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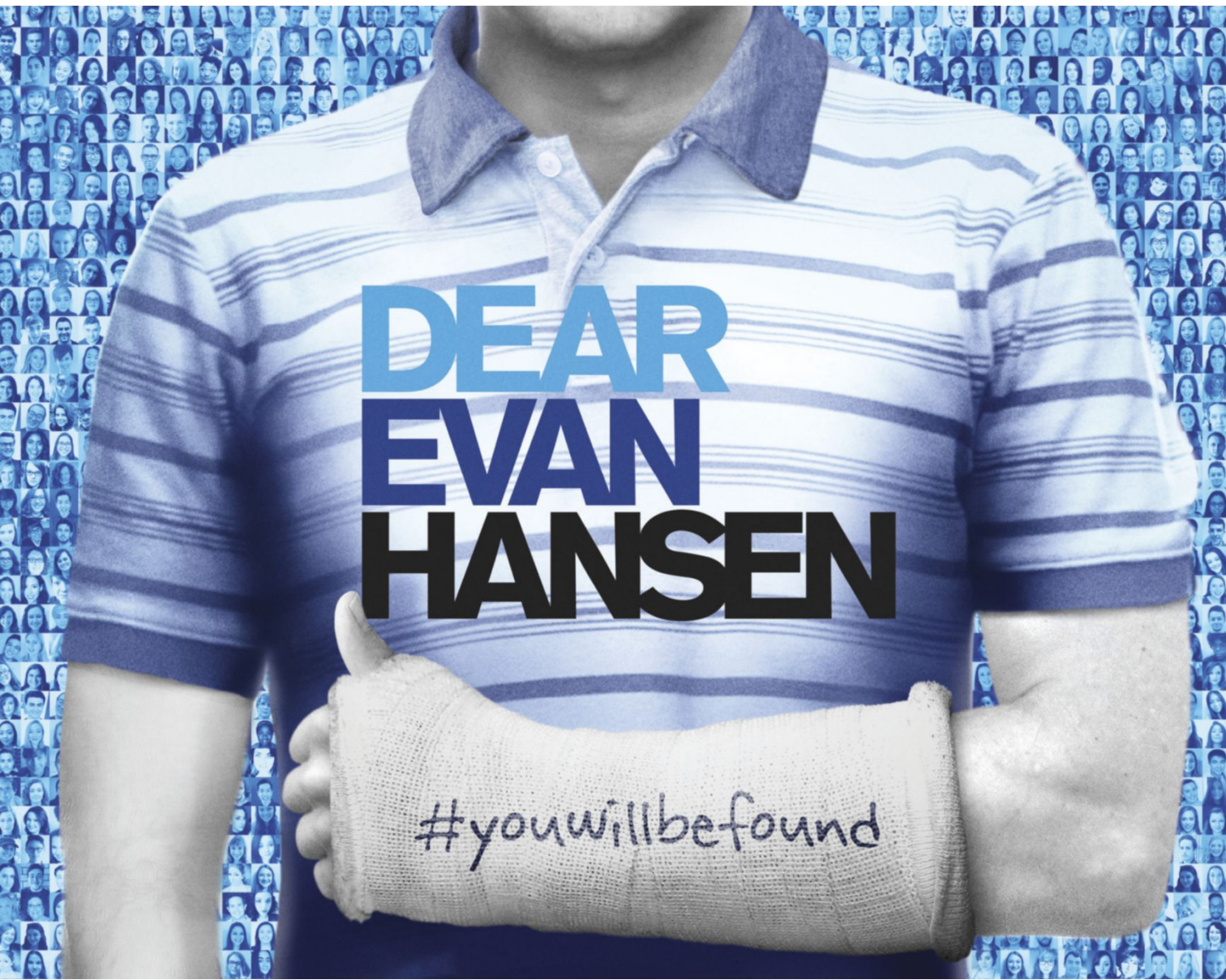
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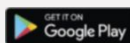
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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Lizzie Widdicombe** (“Rate Your Boss!,” p. 22) is a staff writer and an editor of *The Talk of the Town*.

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**Alex Perry** (“Blood and Justice,” p. 36) is a reporter based in England. This piece is adapted from his book “The Good Mothers,” coming out in the U.S. in June.

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**Adrian Chen** (“Mockery and Democracy,” p. 48) joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2016.

**Emily Nussbaum** (*On Television*, p. 74), the magazine’s television critic, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

**John Edgar Wideman** (*Fiction*, p. 58) is the author of many books, including, most recently, “Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File.”

**Jennifer Grotz** (*Poem*, p. 52), the director of the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conferences, teaches at the University of Rochester. Her most recent poetry collection is “Window Left Open.”

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### PODCAST

Andrew Marantz and Dorothy Wickenden discuss the fallout from Steve Bannon’s political collapse.

### VIDEO

As the federal budget threatens the U.S. population of wild horses, one woman is fighting to keep them free.

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# THE MAIL

## FINDING THE FICTION

A few sentences into Sadia Shepard's story "Foreign-Returned," I began to get the eerie feeling that I knew exactly what was coming next (Fiction, January 8th). And, in fact, I did, because almost everything that happens in Shepard's story happens in Mavis Gallant's story "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street," published, in *The New Yorker*, in 1963. Scene by scene, plot turn by plot turn, gesture by gesture, the Shepard story follows the Gallant—the main difference being that the characters are Pakistanis in Connecticut rather than Canadians in Geneva. Some phrases and sentences are mirrored with only a few words changed. Shepard, in an interview with the fiction editor Deborah Treisman, acknowledges a "great debt" to the Gallant story, but the correspondences far exceed the bounds of "debt," and even of "homage," or of a "translation" into a different ethnicity and historical period. Is it really acceptable to change the names and the identities of fictional characters and then claim the story as one's own original work? Why, then, do we bother having copyright laws? *Francine Prose*  
*New York City*

Do we really need to have a conversation about whether pastiche, parody, reframing, transposition, and creative rearrangement—basic concepts in twentieth- and twenty-first-century aesthetics—are acceptable in literature? "Foreign-Returned" replicates the dramatic situation of Gallant's story in a different time, place, and cultural milieu; if you know both stories, you feel a certain thrill or shock of recognition when details reappear, knowingly transformed, as when a Bible in Gallant's story becomes a Quran in Shepard's. This recognition through transposition has been done countless times; the most obvious recent example is Nathan Englander's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank."

