouflage uniform with stars and crossed sabres on the epaulets. He sits in front of a box of tissues, a large display of multicolored flowers, and no fewer than three containers of Wet Ones hand wipes. This strange tableau creates a “Wizard of Oz” effect—pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. “This is a time period that we are going through, and these are its fruits, its symptoms,” Sisi says softly. “But you will not be able to cope fully and go back to where you were. Where nobody mentions your name or talks about you.”



LAST NOVEMBER, SISI embarked on a state visit to the United Kingdom to meet with David Cameron, who was then Prime Minister. Sisi invited a number of prominent Egyptians to join him in London, including Sameh Seif El-Yazal, a retired general of military intelligence, who was leading a coalition of pro-Sisi candidates in the election for Egypt’s new parliament. On the EgyptAir flight, El-Yazal told me that the main goals of the trip were economic. “The U.K. is the largest non-Arab investor in Egypt,” he said. “I know there is a lot of interest, especially in the oil business. And we’ll be

talking about the export-import issue as well.”

Four days earlier, a Metrojet airliner carrying Russian tourists had crashed after taking off from the beach resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, in the Sinai Peninsula, killing all two hundred and twenty-four people aboard. In 2014, a Sinai-based Islamist group had pledged allegiance to ISIS, but initial reports of the crash speculated that it was likely the result of a technical malfunction rather than terrorism. This detail gave the Egyptians hope that the crash wouldn’t further damage the tourism industry, which had been crushed since the start of the Arab Spring. El-Yazal told me that the trip’s agenda wouldn’t be affected by the news.

John Casson, the British Ambassador to Egypt, was on the same flight. When I stopped by his seat, he didn’t seem to be thinking about the economic goals of Sisi’s visit. Casson was studying a Carnegie Endowment brief entitled “Egypt’s Escalating Islamist Insurgency,” and he referred to the number of Egyptian soldiers who had been killed in Sinai during the past two years. “It’s more than seven hundred, which is more than we lost in all of Afghanistan,” he said. (Some four hundred and fifty British soldiers died in the Afghan war.)

The night before, Casson had learned that British analysts believed that the plane had probably been brought down by a bomb planted by agents of ISIS. This information remained secret, although Cameron had telephoned Sisi to tell him. Months later, Casson told me that the crisis had unfolded “in real time.” As we were flying to London, a plane with British experts was headed in the opposite direction, to conduct an emergency evaluation of security procedures at the Sharm el-Sheikh airport.

Not long after we touched down in London, all flights between Sharm and the U.K. were grounded. It was unclear when and how the nearly seventeen thousand British tourists in southern Sinai would be repatriated. For the state visit, the timing couldn’t have been worse; on the first morning of Sisi’s trip, a headline in the *Independent* read “THIS COULD WELL DESTROY THE CONFIDENCE OF TOURISTS.” Sisi was staying at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, near Hyde Park, and, when I stopped by at eight o’clock

on the evening of his arrival, the front entrance had been cordoned off by the police, because several dozen Egyptian protesters stood in front, chanting Tahrir slogans: *Yasqut, yasqut, hukm al-askar!* (Down, down with military rule!)

Inside, Sisi's delegation had taken over the elegant Rosebery Lounge. Heavyset security officials were stationed beside the high bay windows, and businessmen sat at the tables, chatting in Arabic. Members of the Egyptian Presidential press corps were waiting for the evening's briefing. I sat with Fathya Eldakhakhny, a reporter for *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, a privately owned newspaper. She doubted that members of the press would have an opportunity to ask many questions about the Sinai crash. "We are here for decoration, nothing else," she said.

Eldakhakhny, a dark-haired, energetic woman in her late thirties, had served in the Presidential press corps for most of the post-Tahrir period. She said that in the days of Morsi it had been common to interact with the President's spokesman. But since Sisi took office he had held only one press conference in Egypt, at which questions were scripted. "They chose three Egyptian journalists and told them that these are the questions you will ask," Eldakhakhny said. The three journalists had confirmed to her that the questions had been planted. "I wrote an article about it," she said, and then laughed. "They didn't allow me to enter the Presidential palace for three months!"

After the coup, Sisi counted on the support of the Egyptian media. Most journalists had distrusted and feared the Brotherhood, and they were relieved when Morsi was removed. In a leaked video from this period, Sisi listens while a uniformed officer advises him on relations with the press. "In my opinion, I think that the entire media in Egypt is controlled by twenty or twenty-five people," the officer says. "These people, sir, can be contacted or engaged with in a manner that is not announced."

In fact, the meetings with the press weren't kept very quiet. During the first couple of years after the coup, televised recordings of Sisi's roundtables with prominent editors and talk-show hosts were often posted on YouTube. In one meeting, Sisi asks a group of journal-



*"Can you describe your assailant, his weapon, and a funny occupation to our improv sketch artist?"*

ists to pass sensitive information on to the authorities rather than publish it. "If you have any information on a subject, why not whisper it rather than expose it?" he says.

In Egypt, a President's control over the media has always depended largely on individual negotiation. There's no ministry of information or formal censorship apparatus, and the Internet is unrestricted. Under the Mubarak regime, boundaries weren't formally defined, and the press was managed through a combination of subtle threats and rewards. After the revolution, this system collapsed, and there were two and a half years of virtually total freedom of the press, followed by the period of almost unanimous support of Sisi. At the time of the London visit, though, the press corps was showing signs of dissent. Recently, the media had reported on a series of floods and mismanaged public services in Alexandria.

In the Rosebery Lounge, Sisi's spokesman finally appeared and met privately with Eldakhakhny and the other Egyptian journalists for twenty minutes. Afterward, Eldakhakhny told me that she had been the only one to ask about the plane crash. "The spokesman didn't want to answer," she said.

"He said, 'We don't want to focus on this issue. We want to focus on the visit. What I can say is that, in Egypt, we don't want to make decisions until the end of the investigation.'"

Eldakhakhny told me that it was possible to push some boundaries under Sisi. "Like this thing right now," she said. "The other journalists didn't follow up on the question, but they took down what was said. And maybe after a while they will start to ask these questions, too." After the meeting, the reporters from state-owned organizations had debated whether they would print the spokesman's denial. Eldakhakhny said that she was going to publish it, so they decided that they would publish, too.

I asked if she would write about the protests at the hotel, and she laughed and buried her face in her hands, as if helpless. She told me that editors at the paper had decided that it was too risky to cover the demonstrations. Later, they adjusted: the newspaper ran a piece under a different byline, and the story emphasized the presence of pro-Sisi demonstrators in London, while claiming that all opponents were connected to the Muslim Brotherhood. Eldakhakhny told me that such calculations



are common. “Sometimes if we publish something we get a call from the President’s office: ‘Remove the story!’”

FOR THE REST of the visit, the Egyptian government held its line. In Sinai, Russian investigators reported evidence of an explosion on the plane, and the Sinai affiliate of ISIS claimed responsibility. It had organized the attack in response to Russia’s air strikes in Syria. But Sisi and his administration refused to accept this possibility. The day after flights were grounded, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an aggrieved statement claiming that the British had made their decision “unilaterally, without consulting with Egypt,” despite all the direct high-level communication that had taken place.

The day that Sisi left London, I saw El-Yazal again, and he said that members of the delegation were angry about the British decision to ground the flights. “They should have waited until the visit was completed,” he said. His response seemed irrational—as a former intelligence officer, he must have known that any Western government would respond immediately to information that its citizens might be at risk from terrorism. When I spoke with one of the Egyptian journalists from the state press who had covered the visit, he told me that the British and

the Americans had conspired in order to shame Egypt and destroy the tourist economy. “This is an insult,” he said. “Why would you want to embarrass the President?”

Egyptian pride sometimes drives policy, and officials have a reputation for being hot-tempered. “I’ve certainly been yelled at and sort of aggressively confronted by many Egyptians in the government,” one U.S. official told me. “But Sisi—I’ve never seen him lose his cool.” In London, when Sisi appeared with Cameron before the press, he was gracious toward his host. Casson told me that during the closed-door meetings Sisi showed no sign of anger or resentment. “In the meeting with the Prime Minister, he was statesmanlike, very candid,” he said.

When Westerners analyze the actions of an authoritarian figure, they tend to focus on his mind-set—the frequently petulant behavior of a man with unlimited power. But often the institution matters more than the individual, and a leader channels the psychology and the dysfunction of the state. For Sisi, who rose as a creature of the system, the response to the Metrojet crisis was essentially to step back and allow the government to follow its instinctive course of defensiveness, denial, and inflexibility. It made no strategic sense: since taking office, Sisi had sought to justify his crackdown on civil

liberties by declaring that Egypt was in an existential battle against radical Islamists. The Metrojet bombing supported this narrative, but it also hurt Egyptian pride, which trumped terrorism. Sisi didn’t change his line until three months later, when, in a televised speech, he made a passing reference to the fact that terrorists had brought down the plane. After that, he never referred to the event in public.

Not long after the London visit, El-dakhakhny left the Presidential press corps. “This is not a job,” she said, when I saw her again. “You’re a postman. Just take the press release and deliver it to the newspaper.” She was now the editor of *Al-Masry Al-Youm’s* Web site, and I asked about her conclusions after nearly two years of covering Sisi. “He doesn’t choose good people to work for him, his advisers, his ministers,” she said. “If you work alone, then you will lose. I think that he doesn’t trust anybody except the Army.” She continued, “He needs a party.”

OF THE FOUR military men who have ruled Egypt during the past sixty years, Sisi stands out for his lack of interest in formal politics. Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat were activists as young men, and both flirted with the Muslim Brotherhood before rejecting political Islam. As President, each worked to build a political organization, which under Sadat became known as the National Democratic Party, or N.D.P. Mubarak, Sadat’s chosen successor, used the N.D.P. to rule what was in effect a one-party state.

In some respects, Sisi is a natural politician, and his speeches, delivered in colloquial Arabic, often impress average Egyptians as sincere and sympathetic. But his political instincts are personal, not institutional, and the subject of politics does not seem to have interested him while he was growing up. Sisi’s immediate family includes thirteen siblings and half siblings; his father was polygamous, although little is known about the woman who in the Egyptian press is referred to as simply “the second wife.” The only family member whom Sisi speaks about with any frequency is his mother. She died during his second year in office, and he has described her as “an



authentically Egyptian woman, in all the meaning of authenticity.” In 2013, an Egyptian journalist asked Sisi what he had done after announcing the removal of Morsi on television. Sisi responded, “I read the statement, and then I went to my mother.” (Her reaction: “May God protect you from all evil!”)

Sisi’s grandfather began a business making arabesques, wooden objects that are intricately patterned with inlaid mother-of-pearl. The Sisi clan came to dominate the arabesque trade in Khan al-Khalili, the premier tourist market in Cairo, and the family still owns nearly ten shops there. One afternoon last summer, I stopped at a store that was being tended by Mossad Ali Hamama, the thirty-two-year-old son of one of Sisi’s cousins. The shop’s back wall is decorated with a photograph of Sisi’s grandfather. In the black-and-white picture, he sits imperiously in a galabiya, a cane in one hand and a tarboosh on his head.

Hamama said that during summer vacation all teen-age male family members are apprenticed into some aspect of the business. Sisi trained as a *sadafgi*—he used a long-handled knife to carve out tiny pieces of mother-of-pearl. “We don’t have a situation where we say, ‘This is the son of a business owner, and this is the son of a President,’” Hamama said. “The only rule is about the way the elders and the younger interact. If we’re talking about my father’s cousin, if he’s older than me, then I obey him.” He continued, “If an elder comes into the shop, even if he’s not in the business, he’ll sit down here as if he owned the shop. Our family is not from Upper Egypt, but you can say we have this tradition of the Upper Egyptians.”

Upper Egypt is known for conservatism, and I asked Hamama if he is sometimes bothered by this tradition. “No, it’s the opposite,” he replied. “Because, just as I respect my elders, one day I will be old and somebody will respect me.”

When Sisi was in his mid-teens, he entered a military high school. The combination of Army discipline, a rigid family structure, and sincere religious conviction has created a person who by all accounts is deeply traditional. He married his first cousin, which is common for conservative Egyptians, and his wife and daughter are homemakers. I could

find no evidence in the Egyptian press of any Sisi women having careers. Fathy El-Sisi, one of the President’s cousins, told the newspaper *El Watan* that Sisi had twice turned down an assignment to serve as a military representative in the United States, because the Egyptian authorities requested that his wife remove her hijab while in the West.

For Sisi, the Mubarak regime has served as a cautionary tale. Mubarak openly groomed his son Gamal for political power, and the extended family profited from corruption on a staggering scale. Mubarak’s wife, Suzanne, was also highly involved in politics, especially on behalf of women’s rights, and her role often offended Islamists and other conservatives. After the revolution, Mubarak and his sons were imprisoned, and their fate is undoubtedly one reason that Sisi has kept his family out of the public eye. Eldakhkhny told me that the Bahraini press once reported that Sisi’s wife had accompanied him on a state visit, so *Al-Masry Al-Youm* mentioned it in a story. The President’s press office immediately called the paper and demanded that the article be removed.

Sisi seems to have taken similar lessons from the N.D.P., which over time became dominated by corrupt businessmen. A number of American officials told me that during the first post-Tahrir Presidential election Sisi and other military leaders were wary of Ahmed Shafiq, Morsi’s opponent, a retired Air Force general who had been Mubarak’s last Prime Minister. For Sisi and other military men, Shafiq may have been even more threatening than Morsi. They seemed to believe that the Brotherhood could be easily controlled, whereas Shafiq might resurrect a party with real power. Even after the defeat of the Brotherhood, the authorities have made sure that Shafiq remains in exile—he’s currently in the Gulf, with the threat of legal cases in Egypt preventing his return.

“The biggest question about Sisi is whether he can grow from a commander-in-chief into a politician,” a European diplomat told me. “He gives the impression of seeing politics, as an activity, as a corrosive thing. It divides the nation.” A senior official in the U.S. State Department said that Sisi per-

ceives only the risks and none of the benefits of a party. “Politicians actually need parties for more reasons than to get elected,” he said. “You need to hear from your people around the country.” Another European diplomat described visiting Sisi’s central campaign headquarters during the 2014 Presidential election, in which, after a number of his opponent’s supporters were arrested, Sisi won ninety-six per cent of the vote. The headquarters were in the remote outskirts of Cairo, and, when the European diplomat visited, she passed through heavy security and then found the place empty except for two retired government officials. “If you visit a campaign headquarters at the end of the election, it should be bustling with young people,” she said. “He chose not to campaign. But that could have been an opportunity to build a connection with young people.”

Without real parties, real political institutions, and real professional politicians, there are few ways for young Egyptians to get involved in politics, other than protesting in the streets. The existing parties are too weak and disorganized to enlist aides or volunteers on a regular basis, and laws aimed at limiting foreign influence have dismantled nongovernmental organizations. Sisi’s approval rating remains generally high, because citizens believe that he has brought security to the country, but polls show that the youth are much more skeptical of him than older Egyptians are. Roughly sixty per cent of the population is under the age of thirty, and young people dominated the original protests in Tahrir Square. They are also a major presence in the field of journalism. Most important, the young represent the sector that is most affected by Sisi’s greatest weakness: his economic policies.

ONE OF SISI’S first state visits was to China, in 2014, and he returned the following year. In the press, there was talk of following the example of the Chinese. The implication was that Egypt could use authoritarianism to make decisive economic policy, but few outsiders take this seriously. The Chinese certainly don’t. One Chinese diplomat in Cairo told me bluntly that Egypt is going in the opposite direction

from China. “It’s a reverse image,” he said. Ashraf El-Sherif, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo, said, “I can understand a social contract that is authoritarianism in exchange for development. But in Egypt you have authoritarianism in exchange for non-development.”

In January, President Xi Jinping gave a speech at the Arab League Headquarters, in Cairo, in which he said, “Turmoil in the Middle East stems from the lack of development.” Xi referred to “currency swaps,” “genetic engineering,” and “production-capacity cooperation,” and he used the word “development” twenty-three times. He said “religious” twice. He never mentioned “Islam,” “Muslim,” or “the Islamic State.” For the Chinese, the devoutness of the Egyptians and their commitment to traditional family and gender roles are so deeply entrenched that to comment on them publicly would be as pointless as complaining about the weather. But the cultural differences between the countries, and the ways in which they affect economic and social outcomes, are immense. (It’s impossible, for example, to imagine an ambitious Chinese turning down an overseas promotion so that his wife can wear more conservative clothing.)