As is usually the case when a literary debate erupts, we're not talking about the mechanics of story composition; this is a conversation about racial and cultural power and prestige. Shepard's critics have accused her of plagiarizing Gallant's story, while refusing to admit that to transpose a work's cultural setting, or racial perspective, while preserving its plot is a long-standing, valid, and increasingly vital extension of Ezra Pound's command to "make it new." This denies both Shepard and Gallant the respect they deserve. Gallant wrote a masterly story that embodies a certain time, place, and perspective; Shepard, who discovered it decades later, found a way to bring it to life again, putting the same human frailties into a different context. The real scandal here is the proprietary rage of Shepard's critics, who insist that she has no right to this material. As if they were the ones in charge.

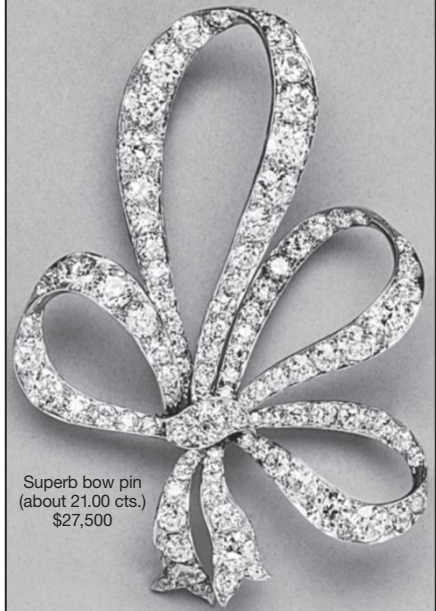
*Jess Row*  
*New York City*

*Sadia Shepard replies:*  
If Prose recognized the imprint of Gallant's story on mine, that means she, like many other readers, is familiar with the model. In acknowledging my great debt to Gallant in my interview with my editor, my aim was to make my intentions clear: to use Gallant's classic story of self-exile in postwar Europe as a point of departure for an exploration of the immigrant experience of Pakistani Muslims in today's America. Prose's assertions reflect both a profound misrepresentation of my work and a refusal to acknowledge the central role that cultural identity plays in my story. I believe that creating new work inspired by Gallant honors her legacy and might even bring her new readers, something that Prose and I no doubt agree she deserves.

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

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JANUARY 17 – 23, 2018

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Passive aggression reaches new comedic heights in **“Miles for Mary,”** which tracks the efforts of earnest high-school teachers to organize a fund-raising telethon in 1988 Ohio. Devised and performed by the Mad Ones, it takes place in the teachers’ lounge, and swiftly reveals the frustrations bubbling under a veneer of ingratiating politeness. By the end of the play—which premièred at the Bushwick Starr in 2016 and is enjoying an encore run at Playwrights Horizons—your dread of meetings may swell exponentially.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HELGAS

# THE THEATRE

## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

### Balls

One Year Lease mounts this physical-theatre rendition of the 1973 tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, also the subject of the film “Battle of the Sexes.” (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. In previews.)

### A Chronicle of the Madness of Small Worlds

At Next Door at NYTW, Elena Araoz directs her adaptation of two short stories by Mac Wellman, dealing with asteroids, aliens, amnesia, and estranged neighbors. (Fourth Street Theatre, 83 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475. Opens Jan. 17.)

### Fill Fill Fill Fill Fill Fill

In Steph Del Rosso’s play, directed by Marina McClure and featuring the Bats, a woman recovering from a breakup begins to feel holes throughout her body. (Flea, 20 Thomas St. 212-226-0051. Previews begin Jan. 22.)

### Fire and Air

Terrence McNally’s new play, directed by John Doyle, traces the relationship between the Russian ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev (Douglas Hodge) and his lover and star dancer, Vaslav Nijinsky (James Cusati-Moyer). (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111. In previews.)

### Hangmen

In this dark comedy by Martin McDonagh (“Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri”), the second-best hangman in England (Mark Addy) reacts to the news that capital punishment has been abolished. (Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111. Previews begin Jan. 18.)

### He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box

Theatre for a New Audience presents a new play by Adrienne Kennedy (“Funnyhouse of a Negro”), which explores segregation through parallel monologues set in 1941 in Georgia and New York City. (Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. Previews begin Jan. 18.)

### Hindle Wakes

The Mint revives Stanley Houghton’s play from 1912, in which a young man engaged to be married has a weekend fling with a woman who works at his father’s mill. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens Jan. 18.)

### The Homecoming Queen

Ngozi Anyanwu’s drama, directed by Awoye Timpo, follows a novelist who returns home to Nigeria after many years to look after her dying father. (Atlantic Stage 2, at 330 W. 16th St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Jan. 22.)

### Jerry Springer—The Opera

Richard Thomas (“Anna Nicole”) and Stewart Lee wrote this musical ode to the talk-show host, staged at London’s National Theatre in 2003. John Rando directs the New Group’s production, featuring Terrence Mann and Will Swenson. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin Jan. 23.)

### The Undertaking

The documentary troupe the Civilians presents this piece exploring mortality and the concept of the land of the dead, written and directed by Steve Cosson. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Opens Jan. 17.)

### Until the Flood

Dael Orlandersmith wrote and performs this monologue, directed by Neel Keller, examining the shooting of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri. (Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-627-2556. In previews. Opens Jan. 18.)

### X: Or, Betty Shabazz v. the Nation

The Acting Company stages Marcus Gardley’s play, which retells the story of the assassination of Malcolm X using the framework of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar.” (Theatre at St. Clement’s, 423 W. 46th St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Jan. 21.)

## NOW PLAYING

### The Children

In Lucy Kirkwood’s gentle, frightening, and surprising play, Rose, a retired nuclear physicist, arrives at the crooked cottage where her former colleagues Robin (Ron Cook) and Hazel (Deborah Findlay) now live. A Fukushima-like disaster has overwhelmed the plant where they all once worked, irradiating parts of the English countryside. Rose (the astonishing Francesca Annis) has a scheme to put it to rights, recruiting older workers to undertake the dangerous cleanup and spare the younger ones. Directed by James Macdonald, first for London’s Royal Court and now for Manhattan Theatre Club, “The Children” is a drama of moral responsibility. Maybe this makes the play sound deadly. In fact, it’s an ethical thriller, a passionate and beautifully acted inquiry into the messes we make—of our lives, of a reactor’s core, of the downstairs toilet—and into our willingness to tidy them again. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Disco Pigs

This seventy-five-minute piece, which debuted in 1997, is alternately interesting and boring to watch, if only because the director, John Haidar, keeps trying to make Enda Walsh’s dense two-character script more theatrical than it is. Runt (Evanna Lynch) and Pig (Colin Campbell) are friends, both teen-agers in Cork, Ireland. Walsh’s text uses some of the region’s dialect, but it also invents words and phrases to convey how the characters’ frenzied imaginations are limited by circumstances, including relative poverty. Lynch and Campbell are real go-getters, but, after about half an hour of their amazing energy and love of performance, you might feel the need to turn away and curl up, quietly, with the script, to delve into and possibly understand what Walsh has written. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

### John Lithgow: Stories by Heart

Lithgow, one of the more charming and emotionally full actors alive, composed this evening of reminiscences about the effect that his late father—a man of the theatre who lived for Shakespeare—had on his life and imagination. The two-act piece begins with Lithgow recalling how, as a

child, he and his siblings were amazed when their father read Ring Lardner’s classic short story “Haircut” aloud. Before you know it, Lithgow becomes his father, expertly navigating the tale with a physical sureness and energy that illustrates just how much the senior Lithgow loved acting, and how much his son loved looking at and listening to his father. After the interval, we learn of Lithgow’s parents’ decline—and how the habit of reading aloud passed from father to child. It’s hard for a solo artist to hold an audience for as long as Lithgow does; he succeeds because he understands the effort it takes to be still, and how silence can add dramatic weight to tale-telling. While not strictly a play, the Roundabout’s production is an opportunity to watch a terrific actor do what he does, splendidly. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

### Mankind

Robert O’Hara is a hit-or-miss artist. At his best (2015’s “Barbecue,” for instance), he’s a social satirist whose comedies bring to mind Flannery O’Connor’s late stories about the breakdown of the status quo. Here, the director-playwright means to explore maleness and social norms, but the piece is so dramatically scrambled that it ends up being a two-hour testament to O’Hara’s confusion. In a future where women have gone extinct, Jason (Bobby Moreno) is a young man who finds himself pregnant. His occasional lover, Mark (Anson Mount), wants him to abort the fetus; eventually they have the child, and then—it’s nearly impossible to tell what happens next. Living in this far-off society, Jason and Mark find that they are versions of their fathers, just as their children become versions of themselves. The entire enterprise is beyond head-scratching. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

### Once on This Island

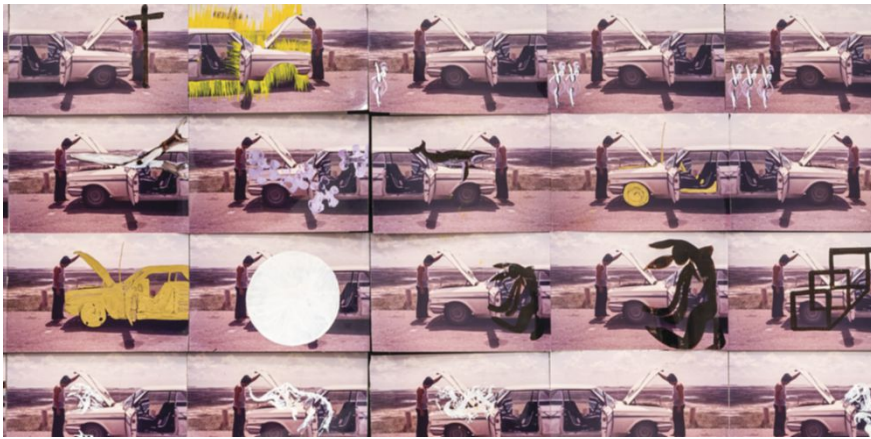
A calypso fairy tale just this side of treacly, Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty’s 1990 musical tells the story of Ti Moune (the big-voiced newcomer Hailey Kilgore), a peasant girl whose island, in the French Antilles, is divided by skin color and class. When a boy (Isaac Powell) crashes his car in her village, she nurses him back to health. He turns out to be an aristocrat, but can Ti Moune’s love conquer all? Michael Arden’s warm, handcrafted revival doesn’t overlay the Disney clichés—the musical, based on Rosa Guy’s novel “My Love, My Love,” repurposes the “Little Mermaid” myth—but instead frames the action as a tale told to a little girl (Emerson Davis) in a hurricane-blasted Caribbean slum. The show may share its ingénue’s lovelorn heart, but its biggest moment belongs to Alex Newell, who scales vocal heights as the draggy Goddess of the Earth. (Circle in the Square, 235 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

## ALSO NOTABLE

**Ballyturk St. Ann’s Warehouse.** • **The Band’s Visit** Ethel Barrymore. • **Bright Colors and Bold Patterns** SoHo Playhouse. • **Cardinal** Second Stage. • **Come from Away** Schoenfeld. • **Cruel Intentions** Le Poisson Rouge. • **Dear Evan Hansen** Music Box. • **Farinelli and the King** Belasco. • **Hello, Dolly!** Shubert. • **In the Body of the World** City Center Stage I. • **Latin History for Morons** Studio 54. • **Meteor Shower** Booth. *Through Jan. 21.* • **Miles for Mary** Playwrights Horizons. • **The Parisian Woman** Hudson. • **The Play That Goes Wrong** Lyceum. • **SpongeBob SquarePants** Palace. • **Springsteen on Broadway** Walter Kerr.



## ART



A detail of Pena Bonita's mixed-media collage "Stalled" (1987), in the group show "Unholding."

## National Interest

Ten Americans exhibit at Artists Space.

What is America? It's fifty states, sixteen territories, and five hundred and sixty-seven tribal nations. The invitation to a poetry reading in lower Manhattan, organized, last month, by the Portland-based artist Demian DinéYazhi, contained a quick history lesson on the last category: "By entering this space, you are acknowledging you are on colonized Lenape lands." The event was part of "Unholding," a vital exhibition of painting, sculpture, video, collage, and drawing by ten Native Americans, on view at Artists Space through Jan. 21. Don't expect a primer on recent developments. Most of the works were made in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, because "Unholding" coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of "We the People," a show at the nonprofit gallery in 1987, curated by the art critic Jean Fisher and the sculptor Jimmie Durham (whose magnificent retrospective is now at the Whitney).

Artists Space already holds a place in the annals of art for the show "Pictures," which named a generation of white-hot—and all white—American artists. "Unholding" emphasizes a parallel history of the period, with works by Pena Bonita, G. Peter Jemison, Kay WalkingStick, Alan Michelson, and Jolene Rickard. A few years ago, the Met anointed the Pictures Generation

with a significant show. What if it did the same for this group and its peers? Call them the *lekhamèn* generation, after the Lenape word for both "draws a picture" and "writes."

Language, verbal and visual, is central to the experience of "Unholding." (The show's title is borrowed from a poem by Layli Long Soldier.) In Michelson's installation "Permanent Title," from 1993, a series of charcoal rubbings on muslin sacks transforms the text of signage on buildings in lower Manhattan into a portable cemetery, evoking headstones in graveyards. Jemison makes witty use of words printed on brown paper bags in his drawing-sculpture hybrids, which split the difference between beauty and political pointedness. WalkingStick's powerful paintings marry landscape to pictographic abstraction.