In China, manufacturing has averaged more than thirty per cent of gross domestic product for the past three decades. In Egypt—a populous, young country, with cheap labor and great access to shipping lanes—manufacturing is only sixteen per cent of a weak G.D.P. Sisi’s speeches almost never focus on manufacturing, and his policies have done nothing to boost it. Egypt’s industrial sector is largely based on energy extraction and production, which employs relatively few people and fluctuates with oil prices. Tourism once contributed more than a tenth of the economy, but, with the turmoil of the Middle East, it has no immediate hope of recovery. In the World Economic Forum’s rankings of women’s economic participation and opportunity, Egypt is a hundred and thirty-second out of a hundred and forty-four countries, behind Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. This is even worse than Egypt’s ranking before the revolution, in part because the security climate has led fam-

ilies to further restrict the activities of wives and daughters. One result has been a spike in pregnancies: in 2012, Egypt recorded its highest birth rate in two decades.

The bloated civil service is one of the few sectors that employ many Egyptians. Not counting the police and the Army, the government has an estimated six million workers, more than twice as many as the United States and the United Kingdom combined. More than a quarter of the Egyptian budget is spent on government salaries. Another quarter is spent on interest payments for loans. Thirty per cent more is spent on subsidies, largely for energy.

If this sounds like a shell game, that’s because it is. For decades, Egypt has been propped up by foreign aid; since the coup, Gulf countries, which rely on Sunni Egypt to help counterbalance Iran and the Shiites, have provided more than thirty billion dollars. The question of whether this money bought the respect and gratitude of the Egyptians was effectively answered by SisiLeaks. In a series of secretly recorded conversations that were released to a Turkish television station starting in 2014, Sisi and his associates discuss Gulf money in the bluntest terms imaginable. In one conversation, Sisi and Abbas Kamel, the chief of staff, talk about making another request of Gulf leaders:

SISI: Listen, you tell him that we need ten [billion] to be put in the account of the Army. Those ten, when God makes us successful, will work for the state. And we need from the U.A.E. another ten, and from Kuwait another ten, and a couple of pennies to be put in the central bank, and that would complete the 2014 budget.

KAMEL: [laughter]

SISI: Why are you laughing?

KAMEL: He will faint, he will faint . . .

SISI: They have money like rice, man.

Sisi and Kamel make casual calculations, with every number representing a billion dollars. The dialogue reads like a screenplay about Arab leaders on the make—“Glengarry Gulf State”:

SISI: The Emirates put in four.

KAMEL: That makes it nine.

SISI: And Saudi Arabia put in four.

KAMEL: That makes it thirteen. And three more—that makes it sixteen.

SISI: And four from Kuwait.

KAMEL: That makes it twenty.

SISI: And then?

[Voice unclear]: Twenty and add to them

3.6 that comes from, from, from January, yes. And the 1.5 from the U.A.E.

KAMEL: That makes it twenty-five. Like I was saying to you, sir, and the oil.

SISI: Did I count the oil?

KAMEL: Yes, sir, you did.

Nobody in Cairo seems to know who is directing economic policy. After taking office, Sisi reduced some subsidies for fuel and electricity, which economists cheered as a first step toward a more sustainable system. But few other proactive measures were taken. Instead, Sisi mostly focussed on grandiose mega-projects, like the expansion of the Suez Canal, which cost more than eight billion dollars and, in the opinion of most economists, is unlikely to provide much benefit in the near future. A relatively weak attempt to reform the civil service was finally passed by parliament in October.

“Sisi thinks, like all military men, that the economy is a collection of projects that the military runs,” Robert Springborg, an expert on the Egyptian military who is currently a visiting scholar at Harvard University, told me. “He hasn’t got a clue.” The military mind-set is also deeply defensive. Unlike the Chinese, who for many years kept their currency undervalued, as a way of attracting investment and manufacturing, the Egyptians have expended a large amount of the country’s financial resources on propping up the pound. In the past year, the black-market rate for U.S. dollars rose steeply, and the government responded by making it all but impossible to exchange at the official rate. Manufacturers like General Motors and L.G. temporarily halted production, because they couldn’t convert local income into dollars to pay for imported parts.

In August, Sisi’s government finally agreed to a loan from the International Monetary Fund. Egypt considered such an action in 2011 and 2012, but support from the Gulf, the United States, and elsewhere allowed the government to postpone hard economic decisions. The delay has proved costly. By the time Sisi’s government accepted I.M.F. support, the terms had become much more stringent than before. A new law has effectively frozen government salaries, and the I.M.F. insisted that Egypt devalue the pound, reduce energy subsidies, and introduce a value-added tax—a



brutal combination in an economy that already has an inflation rate of more than fifteen per cent.

In the beginning of November, the government allowed the pound to float, and the currency has lost more than half its value. During the coming months, life will become much harder for the average Egyptian. More than a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, and yet the country as a whole has enjoyed a kind of economic fantasy. "Compared with other countries in Africa, Egypt has quite a high standard of living, even though it's a dysfunctional economy," a foreign businessman in Cairo told me. "Have they been living beyond their means?" He continued, "When you have a lot of imports, a large workforce, and wages that are quite low, and yet you're not exporting—it doesn't add up."

Government officials rarely seem to comprehend the situation, in part because they have been conditioned by a long history of subsidies. Since 1979, when Egypt agreed to a peace treaty with Israel, the United States has given Egypt approximately fifty billion dollars in aid. The current rate is about \$1.5 billion per year, most of which is military aid, including weaponry and other equipment. Naturally, the recipients tend to fixate on these objects rather than on larger economic issues. After Morsi was removed, the Obama Administration decided not to designate the event as a coup, which would have triggered an automatic cancellation of aid. As a half-measure, the U.S. temporarily withheld some key military equipment. But this policy, instead of inspiring deep reflection about democracy and human rights, resulted in ever more obsessive thinking about certain pieces of shiny metal. "The fact that you could meet an Egyptian on the street who would know that there was an executive hold placed on the Apache helicopters is crazy," one U.S. official who frequently travels to Egypt told me. Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican congressman from Orange County who is a staunch supporter of Sisi, told me that during meetings in the past two years the President has talked about the need to get spare parts for tanks.

"We always used to say, 'The poor Americans give a billion and a half a year and get nothing for it,'" a Euro-



*"Not everyone benefits from technological advances."*

pean diplomat told me. "Well, the Emirates and the Saudis gave thirty billion dollars in two years and got nothing for it." But all these countries have received exactly what they paid for. They've always been motivated by narrow definitions of stability: the U.S. wants peace between Egypt and Israel, and the Gulf wants peace between Shiite and Sunni countries. All of them want an Egyptian government that fights Islamic extremism. If they truly desired social and political change, they wouldn't direct the majority of their funding toward the Egyptian military, a conservative institution with no expertise in economics, education, or social and political policy. It's hardly surprising that a military man like Sisi views the world defensively. But long-term political stability may require immediate economic and social change. "If you're a foreign country that's relying on Sisi as a provider of stability," the foreign businessman told me, "and he is consistently failing to create sustainable jobs for young Egyptians, then what kind of stability is he offering?"

ON FEBRUARY 3, 2016, the body of Giulio Regeni, a twenty-eight-year-old Italian graduate student at the University of Cambridge, was discovered in a ditch beside the Cairo-Alexandria

Desert Road. Regeni had been researching a dissertation about Egyptian labor activism, and friends last saw him on January 25th, the fifth anniversary of the revolution. As the story emerged, the details constantly changed. At first, the police claimed that Regeni had died in a car accident, but the public prosecutor's office revealed that he had suffered bone fractures and bruises and that his face and body were covered with cigarette burns and stab wounds. An Egyptian forensics official estimated that he had been tortured for up to seven days.

In late March, the Ministry of Interior claimed that four men who had been killed in a shoot-out with police were part of a criminal gang that had kidnapped Regeni. Ministry officials displayed Regeni's passport and other identity cards, claiming that they had been found with the gang members. But the story quickly collapsed under investigations by Egyptian and foreign journalists, until even Egyptian officials publicly acknowledged that there didn't seem to be a link to the gang. The signs of torture, along with the fact that Regeni's documents seemed to have been planted with the gang, suggested that the security forces were most likely responsible for the

death. Regeni's research was only mildly sensitive, and there seems to be no logical reason why he would have been tortured. Italy recalled its Ambassador to Egypt, in protest.

While the crisis was building, Sisi delivered a nationally televised address. He claimed that Egypt was the victim of conspiracies, and said, "Don't listen to anybody's words but mine." He criticized those who protested against the government, and he blamed Egyptians for not contributing enough to a fund that has been established to help alleviate the country's financial crisis. In a display of military math, he declared, "If only ten of the ninety million mobile-phone owners in Egypt would donate one pound to Egypt every morning, then we would have ten million every day."

During this period, a number of influential talk-show hosts, who a year earlier had been staunch supporters of the President, openly criticized him. "I think the President no longer communicates with the people," Youssef Al-Hosiny, a host on the ONTV station, which is privately owned, said on air. In the past, Al-Hosiny had been so loyal that Sisi once offered him a job, but now the host turned to the camera and said, "Sir, are you annoyed by the chants, and not annoyed by the killing or the torture?" (Later, after Al-Hosiny's criticism intensified, his show was temporarily taken off the air.)

In the spring, I spoke about the Regeni case with Anwar Sadat, a nephew of the former President, who had just been named the head of the parliament's human-rights committee. At the time, the appointment was considered a positive sign, because Sadat is well respected by the international community. He spoke of the hundreds of disappearances that have occurred since Sisi came to power. "Every day, it's not only Regeni," Sadat said. "Every day, with Egyptians." In the past year, instances of disappearance and torture have spiked, and Egypt currently has more than forty thousand political prisoners. Sadat said that under previous regimes it would have been unimaginable for a foreigner to be tortured to death, and he believed that it might reflect a breakdown in command. "It could have happened because of young officers who are not professional,"

he said. "A mistake. It wasn't something intentional."

In August, Sadat resigned from the human-rights committee, citing a lack of cooperation by the government. When we met, he said that Sisi's relationship with the police is complicated. "He doesn't trust them, but he has to use them," he said.

In Egypt, there's a history of tension between the military and the police, with a shifting balance of power. Mubarak never fully trusted the Army—for one thing, Islamist officers had assassinated his predecessor—and he built up the Ministry of Interior as a bulwark of support. His police became notorious for their brutality and poor discipline. Egypt has mandatory military service for males, and conscripts with the lowest levels of education are assigned to the police. The behavior of the security forces was one cause of the revolution, but none of the subsequent governments have been strong enough to force reforms. "Once, I asked Sisi, 'Why don't you do something about the police?'" a senior official in the U.S. State Department told me. "He said because he couldn't. He said, 'It's a million-man mafia.'"

During the summer of 2013, after the coup, thousands of Morsi supporters held sit-ins at two locations in Cairo. Chuck Hagel told me that he repeatedly warned Sisi not to take violent action, but Sisi emphasized the difference between the police and the Army. "He was saying they were working with the



police, but they're trying to back the police off from being too brutal," Hagel told me. "I said, 'You've got to find a way to handle this.' And that's when he would say, 'I don't control the police.'"

Even under Mubarak, each institution strived to carve out its own sphere of influence, a dynamic that has become much more pronounced since the revolution. And the tradition of police brutality is so entrenched that it's become a kind of applied dysfunction. Sisi, like

all Egyptian leaders before him, knows that the police can do things for which he is not directly accountable. On the morning of August 14, 2013, the security forces cleared the pro-Morsi sit-ins with shocking brutality. The protesters weren't entirely peaceful—some had weapons, and eight police officers were killed. But the vast majority of demonstrators were unarmed, and the security forces didn't provide adequate warnings or safe exits for people to leave. Human Rights Watch estimates that more than a thousand people were killed that day.

After the massacre, Hagel and Sisi spoke on the phone. "He said that he was sorry, so sorry," Hagel remembered. "He said he wished it hadn't come to this. This was never something he wanted, or his country wanted." He went on, "He talked about his family, and he talked about his wife."

I asked what Sisi had said about his family.

"They were sickened by it," Hagel said. "He said his wife was very upset, and his family, to see all of this bloodshed." He continued, "He didn't say they blamed him for it, but they were really touched by it. He said they were praying for everybody."

THE MASSACRE EFFECTIVELY ended a phase of the revolution. Egyptians experienced, in the words of one European diplomat, "a neuralgia about disorder." After more than two years of protests and political violence, it seemed that everybody was traumatized and exhausted. Near the end of 2013, the government enacted a law that effectively forbids any demonstration without official approval, with a maximum punishment of a year in prison.

Today, the neuralgia defines Egyptian public life. Citizens engage in politics in unpredictable and irrational ways, as if reacting to sudden spasms of pain. In April, Sisi's cabinet announced that two uninhabited islands in the Red Sea, which Saudi Arabia had placed under Egyptian control in the nineteen-fifties, were to be returned. After private negotiations, Sisi had agreed to what some might describe as an act worthy of praise: a peaceful transfer of territory in the Middle East.

But there was no public discussion

## REGISTRY

They asked for what  
they'd need: one

cup and one plate,  
one day whose stunt

double would be  
night, and two miner's

lights, for when  
each was lost

to the other.

—*Andrea Cohen*

or debate in parliament, and the announcement seemed timed to coincide with a new Saudi aid package. When Sisi appeared on television, he was defensive, and this time his references to the maternal fell flat. ("My mother taught me not to take other people's things.") Activists and journalists organized a protest in front of the Journalists Syndicate, in downtown Cairo. Several hundred people participated, in the most significant demonstration since Sisi took office.

The Journalists Syndicate is state-funded, and the authorities have generally been able to coöpt the institution. Under Sisi, dozens of journalists and bloggers have been imprisoned, but most of them have been young people who are not members of the syndicate, or who lack the backing of registered publications. During the controversy over the islands, though, the crackdown broadened. At one point, some journalists who had been harassed by the authorities sought refuge in the building, and three syndicate board members were charged with harboring fugitives. When I met with Khaled El-Balshy, one of the board members who had been charged, he told me that he was a liberal, but he had never considered himself a dissident. "If I have a chance of not going to jail, I'll take it," he said. "I've always said what I've wanted to say, but I say it in a careful way. But now you're dealing with a crazy regime." He was late to our ap-

pointment, because he had been signing off on power-of-attorney forms, in case something happened to him. A few months after our meeting, El-Balshy and the two other board members were sentenced to two years in prison, a decision that is currently being appealed.

There had been an attempt to hold a second protest over the islands on April 25th, and early that afternoon I made my way toward the syndicate. Police were everywhere; one plainclothes cop sauntered past with a wad of plastic handcuff restraints dangling from his back pocket, like a workman's tools. A block from the syndicate, a dozen or so men were loitering on the street, and I struck up a conversation with Hossam Khalil, a twenty-seven-year-old journalist who writes for a Web site called Alhayat News. He told me that he was there to protest, not to report.

"People should have the opportunity to give feedback," he said, of the dispute over the islands. The demonstration was scheduled to begin in less than half an hour, but the police had barricaded the street in front of the syndicate. Hossam was accompanied by Bakr Ahmed, an accountant, who told me that he didn't really care much about the islands. "I'm here to support Hossam, because he's my friend," he said. While we were talking, more than twenty plainclothes police suddenly moved in. They checked I.D.s and hustled the young men toward a row of

police vans. When an officer saw my foreign passport, he told me to leave. After ten minutes, I called Hossam's phone, but it was off—I assumed that it had been impounded.

An Egyptian journalist texted me to say that the demonstration had been moved to Mesaha Square, an obscure location on the Giza side of the Nile. I arrived as carloads of young people spilled out onto the peripheries of the square. Soon, they coalesced into a chanting mass of around three hundred: "Down, down with military rule!"