"Unholding" pays homage to the 1987 show at Artists Space, but it doesn't literally restage it, which makes the ratio of old to new works feel lopsided. "Culture Capture," a ghostly four-minute video about museum displays of sacred tribal objects, made in 2017 by the filmmakers Adam Khalil and Zack Khalil, with Jackson Polys, is an eloquent expression of the original theme, which Durham described as "us looking at them looking at us." I wonder how the inclusion of other younger artists—say, Jeffrey Gibson or Sky Hopinka—might have expanded the view.

—Andrea K. Scott

## Metropolitan Museum

"David Hockney"

This ravishing survey of Hockney's six-decade career is unlikely to make a bigger splash in New York than it did last year in London, where almost half a million people lined up to see it at the Tate Britain. (The Met and the Tate co-organized the show with the Centre Pompidou, in Paris.) Still, it arrives as a revelation, a retort to all the avant-gardist eye-rollers who dismiss the eighty-year-old British artist as, at best, a guilty pleasure. The retrospective unfolds over eight rooms—each so cohesive it's a show of its own—as a bracing reminder that beauty and ideas aren't mutually exclusive and that great art is always, in some sense, conceptual. From the outset, we encounter an artist whose profound intelligence about picture-making is matched by his passion for color—and for passion itself. While he was still a student, at the Royal College of Art, in the early nineteen-sixties, Hockney began making explicitly homoerotic work, at a time when acts of queer love were against the law. In these paintings, we see the artist move beyond the gestural abstraction that was de rigueur in the era, and explore the figuration he would continue to hone to jewel-toned perfection. A post-graduation trip to L.A., in 1963, was also a homecoming, as Hockney found his métier in the city's sun-dappled swimming pools (which feature in his most famous works) and the beefcakes who lounged in and around them. The show slackens a bit when it lingers on landscapes from the nineties, but a cycle of views of a cerulean-blue terrace in the last room is a joy-soaked tour de force. *Through Feb. 25.*

## Met Breuer

"Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed"

A modern master of late-blooming reputation receives recuperative, gorgeous attention to his least esteemed body of work. The show takes its title from the last of the Norwegian's major self-portraits—or "self-scrutinies," as he termed them. Completed a year before his death, in 1944, at the age of eighty, it pictures a wizened man standing in semi-silhouette against the bright yellow of a studio wall that is hung with indistinct paintings. There's a faceless grandfather clock to one side of him and, to the other, a bed with a spread that is rendered in a bold pattern, on white, of red and black hatch marks. The painting crowns a long period that began after 1908, when an alcoholic breakdown ended Munch's twenty-year streak as a peripatetic rock star of Symbolist sensations, of which "The Scream" (1893) is only the most celebrated. After treatment at a Danish clinic, he withdrew to a nearly reclusive existence in a house outside Oslo. He left off distilling iconic images from his tumultuous experience in favor of painting, non-stop, whatever appealed to him on a given day: himself, landscapes, interiors, models, and repetitions (rather spunkless) of his early masterpieces. The show claims a place for Munch in the modernist canon of painting for painting's sake, and, in the process, it presents the spectacle of a great visual poet reduced to unstructured, though lyrical, painterly prose. In his later years, Munch took to working for himself alone until, with "Between the Clock and the Bed," he came upon one new fact of his life, incidentally relevant to everybody, that was worth getting just right. It's a feat both in and beyond art: a threshold of eternity. *Through Feb. 4.*



**Asia Society**

“After Darkness: Southeast Asian Art in the Wake of History”

The indisputable star of this moving show of artistic responses to recent political turmoil in Southeast Asia is Htein Lin’s ongoing project “A Show of Hands,” plaster casts of the hands of hundreds of people who, like the artist, have been political prisoners in their native Myanmar. Lined up and labelled, the bulky objects convey both the power of solidarity and the violent dehumanization to which dissidents are subjected. An accompanying documentary video creates a similarly transfixing dissonance by skipping quickly from one participant to the next, as they recount memories of beatings, harsh conditions, and subsisting on a diet of rats. The charred wooden torsos of FX Harsono’s “Burned Victims,” commemorating those who died during a violently repressed 1998 protest against the Indonesian dictator Suharto, are just as breathtaking in their confident representation of simple facts. A pair of video installations by the consistently sensational Propeller Group (the young Vietnamese and American artists Phunam, Matt Lucero, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen) inflects a direct gaze with American irony. In “The Dream,” we watch as a Honda motorbike, parked overnight on a Ho Chi Minh City street, is denuded of its parts in four and a half time-lapsed minutes. “The Guerrillas of Cu Chi” juxtaposes a 1963 Viet Cong propaganda film about the Cu Chi tunnels with recent footage of American tourists in the same location, shooting targets with war-era ordnance for a dollar a pop. *Through Jan. 21.*

**Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum**

“Access + Accessibility”

From a wheelchair with collapsible wheels, the better to stow during travel, to an adjustable wooden foot for the growing child who can’t afford a brand-new prosthesis every year, this inspired exhibit presents solutions to challenges that many of us never have to consider. Cute-Circuit’s Soundshirt, outfitted with vibrating doodads to convey music to the deaf, or a set of Uno cards redesigned for the color-blind, may at first seem more like entertainment options than life changers. But, considered as part of a suite of aides that also includes the Brainport Vision Pro, which translates visual stimuli to the tongue, and the Maptic Bracelet, which uses a system of hot-or-cold vibrations to guide the blind, they open a fascinating view into how new technologies are poised to transform our sensual experience of the world, and of our own bodies. And objects like those Uno cards, designed by Miguel Neiva, and Sam Barclay’s book “I Wonder What It Is Like Being Dyslexic,” which simulates the experience of dyslexia with ingenious typography, illuminate the ways in which mainstream design reinforces bias against the differently abled. *Through Sept. 3.*

**Jewish Museum**

“Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress, from the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem”

Judging by this array of nineteenth- and twentieth-century garments—from sumptuous wedding gowns and men’s coats made of vibrant ikat cloth to simpler everyday garb—Jewish costume was determined as much by locale as by faith. A stunning abaya (a robe-like cloak) of mauve silk and gilt-metal thread, from nineteen-twenties Iraq, may also have been worn by a Muslim woman;

a gold-brocade and cotton-floral ceremonial ensemble from Calcutta, dating to the late eighteenth-hundreds, pairs a Victorian silhouette with an Indian-influenced bodice. But sometimes differences in dress did distinguish disparate Jewish communities. In mid-twentieth-century Herat, street wear for all women included a *chadur* (a wrap) and a *ruband* (a veil with a small net panel to see through). Jews, according to the show’s accompanying wall text, usually wore black and white rather than bright colors, a convention brought to Afghanistan from Mashhad, Iran, by a group who practiced Judaism in secret, after their forced conversion to Islam, in 1839. Such historical notes elucidate the “veiled meanings” of the exhibition’s title, showing clothing in the context of both geopolitical shifts and religious traditions. *Through March 18.*

**New Museum**

“Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon”

Works by forty-two mostly L.G.B.T.Q.-identified artists (who range in age from twenty-seven to sixty-seven), artist teams, and collectives tend to be elegant and ingratiating, temperate, or even a little boring—though not unpleasantly so. (A little boredom may come as a welcome relief to our lately adrenaline-overdosed body politic.) One rare example of an aggressive affront is a series of fantastically nasty small works by the reliably dazzling Los Angeles-born, Berlin-based, biracial, transgender artist and performer Vaginal Davis: abstract reliefs that suggest mangled faces, viscera, and genitalia, painted in a blood-red mixture of substances, including nail polish. The happiest surprise is a trend in painting that takes inspiration from ideas of indeterminate sexuality for revived formal invention. Two painters who stand out are Tschabalala Self and Christina Quarles, who rhyme ambiguous imagery of gyrating bodies with pictorial techniques that recall Picasso, Gorky, and de Kooning. Whether intentionally or not, they effectively return to an old well that suddenly yields fresh water. *Through Jan. 21.*

**Museum of Modern Art**

“Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978-1993”

This calculated clutter of ephemera, art work, and experimental films opened, appropriately, on Halloween. Inspiration for last-minute costumes could be found in such treasures as a transparent vampire cape constructed from a shower curtain, worn by the New Wave legend Klaus Nomi, and a coat made from fiberglass insulation; or, more generally, in the anything-goes, drag-punk aesthetic that suffused the East Village scene. Club 57 was located in a church basement on St. Marks Place and defined by its visionary team: the artist Keith Haring was the exhibition organizer, and the actor and cabaret cutup Ann Magnuson curated performance. The venue was a creative hub for the interdisciplinary, operating at the margins of the official art world. So it’s no small feat that a major museum captured the scope and spirit of this Reagan-era subcultural landscape, down to the darkened club environment in the lower-level theatre gallery. Here, among the deluge of anonymous, Dadaesque flyers and campy silk-screen posters by the performance artist John Sex, you’ll cross paths with an early Ellen Berkenblit horse painting and a ballpoint Basquiat drawing. The film programming is terrific as well: this week, the focus is on Super 8 works by John Ahearn, Andre Degas, and Ricardo Nicolayevsky. *Through April 1.*

**Elizabeth Catlett**

This uplifting show by the African-American artist, who died in 2012, at the age of ninety-six, traces the evolution of her streamlined forms and her focus on women as subjects over seven decades. The earliest piece here is the bronze bust “Negro Woman,” from 1946; among the most recent is “Mahalia Jackson, New Orleans,” from 2010, an ecstatic three-foot-tall statuette of the gospel singer and civil-rights activist. Catlett’s socially engaged, cross-cultural sensibility incorporates influences as wide-ranging as the Harlem Renaissance, the modernism of Arp and Brancusi, pre-Columbian iconography, and the murals of Diego Rivera. (Catlett lived in Cuernavaca, Mexico, from the late nineteen-forties until her death.) Think of this superb, small selection as an amuse-bouche for the major museum retrospective that, as the art world belatedly catches up to overlooked brilliant women, is all but inevitable. *Through Feb. 3. (Burning in Water, 317 Tenth Ave., at 28th St. 716-380-3080.)*

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

**Kathleen White**

2001, a year of bereavement for White, is charted here in “A Year of Firsts,” forty spare works on paper—scribbles, tally marks, sketches of birthday candles. The New York artist, who died in 2014, lost many of her friends to AIDS that year; her father and two siblings had died recently, too. In a work dated September 11th, a sky of black soot looms above a blue void. Over all, the series captures the strange sense of renewal that can follow losses of seismic proportions. In the center of the gallery, a video work from 1991 provides a soundtrack, in the form of an a cappella rendition of “On Broadway,” sung by the artist, who wears a nurse’s uniform as she draws her own blood, bandages her wounds, and, ultimately, binds her mouth shut. *Through Jan. 27. (Martos, 41 Elizabeth St. 212-560-0670.)*

**“Mother’s House”**

The postmodern home that the architect Robert Venturi built for his mother in Philadelphia, between 1962 and 1964, provides the name for this nine-artist group show. The thread connecting the assembled works is a pattern that appears here on pillows and crockery, which Venturi designed with his frequent collaborator, the less well-known Denise Scott Brown (who was also his wife). The show’s high point is an elliptical call-and-response about gender between the New York architect and sculptor Michelle Rosenberg and the young painter Nikki Katsikas. Rosenberg’s grid of found broom heads in bright artificial colors neatly subverts half a dozen art-historical genres, while also providing bristles for her more delicate but equally subversive wooden brush sculptures; Katsikas’s small oil painting “Domestic Politics” shows an exuberant Hillary Clinton sitting comfortably at home in Chappaqua, as a pajama-clad Bill cooks them breakfast. Landing a topical zinger is the gallerist R. J. Supa’s contribution, “Nightly Knight,” an issue of *Artforum* affixed with a business card inscribed “all the best” by that magazine’s former publisher, Knight Landesman, who has been accused of sexual harassment. *Through Feb. 4. (Yours Mine & Ours, 54 Eldridge St. 646-912-9970.)*

# NIGHT LIFE

## ROCK AND POP

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

### David Johansen

Several years ago, when this storied musician was asked about his biggest regret in life, he answered, "That I'm neither unhappy enough to be a poet nor indifferent enough to be a philosopher but lucid enough to be a condemned man." Lucid is an apt description of Johansen's work, which has ranged from creating the night-club persona Buster Poindexter to fronting the glam-rock band the New York Dolls in the nineteen-seventies. The band's prescient approach helped build a critical foundation for punk: mainly, the theory that one doesn't need to play music well to make it as a musician. (Johansen has also said that he's no good at singing.) He'll perform a career-spanning set at the New York Night Train Soul Clap and Dance-Off, a recurring dance party, along with DJ **Jonathan Toubin** and his cadre of shimmering sixties soul gems. (*Elsewhere*, 599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. [elsewherebrooklyn.com](http://elsewherebrooklyn.com). Jan. 20.)



*The singer-songwriter Lana Del Rey projects angsty rebellion and sullen glamour, with a voice that strikes low notes to match. She plays the Prudential Center Jan. 19.*

### Majid Jordan

Early last November, the woozy Toronto R. & B. duo Majid Jordan began writing intriguing mis-sives on Twitter ("At night your aura turns to blue, your kisses paint me rouge") to promote its recently released album, "The Space Between." The vocalist Majid Al Maskati and the producer Jordan Ullman have slowed their output since they first caught fans' attention, in 2013, with their feature on Drake's smash single "Hold On, We're Going Home," taking the time to develop their ephemeral sound. Majid Jordan performs its earbud staples for two nights. (*Terminal 5*, 610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. Jan. 20. *Brooklyn Steel*, 319 Frost St., Brooklyn. 888-929-7849. Jan. 22.)