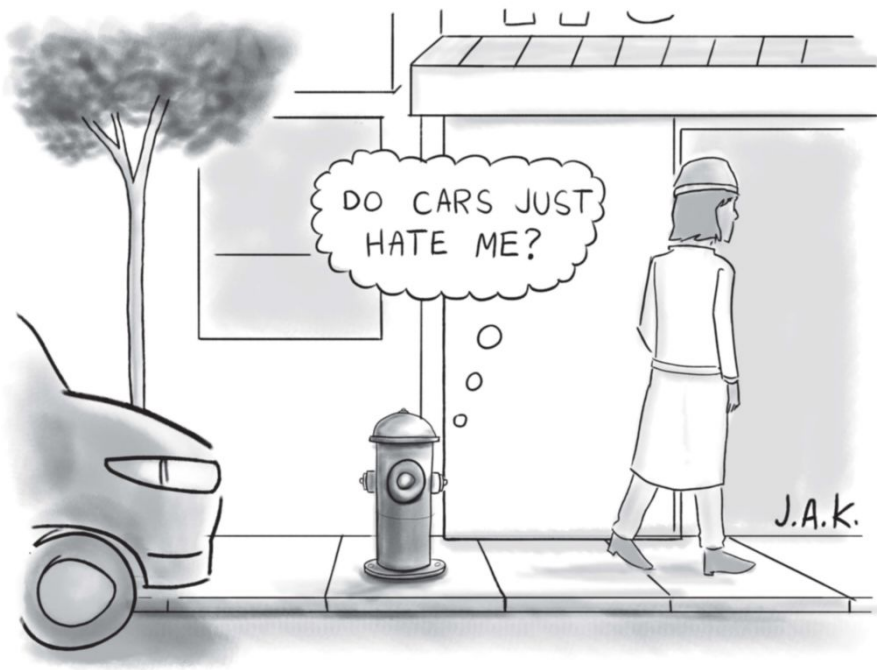
It took seven minutes for the police to respond. They fired tear gas and rounds of birdshot, and soon the protesters were fleeing in all directions. I ran with a group that headed east on a residential street, where we were stopped by a terrifying sight: a plainclothes cop, his face furious, shouting and sprinting toward us with his pistol drawn. What was he yelling? Whom was he pointing the gun at? Why was he running against the flow of dispersal? But these were questions to add to the eternal mystery of Egyptian police work. Whatever he was chasing, it wasn't us; along with half a dozen others, I flattened myself against a wall until the maniac had charged past.

Two blocks from Mesaha, everything was quiet, and I approached four young men who I assumed had been part of the protest. But my questions confused them—in the grand, chaotic scheme of the city, the demonstration had been so small that these men hadn't even noticed. They brightened when they realized that I was a foreigner. "Can you help translate this?" one asked, handing me a printed response to a visa application to the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service. One sentence read, in English:

It is not felt to be sufficiently probable that you will return to your country of origin promptly, due in part to the local or general situation in your country of origin/habitual residence and/or your weak social ties there.

I did my best with the translation and kept walking toward the Nile. What would you do if you were a young Egyptian? Hossam called my cell phone late that evening, to see if I was all right. He had been detained by the police for more than six hours and released; Bakr was still being held, along with nearly three





hundred others. Three days later, Bakr appeared before a judge. The young accountant, who had been arrested before he even reached the protest, was sentenced to two years in prison.

**I**N DETENTION, BAKR found that it was difficult to undergo interrogation as a political prisoner when he had committed no act of protest, belonged to no political organization, and in fact held no strong political opinions. His instinct was to create an alibi: he told the interrogating officer that he had been retrieving a computer that was being repaired near the syndicate. Two days later, during another interrogation, he claimed that he had been picking up a suit from a tailor, because his cousin was getting married. Later, he couldn't explain why he had created a new narrative, other than the fact that the interrogators seemed dissatisfied.

They also didn't like Bakr's responses to questions about his voting history. Since the revolution, he had gone to the polls three times, and in each case he had deliberately spoiled his ballot. In 2011 and 2012, this was a common act by young people who disliked all the electoral choices. But the practice confused the interrogators. "They said, 'You're weird, you're strange, how are you so full of contradictions?'" Bakr recalled. They asked if he belonged to the

Muslim Brotherhood, or if he had any relatives in the organization, and his denials seemed to disappoint them even more. Finally, they asked if he was a Muslim. When he said that he was, they brightened: "So why didn't you vote for Morsi? Don't you want Sharia law?"

**S**ISI HAS SUCCESSFULLY portrayed himself as standing against a wave of radical Islam, whereas activists often claim that his crackdown will only create new militants. But both these narratives may be wrong. There's no evidence of the kind of broad-based movement of religious resistance that arose during the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when Islamists engaged in violent attacks across Egypt. Nancy Okail, who directs the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, which analyzes reports of terrorism, told me that the previous generation of Egyptian radicals always portrayed their struggle in highly religious terms. "It addressed issues of traditional culture," Okail said. "For example, they threw acid on women who were not covered." In those days, Islamists also attacked hotels and night clubs that served alcohol, and foreigners were a prime target.

The current movement rarely targets foreigners or tourists, with the exception of the Metrojet bombing, which was intended as a statement against

Russian policy in Syria. There have been scattered attacks on Coptic Christian churches, including a recent bombing that killed more than two dozen worshippers at Cairo's main cathedral. But the vast majority of terrorism has focused on the Egyptian police, the Army, or other representatives of the state. Okail told me that while the current resistance uses the model of radical Islam, its targets tend to be political rather than religious or cultural. The same is true of the terrorists' statements, which often focus on issues that have little to do with Islam, such as the Red Sea islands. "Messages now are nearly as political as if they were produced by a political group," Okail said.

There has been almost no violence in Upper Egypt, which was a hotbed of radical Islam thirty years ago. These days, most attacks occur in Sinai, where Okail says that the total number of fighters is only between five hundred and a thousand. Hassan Hassan, a fellow at the Tahrir Institute who studies ISIS, told me that around six hundred Egyptians have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq. That's fewer than the number of German citizens who are believed to have joined ISIS, and much lower than the figure for Tunisians. A Belgian is six times more likely than an Egyptian to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

"In Egypt, people are not turning to these organizations, because they know better," Hassan told me. He explained that ISIS recruits from foreign countries tend to be relatively educated and sophisticated, but they have a poor understanding of Islam, which makes them susceptible. In contrast, Egypt's long tradition of radical Islam and the recent experience with the Muslim Brotherhood have effectively inoculated most citizens against such ideas. For Egyptians, who mostly supported the coup, the Brotherhood's failure was also a failure of political Islam. "I think that, more than we realized at the time, the Islamists suffered a political defeat," one European diplomat told me. "We tend to see them as defeated by the security forces, but the political defeat may have been just as big."

In Egypt, people who might be ISIS recruits elsewhere—the educated and sophisticated—tend to believe that ISIS was created by the United States as a way of destabilizing the region. That's

how ineffective the terrorists' slick videos have been: in the eyes of many Egyptians, ISIS represents America, not Islam. And Egyptian mosques, which were politically important in the early years of the revolution, now seem peripheral. Under Sisi, strict new rules limit who is allowed to preach Friday sermons, effectively removing Salafis and other radicals from the pulpit. The government issues standardized weekly sermons, and this year's topics have included "Islam Is the Religion of Building and Construction" and "National Products and Their Priority in Selling and Buying." There have been sermons about conserving water and electricity. Sheikh Sayyid el Komi, the imam at the dormitory mosque at Ain Shams University, in Cairo, told me that during the electricity-conservation sermon he announced that the mosque would use only fifteen of its thirty ceiling fans. It seemed hard to believe that this was the message at a university that, only a few years before, had produced thousands of student demonstrators intent on transforming the nation.

In 2013, after the massacre, I interviewed imams and believers at more than two dozen mosques around Cairo. At that time, a minority of the sheikhs had been adamantly anti-coup. This spring, I revisited them and found that their opinions hadn't changed, but they saw no point in being involved in politics. This contrasted with pro-democracy activists, who were more likely to perceive an existential crisis in the current climate. But Islam has many potential outlets other than politics, and the imams now seemed focussed on their communities. "Amid the depression and poverty, many people are just trying to live," Sheikh Ahmed el-Sayyed, the imam at Aziz Bellah Mosque, whose congregation is known to include many Salafis, told me. In 2013, Sheikh Ahmed had seemed under pressure, and I heard him deliver a sermon with a clear message of resistance. But this year he appeared much more relaxed and philosophical. During one Friday sermon, he told the congregation, "If happiness comes from power, then the ministers would be happy."

Two of the most adamantly anti-Sisi imams whom I met in 2013 were subsequently removed from their posts. In the years since, each had received a good

reassignment after a small bribe was paid to the authorities. This surprised me—nowadays, a human-rights activist can't solve a political problem so easily. The imams told me that none of their close friends or colleagues are in prison, whereas activists all have a long list of jailed comrades. But it seemed easier for the imams to distance themselves. "The next wave of change will happen because of the economy," one of them told me. "People won't have food, and they'll go out into the streets." I asked if this meant that the anti-Sisi imams are unlikely to lead any future resistance, and he nodded. "They won't start it," he said. "But, if it happens, then they'll participate."

**T**HIS YEAR, SISI has engaged in some moments of unusual public honesty. "Take a good look at your country," he said, during a televised address in May. "This is the semblance of a state, and not a real state." Five years after Tahrir, the revolution's main achievement is one of exposure, not reform. With every illusion stripped away, Egypt is revealed to be a state without real institutions, led by a man who is not a real politician.

Despite all the country's problems, the possibility of total collapse remains remote. Unlike colonial creations such as Syria and Iraq, Egypt has a powerful sense of unity—after all, it's the oldest country on earth. And the fact that radical Islam has little appeal to today's Egyptians, despite all that they have suffered, is another positive factor. Some analysts point out that Mubarak became less military-minded over time, and perhaps Sisi, who seems to have no weakness for corruption, will develop in positive ways. Even his fiercest critics fear the alternatives. "I think that, whether Sisi is the perfect choice or not, we have no choice but to have him succeed," Anwar Sadat told me. "Egypt cannot afford any other third revolution." A European diplomat said that Sisi could easily counter any movement against him, much as President Recep Erdoğan did in response to the recent coup attempt in Turkey. "He could make a call to the people and say, 'I stand for order,'" the diplomat said. "And that will go down very well." It would likely also appeal to American officials—after Donald Trump won the election, the first foreign leader

to call with congratulations was Sisi.

"If Sisi left now, somebody from the military institution is going to run the country," Hossam Khalil told me. He expected Sisi to serve two four-year terms, after which he hoped for the election of a civilian leader—an extremely modest goal for a young man who had risked a prison term by going out into the street. But the line between today's expectations and tomorrow's demands is not always straight or predictable. In Egypt, it's impossible to imagine how the revolutionary experience will settle into the psyches of the more than fifty million people who are younger than thirty.

In May, Hossam stopped working, because he felt depressed and guilty about leading Bakr to the protest. He followed Bakr's court hearings, and he tried to console Bakr's mother, who is a widow. And then in early June, right before Ramadan, Bakr and the thirty-two defendants who appeared with him were unexpectedly acquitted.

On the evening after Bakr's release, I met him at a café downtown. He looked tired and thin, but he said that he had been fortunate in prison. Others had been tortured, but he wasn't. He said that some of the guards were young conscripts who wept when they saw their peers hauled in as prisoners.

In a non-state led by a non-politician, Bakr seemed like a kind of non-activist. He had never joined a political organization or issued a statement; in fact, he hadn't spoken a single word on the day of his arrest. His interrogations had been a farce of suspicion, fear, and confusion. Every time he had entered a voting booth in Egypt's fledgling democracy, he had spoiled his ballot. And yet he had spent six weeks as a political prisoner, an experience that seemed utterly senseless. But, when I asked what he had learned, his response was surprisingly coherent.

"I learned that even though I have a right, and it's my basic right, there's a price to be paid, and I have to pay it, just like other people have paid it," he said. He took a deep drag on a Karelia cigarette and smiled—there's no happier smoker than a young man who has just got out of prison, on the first night of Ramadan, after the fast has broken. He said, "I also learned that the oppressor is always afraid." ♦





“MOST DIE YOUNG,” Professor Croze admitted. “Define ‘young,’” I said, not looking up from my notebook. Professor Croze was not a pretty sight. There were white spots on the back and the sides of her tongue, and she seemed unaware of them, or unconcerned, at least—she opened her mouth wide to say even the smallest things. “Under the age of thirty-eight,” she said.

I wrote, “Young < 38,” and underlined it twice. It didn’t matter that I’d just turned thirty-eight. I never took anything personally.

Professor Croze went on to list the main causes of death among the Pawong, a Malaysian tribe that she’d studied as a young anthropologist.

“They get murdered, of course—they’re such an easy target—or they go hang themselves in the forest when they’ve had enough. Sometimes they convince themselves they’ve been cursed, and they fade out and die within a few weeks, without any evidence of infection or disease.”

I was writing a story on the Pawong for *Wide*, a cultural magazine with interests so broad that no one knew quite how to think about it. From one month to the next, I’d seen it shuffle around among the entertainment, politics, and women’s-interests sections of the newsstand.

The Pawong were a small tribal society that my boyfriend, Glauber, had told me about a couple of months earlier. Glauber *is* a name, in case you’re wondering, and it was Glauber’s name. I’m not just making it up for the sake of the story. Glauber had been an anthropology minor in college, and random facts about faraway cultures would pop into his head on occasion, usually over dinner, when there was a lull in our conversation. “The Mehinakus are so strict about female and male task attribution that a bachelor would rather go hungry than cook for himself,” he would say, or “The Aztecs believed that the goal of war was to take prisoners, not kill the enemy, and that’s why they lost to the Spanish so quickly.”

What he’d told me about the Pawong, though, on the night we broke up had been meant not as ed-

ifying trivia but as an insult, I think, even though I hadn’t taken it that way—as I said, I take nothing personally. We’d just had an argument about a four-day weekend: Glauber wanted to go visit his parents in Burgundy, I wanted to stay in Paris. “How surprising,” Glauber had said. “What is it now? Is it the thought of getting on a train full of strangers that frightens you? Or is it seeing an old man on the verge of death?” (Glauber’s father had cancer.)

“You know what it is,” I’d said. “I can’t sleep in the country.”

“You hate it.”

“I don’t hate the country,” I’d said. “It’s just that I get bored there during the day. And then at night I get scared.”

“So it *is* fear,” Glauber had said. Triumph on the *is*. “It’s always fear with you.” He’d closed his eyes at this point, which was something that he did whenever he planned a sentence more than four words long. “There’s this tribe somewhere in South Asia, the Pawong, if I remember it right, and they don’t understand war or even conflict at all. Neighboring tribes come and slaughter them and rape their women, and the Pawong don’t know to defend themselves or retaliate. It doesn’t even occur to them that they could respond.”

“I can’t see how this relates to Burgundy,” I’d said.

“The Pawong,” Glauber had resumed, eyes still closed, “live in fear that their enemies will come back, but they don’t prepare for it. They just dread it and dread it, and teach their children to dread it, and then, when their children are properly scared, it makes them incredibly proud. *My son is so much more afraid than your son*, they boast to their friends and neighbors. They value fear more than we do courage, or anything else, really. You would be right at home with the Pawong.”

“You want me to go there and get raped and slaughtered?” I’d said.

“No,” he’d said. “I think you should go live with the Pawong and be their god.”

Within the hour, he’d packed and left, and although it’s true that things hadn’t been great between us for a

while—we’d run out of things to say to each other, and our silences were, frankly, boring—I would have appreciated a little notice, a little time to get used to the idea of breaking up before the breakup’s implementation.

A few days after he left, I started researching the Pawong and stumbled on an article about warless societies by Professor Croze. She had only a few lines about the Pawong, but they confirmed what Glauber had said:

Shyness, fear, and timidity are highly valued among the Pawong. “To be angry is not to be human,” goes one of their sayings, “but to be fearful is.” Pawong children are taught to express and show their fear to their peers, as well as to avoid conflict at all costs. The Pawong flee at the first sign of danger, and don’t see a need to make excuses. “We are frightened,” they say, and that is explanation enough.

TWO MONTHS AFTER reading these lines, I was in Professor Croze’s office asking the obvious questions.

“How did the Pawong accept your presence amongst them if they’re so fearful? Aren’t they afraid of strangers?”