### Lana Del Rey

In Lana Del Rey's billowing chamber pop, the sweet and the sour enjoy close proximity. She gained adoration by nursing a chanteuse-like image draped in an old American glamour that clashed with her millennial-fluent lyrics. But on her 2017 album, "Lust for Life," the thirty-two-year-old singer-songwriter plumbs depths that her previous four didn't reach. On "Cherry," Rey conjures pleasing images of "cherries and wine, rosemary and thyme" before confessing that "all of my peaches are ruined." The record

finds her pawing for happiness in a world more hardened than the one in which her star rose, just a few years ago; she wonders aloud whether it's "the end of an era" or "the end of America." She's joined by the soul-pop upstart **Kali Uchis**, at New Jersey's Prudential Center. (*25 Lafayette St.*, Newark, N.J. [prucenter.com](http://prucenter.com). Jan. 19.)

### Royal Trux

In the eighties and nineties, this scum-rock duo built a cult following by disembowelling boogie with harsh distortion and avant-garde noise. Royal Trux rode the alt-rock wave sparked by Nirvana, but its reputation was built as much by its music—an odd amalgam of early Stones and Beefheart's "Trout Mask Replica"—as by its legendary reputation for heroin abuse. (In a career-defining move, the pair once spent an entire album advance on drugs.) The members are archetypal unreliable narrators, so untangling their history may be a fool's errand; interested listeners should begin with "Twin Infinitives," their 1990 long-player, which has become a yardstick for experimental music. (*Market Hotel*, 1140 Myrtle Ave., Brooklyn. Jan. 19-20.)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### Ambrose Akinmusire

Although he could rest on his laurels as a radiantly gifted trumpeter who combines laudable technical skills with an engulfing sound, Akinmusire also has compositional and conceptual ambition to spare. His residency at this venerated spartan venue (now in the last few months at its East Village location) finds him mixing it up with such stimulating improvisers as **Craig Taborn**, **Mary Halvorson**, and **David Virelles**. (*The Stone*, Avenue C at 2nd St. [thestonemusic.com](http://thestonemusic.com). Jan. 16-21.)

### Al Foster Quartet

Those who can still picture Foster as a young eager-beaver drummer pumping galvanic rhythms behind Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins might be taken aback to realize that he is acknowledging his seventy-fifth birthday at this celebratory weekend gig. Still itching to turn up the intensity, the venerable percussionist is at the helm of a quartet that includes the saxophonist **Danya Stephens** and the pianist **Adam Birnbaum**. (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. Jan. 19-21.)

### Tom Harrell

Parsing the components of the trumpeter Harrell's stylistic identity is the easy part—bebop, post-bop, Latin, and classical influences clearly run through his playing. But understanding just how this admired veteran absorbed it all and emerged with a thoroughly integrated and distinctive musical approach is more difficult. His robust quintet finds room for the saxophonist **Jaleel Shaw** and the pianist **Danny Grissett**. (*Village Vanguard*, 178 Seventh Ave. 212-255-4037. Jan. 16-23.)

### Jenny Scheinman's Mischief and Mayhem

A look at the audacious collaborators that the violinist and singer Scheinman surrounds herself with in her Mischief and Mayhem outfit—the guitarist **Nels Cline**, the drummer **Jim Black**, and the bassist **Todd Sickafoose**—speaks volumes about her multifarious musical inclinations and the genre-morphing tangents (new jazz, rock, Americana) that she's all too willing to follow. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Jan. 18-21.)



# MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

### The Commuter

The director Jaume Collet-Serra's unintentionally comedic action film is set mainly on an evening Metro-North train from Grand Central Station, where Mike McCauley (Liam Neeson), a financially strapped paterfamilias dragging himself back to Tarrytown, accepts a hundred thousand dollars from a mysterious stranger (Vera Farmiga) to find a passenger named Prynne who's carrying an important bag. Mike, an ex-cop, knows how to conduct the search, and he soon has another motive: his wife and son have been kidnapped and won't be released until the job is done. Mike fights his way through it, clobbering several passengers with his fists and another with a guitar, dangling out the window and beneath the carriage of the speeding train. He's caught in a vast surveillance network of corrupt officials and in the network of well-worn relationships that have developed over a decade of daily round trips. Neeson's performance is brisk and uninflected; his Mike is gaunt but unhaunted, a blank without shadows. The set pieces and the cliché dialogue seem piled on randomly; the story and the characters would be no less developed in half the time; and the slapdash script places the suburban train line at a bunch of Manhattan stations where it doesn't actually go.—*Richard Brody* (*In wide release.*)

### The Insult

Ziad Doueiri's new film begins with a drainpipe and winds up with angry mobs and burning cars. The pipe is the cause of a brief exchange between two men, from different—or, as they see it, opposing—sides of the Lebanese divide. One is Tony Hanna (Adel Karam), a Christian who runs a garage, and the other is Yasser Salameh (Kamel El Basha), a Palestinian refugee who works on a construction crew. Each, having wounded the other's pride, finds it almost impossible to back down, despite mollifying advice from his wife, and, once lawyers get involved and the media learn of the dispute, the quarrel bursts out of control. Much of the story, written by Doueiri and Joelle Touma, is set in courtrooms, where we are schooled in the past—not only in the individual histories of the protagonists but in the sufferings endured by their respective communities. With all the weight of these matters, the movie often feels clunky and didactic, grimly bent on balancing the argument; fortunately, there are fighting performances—from Camille Salameh, as a mischievous attorney, and from El Basha, whose graven features tell a sorry tale. In Arabic.—*Anthony Lane* (*Reviewed in our issue of 1/15/18.*) (*In limited release.*)

### Lady Bird

As writer and director, Greta Gerwig infuses this comedic coming-of-age drama with verbal virtuosity, gestural idiosyncrasy, and emotional vitality. The loosely autobiographical tale is set mainly in Gerwig's home town of Sacramento, in the 2002-03 academic year, and centered on Christine McPherson (Saoirse Ronan), self-dubbed Lady Bird, a senior at a Catholic high school whose plan to escape to an Eastern college is threatened by her grades and her parents' finances. Lady Bird's father (Tracy Letts), with whom she shares a hearty complicity, is about to lose his job; her mother (Laurie Metcalf), with whom she argues bitterly, is a nurse who works double shifts to keep the family afloat. Lit-

erary and willful, Lady Bird joins the school's musical-theatre troupe, with results ranging from the antic to the romantic. Afflicted with real-estate envy, she infiltrates the world of rich kids and risks losing true friends; she dates a Francophile rocker (Timothée Chalamet) whose walk on the wild side is comfortably financed. Meanwhile, her relationship with her mother deteriorates. Deftly juggling characters and story lines, Gerwig provokes aching laughs with gentle touches (Metcalf's etched diction nearly steals the show), but her direction remains self-effacing until late in the film, when several sharply conceived scenes suggest reserves of observational and symbolic energy.—*R.B.* (*In wide release.*)