“Well, I guess I wasn’t that scary!” Professor Croze answered with a burst of laughter. “I mean, look at me!”

Because she asked directly, I had no choice but to look up from my notebook. I wondered if whatever was on her tongue was contagious and if she was going to die.

“In fact, they were way more concerned about my own lack of fear in coming to them than anything else,” she went on. “They said, ‘But what if we had been bad people? Did you think about that?’ They couldn’t understand why I would leave my home and take chances staying with them. They thought I was brave, which made me weirdly proud—except they see no value in bravery. They think bravery is a form of stupidity, actually.”

Leaving Professor Croze’s office, I got lost in the same maze of university hallways that I’d always had trouble navigating as a student. I’d noticed, back then, that the more prestigious the professors the more carefully hidden their offices were. I assumed that the Sorbonne ranked Professor Croze fairly highly, because her office had been particularly hard to find. In my time, there had been a



PAUL  
NOTH

“Sorry, still rerouting.”

legendary office, Professor Sarrazin’s, and every year I would hear of a student having a meltdown in some hallway during registration week, trying to find it. The “Sarrazin triangle” had direct consequences on Professor Allan’s class enrollment—that’s how I knew about it. I’d taken Allan’s class my first semester. His office was the one you stumbled upon when, after looking in vain for Sarrazin’s, you were ready to give up on “Venice in the Middle Ages” to take a shot at “Advanced Latin.” Allan’s class was always full.

AT THE RESTAURANT, waiting for my sister, I refrained from Googling “white spots tongue.” My sister wasn’t late, by the way. I’m always early. This used to drive Glauber crazy. “Nothing horrible will happen if you’re a little late,” he’d say. I don’t understand why people say things like that. I mean, I know the chances that my being late would lead to any cata-

strophic consequences are low, maybe exactly as low as my being early would, actually—I don’t know, I’m not a math person—but I’m sure they’re not *zero*, they’re not “nothing,” so why say anything at all?

“Sorry I’m late,” Delphine said. “My last dog took forever to die.”

“You’re not late,” I said.

“I know. It was just a way to introduce the fact that my last dog took forever to die and maybe fish for a little sympathy.”

Delphine is a veterinarian, which is not something that she’s dreamed of doing since she was a little girl, contrary to what people assume when she informs them of her profession. As a little girl, Delphine wanted to be a secretary at a travel agency. We both did.

“I’m sorry about your dog,” I said.

“Well, it wasn’t *mine*,” Delphine said. “But, yeah, thanks. I treated that guy his whole life. It’s never easy, I guess.”

Delphine is married with two kids, so we never talk about her life over lunch. She’s the first to admit that it’s a boring topic.

“You need to get back on the horse,” she told me, after asking about my sex life since Glauber. She sat up straighter, scanned the room for a horse.

“I liked Glauber,” I said. “I think it’s healthy to mourn for a little while.”

“You didn’t like Glauber,” Delphine said. “No one likes Glauber. Please don’t get back together with Glauber.”

I’d had an erotic dream about Glauber a few nights before (telescopic hard-on, lavender fields) and had made the mistake of telling Delphine about it. She’d invested it with meaning. Drawn conclusions.

I guess it wasn’t really a *mistake*. I tell Delphine everything.

“Glauber wasn’t all bad,” I said.

“He wore oxfords sockless.”

“He was rich, though.”

“He wasn’t *that* rich,” Delphine said.

“And you don’t care about money as much as you think you do. I mean, you don’t travel, you don’t smoke, you don’t eat meat . . . you’re literally allergic to most jewelry.” She paused, knowing she was forgetting a major money pit that didn’t concern me. “You don’t have dreams of any kind,” she added, not at all definitively, going high-pitched on the word “kind” and leaving her sentence suspended there, in the hope that I would contradict it.

I had nothing. Rather, my dreams were so humble that normal people would have considered them laughable. My dreams were not to get murdered, not to suffer a ludicrous death, not to think about death all the time, to live in an apartment small enough that I could see all of it from anywhere I stood. (I had already fulfilled that last dream.) I was about to capitulate when I saw Professor Allan, twenty years older than when I’d last seen him but still unmistakably Professor Allan, walk into the restaurant. Since we were close to the university, this wasn’t hard to believe, but because I’d just thought about him after so many years spent

not thinking about him the surprise made me yell his name across the room. Allan turned in our direction. He looked at my face, and then right past it, to see if there was someone else behind our table. There was nothing behind our table but a chalkboard listing the daily specials. Allan walked over to us, squinting the whole way, as if he could crush my features into recognition.

"You probably don't remember me," I said when he was close enough to hear. "I took your class about twenty years ago."

"Oh. Yes. You've been long forgotten then." Allan relaxed his eyes.

"I wasn't a very noticeable student to begin with," I said. "Although, once, I made you and the whole classroom laugh by mistranslating *clavicula Salomonis* as 'Solomon's clavicle.'"

"Oh . . . of course I remember you." His voice softened. "Of course, of course . . . Julie, right?"

"I'm just the sister," Delphine said, although no one had asked her anything.

The translation fiasco appeared to have re-placed me in Allan's memory, but his change of tone seemed to indicate that he also remembered me as the poor Julie whose parents had died during her freshman year. My parents had been poisoned by their water heater—carbon monoxide—and people tended to remember that because it had happened on the same day that terrorists had bombed the Saint-Michel Métro station, right next to the Sorbonne. I'd been in Allan's class when the bombs had gone off.

"I'm guessing you didn't pursue a career in ancient languages," Allan said. "What are you doing these days?"

He put his hand on my shoulder. Poor little Julie.

"I'm a journalist," I said, a little embarrassed.

"An essayist," Delphine corrected, encouragingly. I realized that she thought I was interested in Allan on a sexual level. I'd yelled his name pretty loud, I guess.

"She's actually writing an essay in defense of ancient languages," Del-

phine went on. "With the new education reform and all."

"Oh, are you really?" Allan asked. It was unclear whether he'd picked up on Delphine's matchmaking signals or was just feigning interest in my career because he thought my life had been ruined forever during one of his classes. "Maybe you should interview me."

"That's a great idea," Delphine said.

"Over lunch, perhaps?" Allan suggested. His hand was still on my shoulder.

"Why not?" I said, only to please Delphine.

"She might never have been good at actual Latin," Delphine said, "but she was always so fascinated by the Ancient Roman life style, you know? When we were kids, she read all the 'Astérix' comics and actually cheered for the Romans. I always thought that was the weirdest thing. Same thing happened later, when she read the Bible."

"Is that so?" Allan said.

It wasn't so, of course. Delphine had just invented a family memory right there on the spot so that I would have a better chance of sleeping with the guy. I'd never read the Bible, or "Astérix," though I knew that the Romans weren't supposed to be the good guys in either. As a child, I'd mostly just played travel agent with Delphine; we'd take turns picking up a disconnected phone and setting up imaginary people with imaginary trips. Some of our clients went to Rome, sure, but my recommendations to them were only ever make-believe pizza places.

Allan and I exchanged phone numbers, and he went to have a quick coffee at the counter before his next class.

"Is there something on my tongue?" I said, and stuck it out.

"Dude, put that back in," Delphine said. "We're in public."

"Is there?"

"Why would there be?"

I told her about Professor Croze's tongue and requested her medical opinion.

"Could be papillomavirus," Delphine said. "Or just a fungus. Were the spots cauliflower-like in shape?"

"Are funguses airborne?"

"Come on. Eat your vegetables. You're fine. You don't have tongue fungus, just as you didn't have Parkinson's last week or psoriasis last summer."

I wasn't fully convinced that I didn't have Parkinson's. Sometimes I held both my arms straight in front of me and the right one shook a little. Glauber thought I worried too much. "It's useless," he'd say. "I can assure you that no human beings ever wished, on their deathbed, that they'd spent more time worrying." "Except what if they died crushed by their own house?" I would say. "Don't you think their last thought would be something along the lines of Gee! I should've worried about that sag in the ceiling more actively!" Glauber would dismiss this kind of response on the ground that, sure, there were always exceptions, but that we should be led by the rule and not be ruled by the exception. I hated when he said that, because he made it sound as if the reason I kept looking for exceptions was that I thought of myself as exceptional, whereas I believed, on the contrary, that it was my ordinariness itself that made me a better candidate for exceptional scenarios. Exceptional people died of cancer and heart attacks; it was the nobodies who suffered stupid and puzzling demises, to make up for the lack of surprises in their lives. At least, that had been my parents' experience. I suppose they'd even been given a double dose of last-minute reparations, having died an uncommon death on an exceptional day.

Delphine called me a "good girl" after I finished my vegetables. She used the same tone that she used on her dogs sometimes, but that was all right. She loved her dogs.

**B**ACK AT THE office, I had a voice mail from Allan—I'd given him only my work number, in an attempt to keep things professional—informing me of his lunchtime availability for the following week. He didn't sound very busy, which made things hard. Coming up with an excuse or two is always doable, but no one believes



you when you line up four in a row. Perhaps I could agree on the latest possible date he'd offered and then follow it with a last-minute "something came up." Just as I was deciding to do so, I realized that I'd forgotten to ask Professor Croze to confirm my suspicion that the Pawong people, owing to the disdain they felt toward bravery, didn't have a word for "cowardice." I'd noticed that, to readers eager to learn something about a different culture, the lack, in said culture, of a concept that they were familiar with was more likely to pique their interest than any other factoid. A foreign language having a single word to define something that they would need a whole sentence to express in their mother tongue would also be, conversely, a pleasure-giving piece of information. Highly quotable. That's why everyone knows about Schadenfreude and how the Eskimos have forty-something words for snow. That's why, even though I don't know much about Japanese culture, I do know that the Japanese have a word for one of my habits, which is to buy books, pile them up, and never read them (*tsundoku*). No word for "cowardice" in the Pawong language would mean that I had found my lede. I wondered what Glauber would think of my article. He'd probably think that I was a coward for going to an old—maybe even dying—professor to investigate, and not straight to the Pawong themselves.

"What's up?" I heard Delphine say on the other end of the line.

Sometimes my sister answered the phone before I even realized that I was calling her.

"Do you think I should go to Malaysia?" I asked. "For my article?"

"Absolutely not."

"I was thinking maybe it would make for a better story."

I heard Delphine take a deep breath. "I have trouble believing you would consider leaving a city you haven't got two miles away from in more than a decade for the sake of an article. You don't even like your job. Is someone threatening you?"

Does your boss want you to go?"

"No. It was just a thought."

"Did that thought pop into your head at a moment when, I don't know, you were mulling over grand gestures to win Glauber back?"

"I *like* my job. I just happen to think it's a very poorly considered one."

"Fucking Glauber," Delphine said.

"Everybody thinks they could be cultural journalists, because they, too, can write sentences and have opinions. Investigative journalism, on the other hand . . .

I don't know. I was just thinking maybe it's time to take my career to another level. Nothing to do with Glauber. Glauber wanted me to go to the Pawong and be their *god*, for fuck's sake."

I was almost starting to convince myself that the idea of going to Malaysia had sprouted from my professional drive.

"You'd make such a terrible god," Delphine said. "You'd never know what to command. You'd beg for everyone's opinion all the time."

"Gods don't command," I said. "They just sit there and get adored."

"You wouldn't be too comfortable with adoration, either," she said.

I tried to picture a life among the Pawong. I knew that they lived deep in the forest, so I sat my imagined self on an ancient tree, whose dark trunk had been carved out as a throne for me. I don't know many kinds of trees, so I pictured a cedar, even though I'm pretty sure cedars aren't indigenous to Malaysia. Its massive roots popped out of the ground here and there to make sporadic benches on which the Pawong sat facing me. They looked frightened and wore only headbands and penile sheaths. I didn't picture any women. It would probably smell divine inside a cedar tree, I thought, but I realized that I couldn't imagine scents.

"Maybe I could get used to adoration," I said to Delphine. "It's not like the total lack of it has made my life too terribly exciting so far."

"Life's not supposed to be exciting," Delphine said. "Only certain things are, like a good soccer game, or when you fall in love and stuff.

Other than that, the way life works is it gets you used to absolutely everything too fast, so that it becomes harder and harder to really enjoy anything other than maybe the repetitiveness itself, if you're one of those weird people, and that's that."

"But life *contains* those exciting things you list. It contains the soccer matches and the men worth loving, so why should we not expect the whole thing to be exciting?"

"That's very poor logic," Delphine said. "A bottle contains wine, yet the bottle itself is not exciting. Sometimes you'll get a nice view from a train window, but then the same train goes through miles and miles of shit. The train is not—"

"I get your point," I said. "There's never a need for more than one metaphor."

"I wasn't sure where that last one was going, anyway."

I was still partly in my cedar-Pawong fantasy. I wrote a brief e-mail to Professor Croze, asking for pictures, and Delphine must have read part of my mind, because she asked me what the Pawong looked like. "Maybe fear makes them incredible lovers," she said.

I'd been told I was a fantastic lay over the years, and after a while I'd decided to believe it. Maybe I had my pathological fear of everything to thank for it.

"I have to go now," I told Delphine. "To Group."

"No one has to go to Group," she said. We hung up.

**G**ROUP. I FOUND it unfair of Glauber to have left me on the ground that I was afraid of everything, since we'd met at Group: a group for people suffering from general anxiety disorder, which I'd joined after dropping out of the group for hypochondriacs, because it didn't encompass all my worries. Glauber's anxieties had been only a temporary affliction—they plagued him after he found out about his father's cancer—and he was soon cured, but still. Where had his empathy gone? He'd behaved like one of these poor people who become rich and start looking down on the poor with more contempt than even the



born-rich do, because they're convinced that anyone can decide to stop being poor (they did it!), that it's all hard work and will power and nothing to do with luck, and that, therefore, poor people are just lazy and weak-minded.

I usually didn't share much at Group. I mostly went to take comfort in the knowledge that I wasn't the only person who couldn't help thinking, whenever she bought a sweater, that she might be found dead in it. Group allowed me to really know where I stood on the scale of worried people, whereas a shrink never told you anything about other patients.

"I'm really worried that I might go blind," Ilse said at Group that evening. "I can't think of a worse fate. I know certain blind people are very happy and all, but I don't think I would have the inner resources to be one of them. And, if I have to be completely honest, which I guess is the purpose here, I think I'd rather be able to see than be happy."

Patrick nodded once and deeply at this confession.

"I never believed my thoughts originated in my brain, the way everyone else does," Ilse went on. "Or that my emotions came from my stomach. I feel like all of it comes from my eyes, you know? If I close my eyes longer than a blink"—she closed her eyes here to illustrate—"nothing happens. I don't feel anything. I can't think. So how would I manage without eyesight? And how would I watch my shows?"

That second question, which I believe was asked in jest, caused Helena to talk about her inability to commit to a TV show, out of fear that she would die before every plot line was resolved, even though she was in perfect health. Patrick told her about a Web site that streamed short films for free. "World-class directors," he said. "Foreign. Never more than thirty minutes long." As he was offering to give Helena the name of the Web site, his phone started ringing and he apologized profusely for forgetting to turn the sound off. He couldn't find the phone, though. Manically rummaging through the mess of his briefcase, he kept saying "Shush" in its general direction.

"Maybe you need to take that?" Colette offered, in her signature nice-but-firm tone. Colette was the moderator.

"I'm so very sorry," Patrick said, and at that point I felt my own phone vibrate in my pocket. I wouldn't have looked at it if my neighbor, Yann, hadn't looked at his. It was a text message from Delphine. "are you ok?" the text read.

"There's been a bombing at the Sorbonne," Yann informed us all, in an admittedly shaky voice—but no more shaky than the one he'd used, week after week, to talk about his fear of bay windows and open water.

"What do you mean, there's been a bombing at the Sorbonne?" Ilse asked, as if the sentence could have meant anything other than the sum of its components. "everything ok," I texted Delphine. "i'm at group."

"stay where you are"

"you?"

"still at work. kids at the nanny's, seb at office"

This quick exchange reassured me of the safety of pretty much everyone I cared about. I'd changed phone numbers after publishing a damaging profile of a National Front official (not that he'd threatened or harassed me, but I was concerned that he might) and got rid of Glauber's

number in the process (it had felt like the mature thing to do), so I couldn't check on him. I wasn't even sure that I would have. Everyone in Group was riveted to his screen, though; they had longer lists of loved ones to get through. I broke our circle to go stand by the window. The little square park, three stories below, was empty. Night was falling, and in the building across the street a TV was lit behind every other window.

"It was a long time coming," Ilse said.

"What?"

"The attack. They've been threatening to hurt us for a while."

I wouldn't have bet on Ilse being second to run out of people to check on, but there she was, looking through the same window as I was.

"I guess you're right," I said.

My phone started showing concern for my survival. It blinked with government-issued injunctions to take shelter immediately and await further instructions. Notifications from news agencies gorged the home screen with partial and temporary information. Twenty-nine confirmed deaths. Mostly students. Bomb had gone off in the library, open 24/7 and, during winter finals, packed at all hours. A suspect wearing black gloves seen fleeing the scene. Two explosions, actually. A possible



*"Hi! I'm Carl, from Amazon fulfillment. Would you mind telling us how you feel about your online shopping experience?"*

second suspect on the run. List of subway stations closed to the public.

"You're a journalist, right?" Ilse said. "Shouldn't you have more information than us about what's going on?"

"I'm not that kind of journalist," I said.

"What kind are you?"

"How do you know I'm a journalist?" I asked. I couldn't remember ever having disclosed my profession at Group.

"Oh, Glauber told me. You know, after you guys got together, he started coming to Group on Mondays, so that you wouldn't be in the same circle of sharing."

"I know he did," I said.

"It's not advisable for couples or friends to participate in the same circle of sharing," Ilse recited.

"I didn't know he'd shared about me."

"Well he didn't exactly *share* about you. We just got to talking after Group now and then, you know, over cookies and tea. It was more like private conversations."

Glauber had never told me about lingering after Group.

Behind us, Helena burst into tears. I checked my phone. Another bomb had gone off, this time in the lobby of a hotel near the American Embassy. Possible hostage situation. Patrick retrieved a crumpled paper bag from his briefcase and started breathing into it.

"He seemed to be quite taken with you," Ilse resumed. "Glauber. I was surprised to learn you'd broken up."

"And how did you learn that?" I said.

"He came here last week. We hadn't seen him in *months*."

"Did his anxiety come back?"

"It's unclear," Ilse said. "His father just died. He said he was coming for closure, because we'd helped him a lot, you know, dealing with the whole thing, but I think he'll be back."

"You seem pretty happy about it," I said.

"Always nice to see familiar faces."

I received a text from an unknown number. "Are you all right?" it said. The signature followed immediately: "This is Bernard Allan, by the way." I don't think I'd ever known his first name. Only a few seconds had elapsed

between getting the mysterious text and the revelation of its author's identity, but I'd somehow managed to convince myself that it was from Glauber, that he'd tracked down my new number. The disappointment made me actively hate poor Allan. Why was he writing to me? Didn't he have actual friends? How had he found my number? Why hadn't Glauber been able to?

"Everything all right?" Ilse asked. "Did you hear from everyone you might be worried about?"

"And others," I said.

"Do you think this is the end of the world?" Ilse said, and she wasn't looking out the window or vaguely at the horizon, in the way I assumed people did when they asked questions like that, but straight at me.

"Glauber told me you had an arrangement," she went on. "He told me that when you started dating you agreed on a place to meet if the end of the world was coming and you weren't already together."

Glauber hadn't lied. We'd once had a conversation about a meeting place for the Apocalypse. We wanted to be out in the world when it collapsed. I can't remember why.

"We actually had two," I told Ilse. "Two places. In case the Apocalypse struck exactly our first meeting point."

"Clever!"

"I thought so, too, at the time. It was Glauber's suggestion. Very foresighted. But then it made it complicated to decide which of the two places to go to in the event—more than likely—of the Apocalypse *not* striking one of the agreed-upon meeting points. We thought we would have to go to the one that was farthest from ground zero, but I'm not always good at evaluating distances. Or, what if the end of the world started at different places simultaneously?"

"Yeah, like today, right? What would ground zero be? The university? Or that hotel?"

"Exactly."

"I see," Ilse said, and she broke eye contact. Our fellow-worriers were mumbling stories that, judging by their grave faces, involved us all dying in a very near future.

"Do you think he's waiting for

you?" Ilse asked. "At one of the two meeting points?"

"I sincerely doubt it," I said. "I'm not so sure what's happening right now qualifies as the Apocalypse. Also: we broke up."

"Well, as of last week, he didn't have a new girlfriend or anything. And he did ask about you."

"What did you tell him?"

"There wasn't much to say," she said. "You never share."

"I guess I don't," I said. "I come here to listen. Just listening helps."

Ilse nodded to signify that she understood, but she squinted in a way that made it clear that what I was saying was all very abstract to her.

"Do you mind telling me what they were?" She was still nodding. "The rendezvous points?"

"Why? Do you want to go?"

I'd meant it as a joke, but Ilse was dead serious.

"If that's O.K. with you, of course. I mean, it would have to be. Otherwise, I'd never know where to meet Glauber, anyway!"

I told her what the two meeting places were—the Nespresso boutique by my office and the nicer Nespresso boutique by the Luxembourg Gardens—and she just left. No one tried to stop her.

THE PAWONG WOULDN'T have let me or Ilse leave without trying to stop us. They would have reminded us that the subways were closed, that subways were dangerous places, anyway, with all the germs, or that it was a long walk, that walking contained its own threats, like low-flying birds, or things falling from buildings (flowerpots, bodies), that we would expose ourselves to potential chemical fallout (none of the authorities seemed to be considering the possibility that the bombings were a chemical strike; I was), that Glauber wasn't worth the trouble. And he wasn't. Delphine, on the other hand, was alone at her practice, worrying about her children, her husband, me. Delphine wasn't used to worrying the way I was.

As I walked, I forced myself to be amazed by the efficiency of those government warnings I kept receiving, forced myself to have grown up, level-one social



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*"Keep your facial expressions where I can see them."*

thoughts about how our government, so divided, so pathetic, so disrespected, still had the power to send a message to us all, to have everyone, for a brief moment at least, be on the same page. Well, everyone but the terrorists, of course. And me. Although the terrorists were probably following instructions and hiding out, too. Chances of running into them were low.

My phone vibrated in my hand. It wasn't Glauber.

"You didn't respond to my text," Allan said. "I'm worried."

I answered something along the lines of "I'm fine," but in a far more convoluted way. I'd answered Allan's call only because it meant that I would have to talk, and hearing my voice shaping correct sentences dictated by my brain reassured me whenever I felt panicky. It meant that I was still there. An ambulance passed.

"What are you—walking around town?" Allan said. "Don't you know what's happening?"

"May I ask how you got my personal number?"

"I called your office."

"And they just gave it to you?"

"I was *worried*," he said.

"Eight hours ago, you didn't even remember who I was."

"Well, you've changed quite a bit. Last time I saw you, you were a teenager. But of course I remember you."

"Only from a couple of faculty meetings they made you go to back in the day. How to deal with a bereaved student. Look, I'm not even writing an article on the second death of dead languages. I'm writing an article about the Pawong tribe. Unless you know anything about them, I don't see a reason for us to have lunch."

"Well, I read Croze's books," Allan said. "I'm worried about her, too, actually. She stays late at work sometimes. She's not picking up her phone."

It surprised me that Allan and Croze were friends. It always surprised me to find out that ugly old women had male friends.

"Her office is nowhere near the library," I said, trying to reassure him. "Plus, this morning, her tongue was covered in white spots. Maybe she's at home, nursing some kind of virus or something. Maybe she doesn't even know what's going on."

"That's just how her tongue is," Allan said.

"Is it a fungus?"

"I don't know, really. I think it's just discolored."

I was silent.

"I'll ask her about it, if you want. If she ever picks up the phone. Would that leave you more inclined to have dinner with me?"

I don't know which part of our conversation had got him thinking he could upgrade to dinner, but I appreciated his boldness.

"Only if whatever it is she has isn't contagious," I said.

I managed to have the phone call last exactly until I reached Delphine's practice.

"I'm here, about to knock," I texted Delphine. "don't be afraid. it's just me."

She came to the door before I knocked.

"Do you still keep beers in your vaccine fridge?" I asked.

We made our way to the consult room and Delphine answered my question by opening the black drawer at the bottom of a small refrigerator full of vials.

"Help yourself," she said.

There was a dog on her consult table, a big freckled thing with front paws the size of smaller dogs, on which its head rested. The other two were missing. The other two paws.

"Her owner left when she got the news," Delphine explained. "Something about getting home to her kids. I was about to put her dog down, and then she just left."

"Are you supposed to wait until she comes back to do the injection?"

"She said I should just go ahead and take care of it. She wrote me a check and everything."

The dog shivered when I touched its head. "You're going to die," I told the dog, but I said it nicely. "It's O.K. to be afraid."

"That's just mean," Delphine said. "Give her a break."

"She's standing up for you," I told the dog. "You're in good hands."

Delphine had been watching the news on her desktop computer. She'd muted it when we came in, but her eyes were still drawn to images I couldn't see from where I stood. She'd had three beers already.

"How long does she have, if you don't put her down?" I asked.



“One, maybe two months of increasingly horrible pain.”

The dog started licking my forearm. Her tongue was freckled like her body.

“Can you turn the screen around?” I asked Delphine. I wanted to watch the news, too.

“The wires are too tight, actually. Come sit by me.”

Delphine turned the sound on and dragged another chair over. I didn’t want to leave the dog alone, so I carried her to the chair and nestled her hind-leg stumps into my lap.

The news showed people who had gathered on the security perimeter of the university. Some held flowers, as was customary, I guess, since I’d seen on TV other groups of people in the aftermath of other catastrophes hold flowers. I’d never questioned the practice before, but, having just walked through empty streets for more than forty minutes, I wondered where they’d found their bouquets. As far as I could tell, all the shops were closed. Delphine and I had had a real hard time finding flowers for our parents’ funeral, because so few florists had been able to meet the demands that the attack on the Saint-Michel station had engendered.

There was a picture of them, our parents, on Delphine’s desk. The dog yawned.

“Is she in pain right now?” I asked Delphine.

“She doesn’t seem to be.”

The dog had no idea what was going on. TV had bought her two more hours of life.

“Maybe we can wait a little to put her down then, no?”

“You mean until the next time she has a seizure? Like, in two days?” Delphine looked at the dog, then at the news, then at me. “Sure,” she said. “If you take her home until then.”

My phone chimed. An e-mail from Professor Croze. “Here you go!” it read. She’d attached four black-and-white pictures. A Pawong house, a Pawong dinner, two Pawong men fishing, a Pawong family. They didn’t look afraid. Or cowed. Or meek. Or, for that matter, friendly. They actually looked kind of scary.

I texted Allan to let him know that Professor Croze was safe, and that he should e-mail her. The news now showed images of windowsills all over

town on which people had lit candles. I had candles at home, I thought. There’s a certain type of man who thinks that scented candles are a romantic gift. Glauber was one of them.

Around 6 A.M., after a tired news anchor announced that two suspects had been arrested, I walked Delphine to her nanny’s, then home. Her husband and kids asked me to stay for breakfast, and they wanted to know everything about the dog I was dragging in a dog-wheelchair, but I told them that I needed some sleep, that I would come over for dinner instead.

**G**LAUBER WAS WAITING for me in the hallway of my building, by the mailboxes. He apologized for showing up unannounced, but he’d had no other way to make sure that I was all right. “You changed your number,” he said, and then sneezed. He was allergic to dogs, but it seemed a bit fast-acting for an allergy.

“I’m still at the same e-mail address,” I said.

“Who checks their *e-mail* during a terrorist attack?”

“Did you see Ilse last night?” I asked. “She told me about your father. I’m really sorry.”

“Why would I have seen Ilse?”

“She was looking for you.”

I invited him upstairs. We fucked, but it was meaningless. Nothing more came of it. I didn’t even tell Delphine about it. After he left, I fed the dog leftover mashed potatoes and lit some candles.

Four days later, the dog had a seizure. Delphine came over to give her the injection. I held her while she died. I felt her getting heavier almost instantly, and her body seemed to shrink in my arms, compacting the way that my winter clothes did when I vacuum-sealed them for storage each spring. She would take up less and less room from now on. I held her until I was completely sure that she wouldn’t wake in a panic, and then for a few more seconds after that.

We buried her in Delphine’s yard that night, and Delphine kept the wheelchair at her office, to give to the next dog who needed it. ♦

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Camille Bordas on the things that are worth worrying about.

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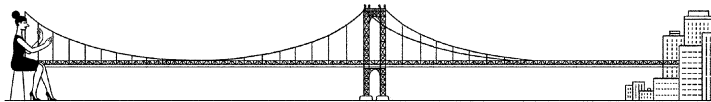
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# THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

## HOLY DREAD

*Bach has long been seen as a symbol of divine order. But his music has an unruly obsession with God.*

BY ALEX ROSS

“**O** LORD, OUR LORD, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” The words of the Psalm look bright on the page, but the music pulls them into shadow. The key is G minor. The bass instruments drone on the tonic while the violins weave sixteenth notes around the other notes of the triad. On the third beat of the first bar comes a twinge of harmonic pain—one oboe sounding an E-flat against another oboe’s held D. Oboes are piercing by nature; to place them a half step apart triggers an aggressive acoustic roughness, as when car horns lean on adjacent pitches. In the next several bars, more dissonances accumulate, sustaining tension: F-sharp against G, A-flat against G, E-flat against D, B-flat against A-natural. The ensemble wanders away from the home key and then back, whereupon the cycle begins again, now with a chorus singing “Herr, unser Herrscher” (“Lord, our ruler”) in chords that contract inward:

Herr!  
Herr!  
Herr!

unser

Herr-r-r . . .

When the upper voices reach “Herrscher,” they dissolve into the swirl of the violins, the first syllable elongated into a thirty-three-note melisma. You need not have seen the words *Passio secundum Johannem* at the head of the score to feel that this is the scene at Golgotha: an emaciated body raised on the Cross, nails being driven in one by one, blood trickling down, a murmuring crowd below. It goes on for nine or ten minutes, in an irresistible

sombre rhythm, a dance of death that all must join.

What went through the minds of the congregation at the Nikolaikirche, in Leipzig, on Good Friday, 1724, when the St. John Passion had its first performance? A year earlier, Johann Sebastian Bach, aged thirty-nine, had taken up posts as the cantor of the St. Thomas School and the director of music for Leipzig’s Lutheran churches. He had already acquired a reputation for being difficult, for using “curious variations” and “strange tones.” More than a few of his works begin with gestures that inspire awe and fear. Several pieces from his years as an organ virtuoso practice a kind of sonic terrorism. The Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor feasts on dissonance with almost diabolical glee, perpetrating one of the most violent harmonies of the pre-Wagnerian era: a chord in which a D clashes with both a C-sharp and an E-flat, resulting in a full-throated acoustical scream.

In the St. John Passion, Bach’s art of holy dread assumes unprecedented dimensions. The almost outlandish thing about “Herr, unser Herrscher” is that it does not simply take the point of view of the mourners and the mockers. It also adopts the perspective of the man on the Cross, gazing up and down. Aspects of the music that seem catastrophic acquire a triumphant tinge. The rhythm conveys mysterious vitality: the second time the “Herr!” chords sound, they fall on the second and fourth beats of the bar, in a kind of cosmic syncopation. A single note is lobbed from one section of the ensemble to another, giving a sense of ever-widening space. The sixteenth notes in the violins unspool al-

most continuously, suggesting the transmission of the Lord’s name through all lands. In the second section of the chorus, where words from Psalm 8 give way to a meditation on the Crucifixion, the dissonances dwindle, and the music moves through a series of expectant dominant-seventh chords, describing a methodical ascent:

Show us, through Your Passion,  
That You, the true Son of God,  
Through all time,  
Even in the greatest humiliation  
[*Niedrigkeit*],  
Have become glorified [*verherrlicht*]!

The words *Niedrigkeit* and *verherrlicht* land side by side. With the second, Bach writes “forte” in the score, and stamping, defiant D minor takes over. The contradiction of the opening is overcome: light and dark are one.