### Paddington 2

The success of "Paddington" (2015), both critical and financial, made this sequel inevitable. Happily, it matches its predecessor in both ingenuity and pace, though the threat of whimsy is never far away. The director, as before, is Paul King, and the company of players remains much the same. The voice of Paddington, a polite Peruvian bear, is still supplied by Ben Whishaw. Hugh Bonneville and Sally Hawkins play the Browns, with whom Paddington lives, in London, and other parts are taken by British stalwarts such as Julie Walters and Jim Broadbent. Newcomers to the scene include Brendan Gleeson, as a terrifying prison chef named Knuckles, and Eileen Atkins, as a fortune-teller, while Hugh Grant pretty much purloins the movie in the role of Phoenix Buchanan, a vainglorious actor who will stoop to almost anything—not just theft but the framing of poor Paddington as the culprit—in a crazed attempt to rise from the ashes of a dying career. There are blatant borrowings from Wes Anderson, and King, perhaps hoping that children will be taken to the film by their grandparents, casts a kindly eye on old technologies; in the climactic chase, one steam train pursues another.—*A.L.* (*1/15/18*) (*In wide release.*)

### Pow Wow

American history bursts forth in the present tense in Robinson Devor's probingly associative documentary, composed of his encounters with residents of California's Coachella Valley. Cheerful, beefy executives and a proud golf-cart salesman speak freely with Devor, as do a young Native American man, who discusses his traditions, and a local historian, who describes the area's legendary figure of Willie Boy, a member of the Paiute tribe who, in 1909, killed his lover's father and went on the run with her. (The story became a Hollywood movie, from 1969, starring Robert Blake, who's seen in a clip.) Devor talks with the local show-business eminence Shecky Greene, and also with police officers and teen-agers whose lives are linked to the desert and the real-estate developers and polo players who seek to tame it. Sean Kirby's cinematography looks deeply into faces and landscapes alike, examining domestic life and outdoor leisure, subterranean waterworks and high-tech fences, majestic vistas and plasticized suburbs with a rapt and avid eye. Adam Sekuler edits with a quietly lacerating wit, and Devor, calmly winning the participants' confidence, sets the movie's tone with a sardonic sequence in a perversely oblivious country-club party of Native American inspiration.—*R.B.* (*Anthology Film Archives.*)

### The Queen

Frank Simon's keenly observed documentary, from 1968, is a behind-the-scenes view of a drag-queen

contest at Town Hall, in midtown Manhattan. The movie starts with a portrait of the m.c., Jack, whose drag name is Sabrina. Simon closely observes the emergence of Jack's artistry by way of makeup and costuming, and then does the same for the diverse array of contestants. The show's participants discuss, in remarkable hotel-room gatherings, the practicalities of gay life at the time—their "husbands," their relationships with parents and neighbors, the option of sex-reassignment surgery, and their efforts to deal with the draft during the Vietnam War. Despite its flash and glitz, the pageant comes off as difficult, exacting work; for all the camaraderie of the drag queens, the competition is fierce and serious. Simon reveals racial tensions among the contestants as well as the eternal conflict between life-worn troupers and talented young newcomers. Whether pushing the camera close to the performers or zooming in from afar to survey them intimately, Simon captures the lavish life of theatrical imagination that inspires them and makes gender itself seem like an urgent performance.—*R.B.* (*Film Forum, Jan. 19.*)

### Tall

Manfred Kirchheimer's 2006 documentary, only now being released, is an exemplary work of urban romanticism, intellectual history, and visual analysis. It traces the development of skyscrapers, starting in Chicago, in the late nineteenth century, and centers the tale on the conflict between two architects—Daniel Burnham, a Europhile, and Louis Sullivan, a democratic idealist who corresponded with Walt Whitman. In the twentieth century, the battleground shifts to New York, where the demands of business swap Sullivan's exalted craftsmanship for industrial methods and prefabricated simplicity. Kirchheimer, doing his own rhapsodic cinematography and ranging widely through archival photos and illustrations, invokes the moral aspirations and political assumptions embedded in the art of architecture (and makes his own sympathies clear). With an insightful commentary (spoken by Dylan Baker) that focuses on underlying technological advances and economic pressures, he conveys the substance of style, the shifts in daily habits—both physical and mental—that urban design imposes. A few insistent sound effects and music cues don't detract from the film's vital conception; its images embody both the potent hidden legacies of civic life and Kirchheimer's own progressive idealism.—*R.B.* (*Metrograph.*)

### The Wind Will Carry Us

Abbas Kiarostami's quietly ecstatic comedy, from 1999, is set in a Kurdish mountainside village where Behzad (Behzad Dourani), a director from Tehran, arrives with his crew to film an unusual local funeral rite. Unfortunately for them, the moribund woman for whom the services are planned is in no rush to pass on, and Behzad is stuck there for weeks with little to do but talk with the villagers. Kiarostami films the encounters and the landscapes with a patient, painterly tenderness, but his modest methods conceal vast political goals. He nudges the Iranian regime's limits on expression as Hollywood directors tweaked the Hays Code—his realism packs symbols to express the forbidden. Kiarostami's main subject is sex, which he evokes in sly touches worthy of Lubitsch and Hawks, alluding to the official abuse of religion and the natural force of desire; when a cynical elderly married woman refers to her "night work," it becomes clear why the entire film takes place in daylight. The title alone, from a love lyric by the pre-revolutionary poet Forugh Farrokhzad that Behzad recites, suggests the irrepressible beauty of playtime. In Farsi and Kurdish.—*R.B.* (*Quad Cinema, Jan. 20, and streaming.*)



# CLASSICAL MUSIC



Julius Eastman, who died homeless, at the age of forty-nine, wrote political post-minimalist music.

## Avant-Garde Pioneer

*The work of an overlooked composer gets unearthed at the Kitchen.*

Julius Eastman is the kind of American genius not enough people know about. I first heard of him from the composer Nico Muhly; for years, Eastman had been a known-ish quantity in music circles, but even there he was something of a mystery, owing in part to the fact that he died under unhappy circumstances. Born in New York City in 1940, and raised in Ithaca, he had a younger brother, Gerry, who ended up playing guitar for Count Basie. As a student, Eastman earned his

degree in piano and composition at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music, in Philadelphia. But Eastman's gifts were not limited to paper. He had a remarkable voice—deep, soulful, nuanced—that attracted attention.