The conductor John Eliot Gardiner has called “Herr, unser Herrscher” a “portrayal of Christ in majesty like some colossal Byzantine mosaic . . . looking down on the maelstrom of distressed unregenerate humanity.” Others have seen it as a picture of the Trinity, with the pedal point of the Father, the suffering discord of the Son, and the shimmering motion of the Holy Spirit. Whatever images come to mind, the craft that went into the making of the scene—the melodic inspiration, the contrapuntal rigor, the immaculate demonstration of the rules, the insolent breaking of them—is as astounding now as it must have been on that day in 1724. Or so we like to think. One notable fact about the St. John Passion—and about its successor, the St. Matthew—is that we have no eyewitness account of the première. If the



*Bach, who obsessively copied out other composers' scores, became an absolute master of his art by never ceasing to be a student of it.*



good people of Leipzig understood that they were in the presence of the most stupendous talent in musical history, they gave no sign. Indeed, Bach removed “Herr, unser Herrscher” from the score when he revived the St. John the following year—a hint that his listeners may have gone away unhappy.

“**B**ACH & GOD” (Oxford) is the splendid title of a new book by Michael Marissen, a professor emeritus at Swarthmore College. It brings to mind two approximately equal figures engaged in a complicated dialogue, like Jefferson and Adams, or Siskel and Ebert. The book is one of a number of recent attempts to grapple with Bach’s religiosity. Others are Gardiner’s “Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven” (Knopf); Eric Chafe’s “J. S. Bach’s Johannine Theology” (Oxford); and John Butt’s “Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions” (Cambridge). All ask, in different ways, how we should approach works whose devotional intensity is alien to most modern listeners. Marissen identifies himself as an agnostic, but adds that in the vicinity of Bach’s music he will never be a “comfortable agnostic.”

Previous Bach scholarship tended to take a more secular tack. Many of us grew up with an Enlightenment Bach, a nondenominational divinity of mathematical radiance. Glenn Gould’s commentary on the “Goldberg Variations” spoke of a “fundamental coordinating intelligence.” One German scholar went so far as to question the sincerity of Bach’s religious convictions. But the historically informed performance movement, in trying to replicate the conditions in which Bach’s works were first played, helped to restore awareness of his firm theological grounding. Recorded surveys of the two hundred or so sacred cantatas, including Gardiner’s epic undertaking in 1999 and 2000, have brought Bach’s spirituality to the forefront. To what extent does he faithfully transmit Lutheran doctrine? What did he privately believe? Marissen also confronts an issue that many prefer to avoid: do Bach’s Passions project anti-Semitism?

Such questions run up against the central agony of writing about Bach: the paucity of biographical informa-

tion. Gardiner writes, “We seem to know less about his private life than about that of any other major composer of the last 400 years.” Bach left few substantial traces of his inner life. Mostly, we have a stack of notoriously dull, grouchy business correspondence. The composer-comedian Peter Schickele, better known as P. D. Q. Bach, captured the conundrum in his “Bach Portrait,” of 1989, which juxtaposes bombastic orchestral utter-



ances in the mode of Copland’s “Lincoln Portrait” with recitations from “The Bach Reader”: “My present post amounts to about seven hundred thaler, and when there are rather more funerals than usual, the fees rise in proportion.”

Gardiner’s book, a vividly written volume that appeared in 2013, tries to fill in some of the gaps. We see Bach emerging from a society still traumatized by the Thirty Years’ War and by outbreaks of plague. Life expectancy was around thirty. In the Thuringian town of Eisenach, where Bach was born, quasi-pagan notions of devilry still prevailed. Bach’s education would have been doctrinaire and reactionary. “History is nothing but the demonstration of Christian truth,” one popular textbook said. Gardiner highlights German research that notes rampant ruffianism among Eisenach’s youth and a troubling trend of “brutalization of the boys.” Gardiner may go too far in characterizing Bach as a “reformed teenage thug,” but the young composer is known to have drawn a dagger in the midst of an altercation with a bassoonist.

Thuggish or not, Bach immersed himself in music at an early age, as had generations of Bachs before him. An obituary prepared by Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel speaks of his father’s “unheard-of zeal in studying.” That claim is buttressed by a discovery made a decade ago, of the teen-aged Bach’s precociously precise copies of organ pieces

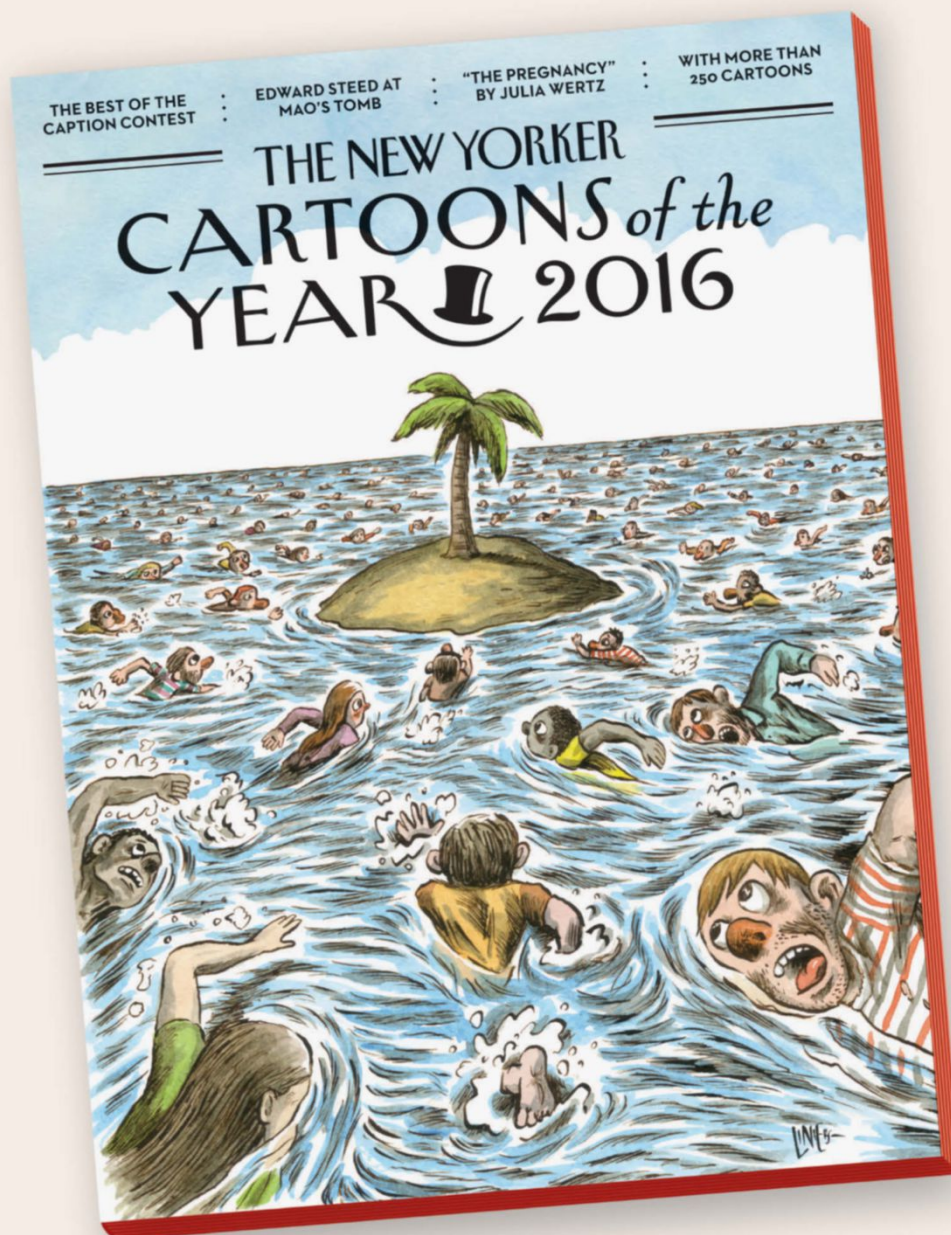
by Reincken and Buxtehude. His life was destined to unfold in a constricted area. The towns and cities where he spent his career—Arnstadt, Mühlhausen, Weimar, Cöthen, and Leipzig—can be seen in a few hours’ driving around central and eastern Germany. But his lifelong habit of studying and copying scores allowed him to roam the Europe of the mind. In his later years, he copied everything from a Renaissance mass by Palestrina to the up-to-date Italianate lyricism of Pergolesi. Bach became an absolute master of his art by never ceasing to be a student of it.

His most exalted sacred works—the two extant Passions, from the seventeenth century, and the Mass in B Minor, completed not long before his death, in 1750—are feats of synthesis, mobilizing secular devices to spiritual ends. They are rooted in archaic chants, hymns, and chorales. They honor, with consummate skill, the scholastic discipline of canon and fugue. They make expert use of the word-painting techniques of the Renaissance madrigal and Baroque opera. They absorb such stock scenes as the lament, the pastoral, the lullaby, the rage aria, the tempest. They allude to courtly French dances, Italian love songs, the polonaise. Their furious development of brief motifs anticipates Beethoven, who worshipped Bach when he was young. And their most daring harmonic adventures—for example, the otherworldly modulations in the “Confiteor” of the B-Minor Mass—look ahead to Wagner, even to Schoenberg.

They are works of deep devotion but also of high ambition. Before Bach went to Leipzig, in 1723, he had been contentedly ensconced in Cöthen, some forty miles to the northwest, where a music-loving prince elicited such instrumental tours de force as the first book of the “Well-Tempered Clavier,” the English Suites, and the music for solo violin and solo cello. But the prince was a Calvinist, and had little need of sacred music. Bach evidently saw the Leipzig job as an opportunity to shape the spiritual life of a city. For the first few years, he pursued that project with ferocious energy, composing cantatas on a weekly basis. Gardiner plausibly evokes Bach in his studio, copyists around him, cranking out music at a frenzied pace—a picture “not dissimilar



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to the backstage activities on a TV or film set.”

For the most part, Leipzig failed to appreciate the effort. Bach was reprimanded for neglecting his teaching duties and for inserting himself into musical and liturgical matters around the city. A member of the town council called him “incorrigible.” The extensive revisions that he made to the St. John Passion in 1725—“Herr, unser Herrscher” was not the only striking section of the score to be cut—were possibly the result of outside interference. The judgment of another composer in 1737 may sum up the conventional wisdom in Leipzig: “This great man would be the admiration of whole nations if he had more agreeableness, if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art.” Bach, for his part, complained in a letter that his experience had been one of “almost continual vexation, envy, and persecution.” Attempts to find a position elsewhere fell short, however, and he remained in Leipzig until his death.

He became a distinguished figure in his final years, his influence felt in many corners of German music, not

least because of the activity of his various composing sons. He received the title of Court Composer from the Elector of Saxony and, on a visit to Berlin, astonished Frederick the Great with his improvisations. Still, he had nothing like the celebrity of his contemporary Handel. According to Carl Philipp Emanuel, Bach twice tried to arrange a meeting with Handel, but the latter contrived to make himself unavailable. The implication is that Handel felt threatened. The anecdote gives a poignant glimpse of Bach’s personality: he yearned to join the international elite, but the trappings of success were denied him. He made careful copies of the Passions in his last years, which suggests a hope for posthumous vindication, but he could hardly have imagined the repertory culture that came into existence in the nineteenth century. More likely, he simply wanted to prevent his music from vanishing. Some of it did: at least one other Passion, after St. Mark, was lost.

**T**HE BOOK THAT perhaps reveals more of Bach than any other can be found at the Concordia Seminary, in St. Louis. By chance, that organization came into possession of Bach’s

copy of Abraham Calov’s three-volume edition of the Bible, which contains Luther’s translation of the Bible alongside commentaries by Luther and Calov. Bach made notes in it and, in 1733, signed his name on the title page of each volume. The marginalia establish the fervor of his belief: no Sunday Christian could have made such acute observations. Bach singles out passages describing music as a vessel of divinity: in one note, he observes that music was “especially ordered by God’s spirit through David,” and in another he writes, “With devotional music, God is always present in his grace.” The annotations also seem to reveal some soul-searching. This passage is marked as important, and is partly underlined: “As far as your person is concerned, you must not get angry with anyone regardless of the injury he may have done to you. But, where your office requires it, there you must get angry.” One can picture Bach struggling to determine whether his “almost continual vexation” stemmed from his person or his office—from vanity or duty.

Yes, Bach believed in God. What is harder to pin down is how he positioned himself among the theological trends of the time. The Pietist movement, which arose in the late seventeenth century, aimed at reinvigorating an orthodox Lutheran establishment that, in its view, had become too rigid. Pietists urged a renewal of personal devotion and a less combative attitude toward rival religious systems, including Judaism. Bach made passing contact with Pietist figures and themes, though he remained aligned with the orthodox wing—not least because Pietists held that music had too prominent a role in church services.

Bach’s two surviving Passions point to an older doctrinal split. John is the visionary among the Evangelists, his philosophical grandeur evident from the first verse (“In the beginning was the Word”). As Chafe observes, the St. John Passion stresses Jesus’ messianic nature and accentuates oppositions between good and evil. Theologians relate John to the “Christus Victor” conception of Atonement, which dates back to Christianity’s early days, and according to which Christ died on



*“I see, and have you tried worrying about it?”*

the Cross knowing that his Resurrection would redeem mankind. In Matthew, Jesus has less foreknowledge: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matthew accords with the other major conception of Atonement, known as the "satisfaction theory," in which humanity is redeemed through the sacrifice of an utterly blameless person. The opening chorus of the St. Matthew Passion, "Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen" ("Come, you daughters, help me mourn"), is an engulfing river of lament, lacking the triumphalism of "Herr, unser Herrscher." The St. Matthew is the more openhearted, empathetic work; the St. John remains a little frightening.

Chafe's interpretation of the St. John detects theology in almost every bar. He notes that over the two parts of the Passion—the first centered on Peter's denial of Jesus, the second on Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate—Bach shifts from flat key signatures to sharp ones and back again. The very look of the notation on the page might be symbolic: sharp signs resemble crosses (# or x). At each transition, Jesus' seeming defeat becomes an emblem of his power. After all, he had predicted that Peter would deny knowing him, and so that humiliation only leads to his victory. Before Pilate, Jesus exposes the emptiness of earthly authority. ("You would have no power over Me, if it were not given to you from above.") As this exchange takes place, the tonality is yanked from D minor, with one flat, to C-sharp minor, with four sharps. Much of Chafe's analysis is arcane, in places straining credulity; but Bach, too, was a man of arcane bent.

Marissen's readings are similarly eagle-eyed, but he is on the lookout for a grimmer strain in Lutheranism. Luther's ugliest legacy was the invective that, in his later years, he heaped on the Jewish people. His 1543 treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies" calls for the burning of synagogues and Jewish homes. "We are even at fault for not striking them dead," Luther writes. Other writings endorse the blood libel—the legend that Jews kill Christian children for ritual purposes. Such sentiments were echoed by the more strident theologians of Bach's time.

One was the Hamburg pastor and poet Erdmann Neumeister. In 1720, Bach was under consideration to become the organist at Neumeister's church, and five of his cantatas set Neumeister texts. (The pastor helped to invent the cantata as Bach practiced it: a suite of recitatives, arias, and choruses on a religious topic.)

Other Lutheran theologians, particularly those in the Pietist camp, were considerably more tolerant. The musicologist Raymond Erickson has highlighted a document known as the *Gutachten*, published in Leipzig in 1714, which denounces the blood libel as baseless. A Pietist named August Hermann Francke—who, according to Chafe, may have influenced the themes of the St. John Passion—advocated the conversion of Jews to Christianity, but did so in a spirit of persuasion rather than coercion. Francke also deemphasized the idea that the Jews were primarily or solely to blame for Christ's death. He wrote, "Blame yourself, O human-kind, whether of the Jews or the Gentiles. . . . Not only Caiaphas and Pilate, but I myself am the murderer." To be sure, Luther said much the same in a 1519 sermon on the Crucifixion. The vituperation of his later writings can be balanced against earlier, more generous judgments. Such were the tensions that existed in Bach's world on the question of the Jews.

The most troubling of the cantatas is "Schauet doch und sehet" ("Behold and see"), which Bach composed during his first year in Leipzig. It meditates on the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In Lutheran culture, Marissen says, the fall of Jerusalem was thought to represent "God's punishment of Old Jerusalem for its sin of rejecting Jesus." Calov quotes Luther to the effect that contemporary Jews are "children of whoredom" who must "perish eternally." Unfortunately, it's clear that Bach paid attention to such passages. At one point, Calov notes that in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction Jews have had to experience "the same sort of thing for over 1600 years, even to this day." Marissen observes that under "1600" Bach wrote "1700." This pedantic updating hardly indicates dissent.

Anti-Jewish rancor is carried over

into the text of "Schauet doch." A tenor sings:

Let whole rivers of tears flow,  
Because there has befallen you an  
irreparable loss  
Of the Most High's favor. . . .  
You were handled like Gomorrah,  
Though not actually annihilated.  
Oh, better that you were utterly destroyed  
Than that one at present hears Christ's  
enemy blaspheming in you.

Bach's music for this recitative is queasily unstable, with dominant-seventh and diminished-seventh chords preventing the music from settling in one key area. On the word "irreparable" the harmony lands on B-flat minor, chillingly remote from the initial G minor. It is a musical picture of wandering and banishment. Yet, Marissen concludes, this cantata is a poor vehicle for righteous anger against Jews. The aching dissonances of its opening lamentation and the peculiar instrumental elaborations in the closing chorale leave a mood of overhanging gloom, as if casting doubt on the notion that contemporary Christian sinners can escape the fate meted out to the Jews.

Marissen says that his findings have often met with a frosty reception at musicological conferences. His critics have claimed that Bach cannot be anti-Jewish, because a cantata like "Schauet doch und sehet" does not actually name Jews as enemies, and because violence against Jews is nowhere advocated in Bach's work. These objections show a shallow understanding of the psychology of bigotry. The weakest protest holds that any noxious views are mitigated, or even annulled, by the greatness of Bach's music. Marissen is properly aghast: "The aesthetic magnificence of Bach's musical settings surely makes these great cantatas *more*, not less, problematic. The notion that beauty trumps all really is too good to be true."

THAT JUDGMENT APPLIES to the Passions, and to the St. John most of all. Of the Evangelists, John is the most vindictive toward the Jews, and many Baroque settings of his Passion narrative preserve that animus. The libretto of Bach's St. John, by an unidentified author, is based in part on a text devised by the Hamburg poet Barthold Heinrich Brockes—a lurid treatment



that was set by Handel and Telemann, among others. One aria speaks of “you scum of the world,” of “dragon’s brood” spitting venom in the Saviour’s face. Brockes’s libretto identifies the soldiers who scourge Jesus as Jews—a departure from the New Testament.

Bach’s libretto is somewhat less severe. The “scum of the world” lines are excised, and the scourging of Jesus is ascribed not to Jewish soldiers but to Pilate. Were these enlightened choices on the part of Bach or his collaborator? There is no way of knowing, but Marissen speculates that Bach, following Lutheran convention, wished to shift emphasis from the perfidy of the Jews to the guilt of all participants in the Passion scene and, by extension, to present-day sinners.

Still, the Jews retain enemy status, their presence felt in a series of bustling, bristling choruses. Many of these pieces share an instrumental signature—sixteenth notes in the strings, oboes chirping above. Several exhibit upward-slithering chromatic lines. Bouts of counterpoint create a disputatious atmosphere. All this fits the stereotype of “Jewish uproar”—of a noisy, obstinate people. At the same time, the choruses are lively, propulsive, exciting to sing and hear. When the Jews tell Pilate, “We have a law, and by the law he ought to die,” the music is oddly infectious, full of jaunty syncopations. This incongruous air of merriment conveys how crowds can take pleasure in hounding individuals. Moreover, the chorus in which the Jews protest the designation of Jesus as “King of the Jews” echoes a chorus of Roman soldiers sardonically crying the same phrase. Ultimately, Bach seems interested more in portraying the dynamics of righteous mobs than in stereotyping Jews. The choicest irony is that he uses his own celebrated art of fugue as a symbol of malicious scheming.

The Jews behave similarly in the St. Matthew Passion, where the crowd’s cry of “*Laß ihn kreuzigen!*” (“Let him be crucified”) is articulated as a driving, demonic fugue. Marissen highlights Bach’s handling of the phrase “his blood be on us and on our children,” which was widely taken to be a curse that Jews cast upon themselves. The St. Matthew mitigates this threat of eternal damna-

tion with the magisterial alto aria “*Können Tränen meiner Wangen*” (“If the tears of my cheeks”), in which an image of dripping blood, palpably notated in the music, is transmuted into one of melancholy grace. Marissen discerns a theological message: the Jews’ curse is borne by all and, on pious reflection, turns into a blessing.

Such gestures help to explain why the Bach Passions have long found an audience far beyond Lutheran congregations. In 1824, Bella Salomon, an observant Jew living in Berlin, gave a copy of the St. Matthew to her grandson, Felix Mendelssohn, who resolved to lead a performance. His revival of the work, in 1829, inaugurated the modern cult of Bach. Although Mendelssohn had converted to Christianity, he remained conscious of his Jewish origins. The scholar Ruth HaCohen speculates that Bach’s “ecumenical, inclusive dialogue” opened a space in which Jewish listeners could find refuge. All this is reassuring, but one cannot take too much comfort. Even if the Passions lack malice toward Jews, they treat them more as metaphors than as human beings.

WE PAY CLOSER attention to Bach’s texts these days because we hear them better. In 1981, the musician and scholar Joshua Rifkin offered the provocative hypothesis that the Passions should be sung not by a lineup of soloists and a chorus of dozens but by a central group of only eight voices, with a few extra voices for smaller parts. Arguments still rage around Rifkin’s proposal, but the logic behind it—having to do with the way Bach prepared his vocal parts—has won many adherents. Certainly, it has yielded crisp, bracing performances. The German words jump out at you, and the clarity of the textures accentuates Bach’s zest for dissonance. The music becomes at once more archaic and more modern.

That paradox animates John Butt’s book on the Passions. He is one of the finest modern conductors of Bach; with the Dunedin Consort, based in Edinburgh, he has made incisive, expressive recordings of the Passions, the B-Minor Mass, and the Christmas Oratorio. His version of the St. John reconstructs how the piece would have unfolded at

the Good Friday service in Leipzig, with choral singing and organ pieces before and after. A Buxtehude prelude preceding “*Herr, unser Herrscher*” amplifies the disconcerting power of Bach’s music: you feel it thunder through the door. In “*Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*,” though, Butt shows impatience with the historically minded readings favored by Chafe and Marissen. Instead, he wants to know why Bach’s works have achieved such resonance through time—how this ostensibly conservative Lutheran composer “writes music that chimes with the sensibilities of a much later age.”

For Butt, the heterogeneity of elements in Bach’s Passions engenders a novelistic richness, a virtual world rife with ambiguity: “It is as if he had entered into a ‘Faustian pact,’ by which he sought for his music an extraordinarily strong power in articulating and enhancing faith within the Lutheran religion, but in doing so gave to music an autonomous logic and referential power that goes well beyond the original purpose.” Addressing “*Herr, unser Herrscher*,” Butt acknowledges the theology but concentrates on the musical texture. The overlapping of strands—the circling sixteenth notes, the pulsing eighth notes, the pungent dissonances of the oboes—makes him think of human beings interacting: voices in conversation, bodies erotically intertwined. At the same time, he senses a mechanical process, a huge machine in motion. All these conflicting images spring to mind even before the voices enter.

A different kind of ambiguity arises in the solo arias, where tensions between voice and accompaniment often conjure the desperation of the beleaguered soul. The St. John Passion aria “*Ach, mein Sinn*” (“Ah, my mind”), a reflection on Peter’s denial, depicts a traumatized, flailing spirit. The tenor starts out in synch with the ritornello; attempts to assume an independent melodic shape; and then, failing that, tries to join up with the accompaniment again. All the while, the instruments churn through their material, indifferent to the singer’s plight. Butt calls it a “representation of a human who loses the way set out for him.”

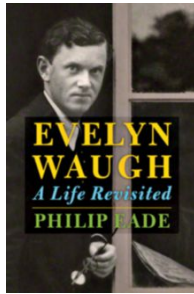
This air of being lost in a world of

## BRIEFLY NOTED

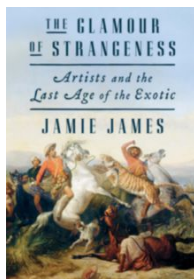
ungraspable dimensions is crucial to the experience of the Passion as a whole. Above all, Butt observes, we are lost in time. In the arias and choruses, time seems to stop, as we sink into a particular emotional or spiritual condition. Elsewhere, time hurtles ahead: unpredictable harmonic schemes generate suspense at every turn of this most familiar of stories. Furthermore, Butt maps multiple time worlds, or “time zones,” in the Passions: the recitatives and dialogues, which plunge us into the midst of the New Testament narrative; the stern, stately chorales, which are like voices calling out from the era of Luther; and the arias and big choruses, which, in operatic style, show the lessons and moods of the Passion being absorbed into the Baroque present of Leipzig.

Butt relates Bach’s complex sense of time to the evolving Christian understanding of eschatology, of the nature of the Second Coming. When, after the early Christian era, the Last Judgment no longer seemed imminent, the idea of “realized eschatology” emerged: the believer could glimpse the world to come within the span of his own life. At the same time, Butt is reminded of Frank Kermode’s theory that in the modern era the concept of the apocalyptic shifts from the future into the present, into a state of “eternal transition, perpetual crisis.” In that state Bach permanently resides.

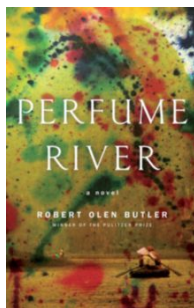
This music can be more beautiful than anyone’s, but it refuses to blot out the ugliness of the world. As Butt says, Bach’s works “agitate the listeners on one level while calming them on another.” Comfort and catharsis are not the point. For that reason, the discomfiting focus on the role of the Jews should be welcome. Bach’s vexations, his rages, his blind spots, even his hatreds, are our own. The musical literature tends to present him as a mastermind exerting uncanny control over his creations, but he, too, may have been caught in the labyrinth of his imagination. What he gives us—what he perhaps gave himself—is a way of coming to terms with extreme emotion. He does not console; he commiserates. “Herr, unser Herrscher” notwithstanding, Bach is no Byzantine deity gazing from the dome. He walks beside you in the night. ♦



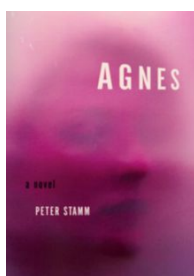
**Evelyn Waugh**, by *Philip Eade* (Henry Holt). This crowded, witty biography follows Waugh from the ancestral home in Somerset (“The only bathroom featured a stuffed monkey that had, improbably, died of sunstroke”) to the jungles of Brazil. The supporting characters seem stranger, blunter, and more lovable, or hateable, than their doubles in “Decline and Fall” and “Vile Bodies”—in this case, life exceeded art. Eade plunges into correspondence and unpublished family papers to explore the writer’s obsessions with social status and Catholicism, his jackknife turns from affection to contempt, and his torturous ambition. “I know I have something in me,” a young Waugh wrote, “but I am desperately afraid it may never come to anything.”



**The Glamour of Strangeness**, by *Jamie James* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Artists and writers who journeyed to distant lands to “create a new self in a new place” are the subject of this study: Paul Gauguin, Victor Segalen, Walter Spies, Isabelle Eberhardt, Maya Deren, and Raden Saleh. James tells their stories and assesses their works, which (Gauguin’s excepted) have often been overlooked. One reason is that the cultural fusions they produced—Spies’s gorgeous Balinese landscapes, Segalen’s proto-modernist poems in the shape of Chinese “steles,” Eberhardt’s Russian-Muslim romances—resist categorization. James demonstrates their importance in shaping Western conceptions of the East (and vice versa), and he rejects the charge of Orientalism, insisting that his subjects were not mere tourists but sincerely engaged in translating one world to another.



**Perfume River**, by *Robert Olen Butler* (Atlantic). This novel confronts the long aftermath of the Vietnam War. Robert Quinlan, a historian and veteran, still wakes at night remembering the man he killed and the Vietnamese woman he loved. His brother, dodging the draft, settled in Canada, and the novel revolves around the question of reconciliation between the brothers, as the health of their father, who fought in the Second World War, fails. Butler roves gracefully, if at times self-seriously, across the perspectives of many characters, showing particular tenderness in his depiction of Robert’s wife, Darla, and her attempt to harmonize conflicting parts of her husband’s life.



**Agnes**, by *Peter Stamm*, translated from the German by *Michael Hofmann* (Other). “Agnes is dead,” this starkly written novella begins. “Killed by a story. All that’s left of her now is this story.” The narrator, an aging Swiss writer researching a book in Chicago, meets a mysterious young grad student in a library and falls in love. At her request, he begins writing a story about her. When, inevitably, it slips out of his control, tragedy follows. Stamm emphasizes the story’s metafictional concerns, but what could be a tired postmodern meditation on the dark powers of storytelling becomes a haunting psychological study. The vivid impression left by Agnes herself belies her conclusion that “the character’s life ends when the book does.”

DANCING

# STREET SCENES

*Kyle Abraham's political choreography.*

BY JOAN ACOCELLA



THE Brooklyn Academy of Music's annual Next Wave Festival, as its name indicates, usually brings us work that is new, or new to New York. But in this year's festival you could see Kyle Abraham's "Pavement" looking very much as it did when it premiered, at Harlem Stage Gatehouse, four years ago. Nowadays, you don't retire a dance that is both concerned with race and very good. In any case, this 2012 piece shows us, with no need of updating, that the circumstances underlying the Black Lives Matter movement preceded its actual founding, in 2013, in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's

killer. Indeed, as Abraham has said, the dance was inspired by John Singleton's movie "Boyz n the Hood," now twenty-five years old. Singleton's boys, all African-American, lived in South Central Los Angeles. Abraham's are in Pittsburgh, his home town, and, interestingly, two of the six dancers are white. (One is a woman.) But the subject is the same: fear, and vigilance. If you're a young person in one of this city's black neighborhoods, you don't have to do or be anything special in order to get killed. The score of "Pavement," a montage of J.C. Bach, Jacques Brel, Sam Cooke, and many others, is punctuated by snippets of

*In "Pavement," arms in a handcuffed position come to signify helplessness.*

dialogue from "Boyz n the Hood." Here's one: "My mama say, 'A bullet don't have no name on it.'"

Political art is always, in some measure, a problem for audiences living in the time of its creation. They don't know what they're clapping for, the art or the cause. Some people just go ahead and clap for the cause, and feel proud or sheepish about it. Others, annoyed at being preached to, turn their backs on work that has real artistic value. (I would say that at least half the Western world's great art started out political.) The whole thing is a mess. The ideal, of course, is a piece in which the artistic qualities—in dance, those would be shape, tempo, rhythm, attack, etc.—are such as to elicit a feeling that you recognize as being on the side of justice. But you never know whether that's really justice or just your wish for a piece you admire to share your politics.

"Pavement," I think, comes close to combining truth and beauty, by making its realism metamorphose, again and again, into symbol. The boys who constitute its cast are constantly running, and at first you think, Why shouldn't they be? They're boys, and they're on a basketball court. But after a while you start to feel that they're running a bit too much. The running becomes a dance, a dance about running—a symbol. Now realism intrudes again. One boy starts to fall, another catches him and lowers him to the ground. He's been killed. But has he? Soon he's up again, and catching somebody else's fall. This happens repeatedly. And, incidentally, the fall is beautiful: a spiral. It's a design as much as a homicide.

But the most eloquent realism-to-abstraction switch is what I would call the handcuffs gesture: the dancer joins his hands, behind, at the bottom of his spine, as if he had been manacled. At first, you take this quite literally, and, again, why shouldn't you? Unless we've been arrested, we don't usually hold our hands that way. But as the dancers repeat the gesture it starts to expand into an idea: helplessness. These boys don't have a chance.

The meanings are amplified by the quality of the dancing. It's been a long



time since I've seen a group of virtuoso dancers look as natural, as human, as Abraham's company. I would single out Vinson Frayley, Jr.—you can't take your eyes off him—and Tamisha Guy, and Kyle Abraham himself, but all the performers are miracles of unshowy expressiveness. How easy it would have been, in this piece about young people in danger, made in a time when we have seen many young people in danger, to achieve a smooth, custardy, yes-we-all-agree effect. But that's not what happens. Abraham's dancers are as strong as they are soft—as threatening, sometimes, as they are threatened. You can almost feel their bodies against you, feel their flesh, and how it could be wounded.

The finale is tremendous. We see two piles of dancers, one pile of three, one of two. But they aren't really piles—they're stacks, of bodies lying face downward, with their arms in the handcuffs position. And they aren't really dead—in the stack of three, the body in the middle wiggles out and moves over to lie down on top of the stack of two. But by now they aren't even bodies. They're just material, something you could throw away.

**E**ARLY THIS MONTH, Abraham premiered a dance, "Untitled America," about the place where such material is usually sent when it is thrown away: the prison system. Some of the piece does indeed look like a continuation of "Pavement." It, too, shows us people, in small groups and ensembles, laboring and grieving. Again, the handcuff gesture weaves its way through; again bodies fall, and other dancers run to them, to let them down gently. Again, recorded voices speak, like ghosts.

But "Untitled America" is not as affecting as "Pavement," because it lacks the earlier piece's modesty and indirection. Much of the music is quite blatant (Laura Mvula's "Father Father," Mvula and Troy Miller's "Show Me Love"), and the recorded speech, taken from interviews with former prisoners and no doubt grounded in real, brutal experience, is full of psychotherapeutic banalities: "trust factors," people "being there," or not, for other people, and so on. In keeping

with the sentimentality of the text, a soft haze issues from a machine in the wings, and there's a lot of hugging.

But the most serious problem is that the piece has no structure to speak of. Actually, the same was true of "Pavement." It was mostly brief encounters, strung together. But the small cast, in street clothes, in BAM's small Fishman Space, was able to put it over. The Alvin Ailey company is something different: big, glamorous dancers—there were twelve of them in "Untitled"—dancing, in costumes, in gilt-edged City Center, with a capacity of more than two thousand. These people don't look like kids playing basketball; they look like sculptures by Bernini. Watching them, you expect something big, and when you get it you say, Wait a minute, this is too big—we were supposed to be talking about some poor girl whose boyfriend turned state's evidence against her. The grandeur of the presentation makes the piece seem oversold. Though lasting only thirty-five minutes, it feels twice as long as the fifty-five-minute "Pavement." And it's by the same man.

Never mind. Right now, Abraham has only one overriding subject, and, given the times, how could it be otherwise? As he has said of "Untitled America," "So many people that look like me"—that is, African-Americans—"can't even make it to the prisons. We've been shot before we even get to the trial. So what does that mean? Do we not mention that?" For the time being, he's going to mention it, and the Ailey company, one of the widest-touring American dance companies, is an important place to have it mentioned. At this point in his career, Abraham has just about everything: his own, excellent company, bags of awards (in 2013, he received a MacArthur Fellowship), offers right and left. But as a man of conscience he has less choice of subject matter than his white colleagues do. Good luck to him. ♦

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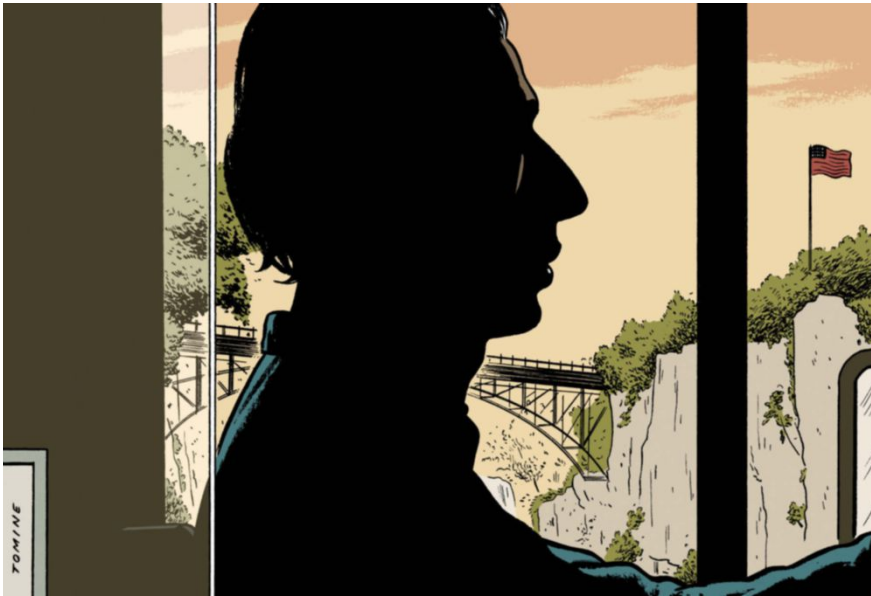
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## POETS' CORNER

*"Paterson" and "Neruda."*

BY ANTHONY LANE



*Adam Driver plays a bus driver with a calling in Jim Jarmusch's movie.*

THE HERO OF the new Jim Jarmusch film, "Paterson," is named Paterson (Adam Driver). He lives in Paterson, New Jersey, with his wife, Laura (Golshifteh Farahani). Every day, Paterson wakes up early, has breakfast, leaves the house, and goes to work as a bus driver—piloting the No. 23, which says "PATERSON" on the front. He stops for lunch. At the end of the day, he comes home and eats dinner. Later, he takes his English bulldog for a walk, leaving it outside a bar while he goes in for a beer. For some reason, the mutt's name is Marvin, which is ridiculous. It should be Paterson.

If all that strikes you as a little unexciting, you don't know the half of it, or the seventh. In the course of the film, the pattern is repeated each day for a week, with minor variations. The weekend feels no different, except when the couple go to a movie: an old horror flick, "Island of Lost Souls" (1932), which is pretty much the opposite of their domestic routine. (Although, as Paterson remarks, one of the actresses—Kathleen Burke, as Panther Woman—

resembles Laura.) Followers of Jarmusch will know that he never likes to be hurried or hustled in the unfurling of a plot. Some of the gags are constructed with a degree of patience that Jacques Tati, the grand master of the slow build, would not have scorned, and the payoff to one of them, involving Marvin and a mailbox, is delayed so long that I had actually forgotten that there was a joke in the works at all.

There is more to Paterson, however; there has to be, since he is played by Adam Driver. One glance at the guy, and you instantly wonder, Why the long face? So fine are those pallid features, skittering with anxiety and intent, that his agent must be constantly tempted to skip the movie offers and enter him in the Kentucky Derby. Driver has a hint of Basil Rathbone, but without the dash, and the time may come when he delivers the most highly strung Sherlock Holmes ever witnessed onscreen. Little surprise, then, that Paterson should harbor a secret—a private fixation, known only to his wife, which keeps him down in the basement, after

hours. You can be forgiven for assuming that he is a serial killer, or an abductor, those being the only vocations, as far as movies and TV are concerned, that drive quiet men to their cellars, but no. Paterson does something even more inexplicable. He writes poems.

These are not published. Nor, to Laura's anguish, are they copied for safekeeping. Instead, they are written painstakingly in a notebook, while Paterson is on his lunch break or sitting at the wheel of his bus, waiting to depart. He also reads them, in voice-over—word after careful word, as if the lines were being squeezed out of him drop by drop. You can see what Jarmusch is up to. He is making the effort, which few movies have even attempted, to dramatize the act of poetic composition, to suggest what manner of struggle, or reverie, or self-surrender, is entailed. I don't think his plan succeeds (nor can I really imagine what success would look like), but he boosts his cause by picking poems of a curt and plain-speaking simplicity, apparently free from "the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings" that Eliot refers to in "Four Quartets." The poems that Paterson recites are in fact by Ron Padgett, three of them written for the film. We hear a poem entitled "Poem," which begins, "I'm in the house./It's nice out: warm/Sun on cold snow."

Nothing in "Paterson" is intolerable. The days trot by; the weather is unerringly pleasant; the bus breaks down, but nobody is hurt. As for the kooky Laura, she starts learning to play the guitar, and paints roundels everywhere—on her skirt, on the shower curtain, and, in frosting, on the cupcakes that she bakes to sell at the farmers' market. (So cute is the visual matching that Paterson eats Cheerios for breakfast.) The toughest thing in the film is the Cheddar-and-Brussels-sprout tart that she concocts for dinner, which her husband, the soul of politeness, forces down. Poems are easier than pie. Paul Valéry wrote that a work of art is never completed but abandoned, perhaps through lassitude, yet that note of troubled exhaustion finds no echo here. Many of the verses rise, as if unbidden, to Paterson's mind and are brought to a crisp and gratifying close. We are left with a sense that poetry is at once the core of his being

and no big deal, slotting all too sweetly into the rhythm of existence.

Looming behind “Paterson,” of course, is “Paterson,” the book-length poem by William Carlos Williams—or, as Laura calls him, Carlo Williams Carlos. The poem was published in five volumes, between 1946 and 1958, during Williams’s long spell as the head of pediatric medicine at Passaic General Hospital. (A sixth part was left unfinished.) One principle of the poem was, as he wrote, “that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody.” Hence, for instance, the image that opens a section of Book I: “Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls/its spent waters forming the outline of his back.” Hence, too, in Jarmusch’s film, the sight of Paterson eating lunch on a bench, facing the Passaic Falls. Seldom does he speak to passengers on the bus while it’s in motion, but he overhears their chatter, with a smile, just as Williams, by his own admission, “went on Sundays in summer when the people were using the park, and I listened to their conversation as much as I could.” This movie has almost no bite but plenty of moseying charm, and what it *does* get right is the idea of poets as perpetual magpies. They pick up scraps of talk and offcuts of sensation, with which to feather the nests of their lyrical work. Nothing goes to waste.

**T**RAVEL TO the other end of the bardic spectrum, as far away from Paterson as possible, and you arrive at Pablo Neruda. As incarnated by Luis Gnecco in Pablo Larraín’s

“Neruda,” he strikes a formidable figure. Where Paterson is ascetic and gaunt, murmuring poems to himself, Neruda is corpulent and unabashed, declaiming to his disciples and eager to gorge on the sins of the flesh. “I could eat a pig!” he exclaims. A typical evening finds him disguised as a priest, on the prowl, or dressing in drag, as a prostitute in a brothel, to evade capture during a raid by the authorities. Though an adoring husband to Delia (Mercedes Morán), an Argentinean aristocrat, he remains a committed orgiast, and slips a hand down the blouse of a typist while Delia is in the room. Come the revolution, he predicts, “we’re going to eat in the bedroom and fornicate in the kitchen.” Sounds like a job for Buñuel.

The strangest facet of the tale—a more spirited enterprise than Larraín’s “Jackie,” his Jacqueline Kennedy film, which is currently in release—is how much of it is true. Neruda was indeed a Communist senator in Chile, and was both scandalized and imperilled when, in 1948, the President, Gabriel González Videla (Alfredo Castro), whom he had hitherto supported, turned against the Party. It is also the case that, as the movie shows, a warrant was issued for Neruda’s arrest; that he was shunted by accomplices from one safe house to the next, like a spy; and that he finally fled over the Andes to Argentina. In short, his biography is as juicy with incident, and as controversial, as that of any poet since Byron, and some filmgoers will chide Larraín for not mentioning Neruda’s unrepentant Stalin-

ism. There was even an ode to Uncle Joe.

Where the movie does depart from—or erect fantasies upon—the established facts is in the person of Oscar Peluchonneau (Gael García Bernal), a fictional cop who is dispatched, with the President’s blessing, to hunt Neruda down. Bernal lacks the edge of wolfish cruelty that the role requires, but he sounds nicely mordant in his running commentary (“Communists hate to work. They’d rather burn churches. It makes them feel more alive”), and he keeps pace with the movie’s changes of gear. Later on, the film switches to a playful grandeur, with the policeman trudging through snowy fields on the trail of his prey and fearing, at the limits of fatigue, that he might be no more than a figment of Neruda’s invention—a supporting character in the drama of the wanted man. Poets, according to Peluchonneau, “tend to think that the world is something they imagined,” and the movie, rejoicing in the magniloquence of its hero (“I need to be a popular giant”), conspires with that view. Larraín, like Jarmusch, hardly delves deep into the creative process, but, where “Paterson” is tranquil to the point of inertia, “Neruda,” with its jumpy shifts of scene, its doses of casual surrealism, and its mashing of high politics against low farce, struck me as more of a poem. It reminds us that movies, by their very nature, owe far more to poetry than they ever will to the novel. The story is only the start. ♦

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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 Tom Chitty, must be received by Sunday, January 1st. The finalists in the December 12th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 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



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“I have some good news—we’re letting you go.”*  
Connor Kurtz, Douglassville, Pa.

*“I admire your restraint.”*  
Linda Pickering, Lawrenceville, N.J.

*“Tell me about a difficult situation you’ve been in and what you did to get out of it.”*  
Jonah Schwartz, Kinston, N.C.

### THE WINNING CAPTION

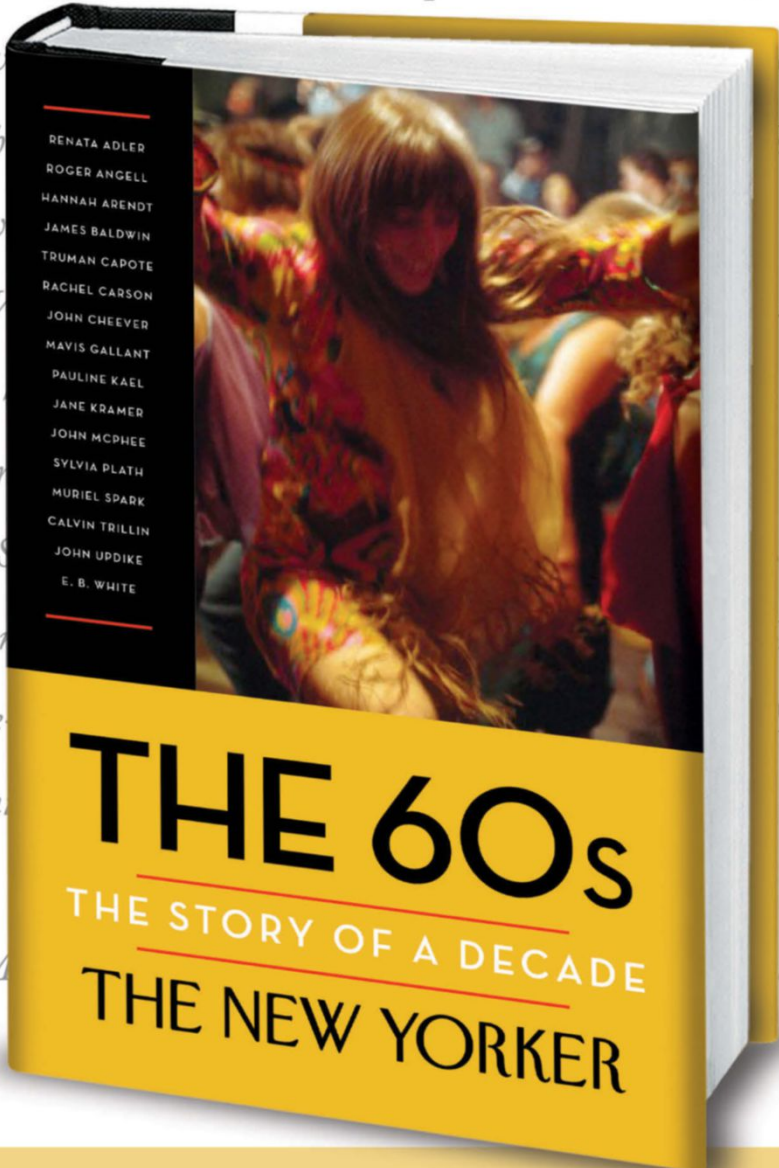


*“Like the pomp. Not crazy about the circumstances.”*  
Scott Tredwell, Advance, N.C.

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Portnoy's Co  
Crisis • Free  
Environmen  
Feminism •  
Free-Love M*



*on • Truman  
Muriel Spark  
• The Beatles  
viggy • Allen  
& Garfunkel  
Pauline Kael  
Sylvia Plath  
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Second-Wave  
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