Eventually, the conductor Lukas Foss found himself drawn to Eastman's way of singing and writing, and he recommended him to the Creative Associates, a program sponsored by SUNY Buffalo's Center for the Creative and Performing Arts. Eastman was initially given a stipend but no teaching responsibilities, and it was while there that he began to conceive of the post-minimalist pieces, completed in the

seventies, that he became known for, including the powerful "Evil Nigger" and "Gay Guerrilla." (John Cage objected to Eastman's contribution to a staging of his "Songbooks," saying that the younger writer had few ideas.)

Eastman composed what he called "organic music": each phrase of a piece contained a bit from the previous phrase—but then he might erase some phrases. His controlled-chance compositions are as bold as his titles, and, as one of the few blacks to gain recognition in the downtown avant-garde music scene (he moved to Manhattan in 1976), Eastman talked about race in his work at a time when many other composers were dealing with pure sound and repetition. He married political meaning to works for cello and piano which always sounded like the voice—his voice.

Eastman, it seems, was a man filled with longing, and with dashed hopes that he helped dash. He wanted an academic position in order to keep going, but it didn't come through; he didn't go along to get along, which is part of his genius, and his tragedy. When he died, in 1990, he was homeless. Many of his compositions had been thrown out when he failed to pay the rent for his East Village apartment.

The love and support that follow him now are very touching. The current Eastman revival has been led by the brilliant composer Mary Jane Leach, who has done much to help reconstruct the music and who, along with the historian Renée Levine Packer, helped put out "Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music," an essential text about the artist. Young musicians, queer artists, and others who champion Eastman's singular vision are gathering at the Kitchen for a tribute, Jan. 19-Feb. 10, that includes concerts, performances, and an exhibition. They will not only celebrate a fractured master but seek to change what Eastman could not, certainly not single-handedly: a largely white male avant-garde that's learning to make room for other stories, and other visions.

—Hilton Als

## OPERA

**Metropolitan Opera**

The riveting French tenor Roberto Alagna leads the cast in both halves of opera's most famous double bill, Mascagni's "**Cavalleria Rusticana**" and Leoncavallo's "**Pagliacci**," two pitiless tales of heartbreak crafted in the most ardent verismo style. He's joined onstage by such fine singers as Ekaterina Semenchuk, Aleksandra Kurzak, and George Gagnidze; Nicola Luisotti conducts. *Jan. 17 at 8 and Jan. 20 at 1.* • David McVicar's new staging of "**Tosca**," the finest of Puccini's melodramatic thrillers, feels like a course correction: less risky than Luc Bondy's controversial 2009 production, but more successful. Old-fashioned at heart, it offers a sumptuous re-creation of the opera's Roman settings. But the slanted stage skews the perspective, creating an effective backdrop for McVicar's detailed telling of a story about sanctimony and sexual blackmail in a nineteenth-century papal state. Sonya Yoncheva and Vittorio Grigolo make smashing role debuts; Emmanuel Villaume conducts with attentive care, though he sacrifices some of the music's propulsive intensity in the process. (Gareth Morrell replaces Guillaume in the first performance.) *Jan. 18 at 8 and Jan. 23 at 7:30.* • At the time of its premiere, in 2014, Richard Eyre's production of Mozart's upstairs-downstairs comedy "**Le Nozze di Figaro**," set in the nineteen-thirties, played into the "Downton Abbey" fever that was sweeping the country. Dressed in soigné period costumes, the stars of the current revival—Ildar Abdrazakov, Nadine Sierra, Mariusz Kwiecien, Ailyn Pérez, and Isabel Leonard—deliver finely etched portraits worthy of the Grantham household, and Pérez's luscious-voiced Countess gives the show its beating heart; Harry Bicket. (This is the final performance.) *Jan. 19 at 7:30.* • The chief virtue of David McVicar's production of Verdi's "**Il Trovatore**" is its pacing: the revolving stage requires no breaks to change the sets, meaning that it hurls the characters toward their grisly fate with just enough time for a string of explosive arias and, of course, the opera's famous Anvil Chorus. The show stars Jennifer Rowley, Yonghoon Lee, Quinn Kelsey, and Anita Rachvelishvili; Marco Armiliato. *Jan. 22 at 7:30.* • Bartlett Sher's picturesque rendition of Donizetti's feather-light comedy "**L'Elisir d'Amore**"—built with his usual collaborators, the set designer Michael Yeargan and the Tony Award-winning costume designer Catherine Zuber—returns with a cast of full-bodied lyric voices, including Matthew Polenzani, Ildebrando D'Arcangelo, and Pretty Yende; Domingo Hindoyan. *Jan. 20 at 8.* (*Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.*)

**Prototype Festival**

Composed by Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko, "**Iyov**," a Ukrainian "opera-requiem" for amplified voices with prepared piano, cello, and drums, evokes ancient ritual, avant-garde theatre, modernism, minimalism, and more to recount the biblical tale of Job. Vladyslav Troitskyi directs the economical yet expressive multimedia staging. *Jan. 15-16 and Jan. 18-20 at 8.* (*HERE, 145 Sixth Ave.*) • The violinist and vocalist Carla Kihlstedt and the percussionist Matthias Bossi, the art-pop aesthetes who make up the industrious duo Rabbit Rabbit, collaborate with their fellow composer and instrumentalist Jeremy Flower in "**Black Inscrption**," a song cycle (staged by Kihlstedt and

Mark DeChiazza) about a deep-sea diver's journey of discovery in the inky depths. *Jan. 17-19 at 9:30 and Jan. 20 at 4 and 9:30.* (*HERE, 145 Sixth Ave.*) • The mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaisert assumes the role of a convicted killer offered a route to freedom by a moth, portrayed by the renowned performance artist John Kelly, in the world-première production of "**The Echo Drift**," a chamber opera by Mikael Karlsson that was commissioned by Beth Morrison Projects, HERE, and American Opera Projects. Mallory Catlett directs an elaborate multimedia production designed by Elle Kunnos de Voss; Nicholas DeMaison conducts the International Contemporary Ensemble. *Jan. 18-20 at 7:30.* (*Baruch Performing Arts Center, 55 Lexington Ave.*) • Two Belgian ensembles—Dez Mona, a glam-rock band fronted by the extravagant vocalist Gregory Frateur, and Baroque Orchestration X, a period-instrument group that specializes in new music—reprise "**Ságo**," a theatrical song cycle based on Norse mythology, well regarded in its previous Prototype appearance, in 2016. *Jan. 20 at 9:30.* (*Joe's Pub, 425 Lafayette St.*) (*For tickets and full schedule, see prototypefestival.org. These are the final performances.*)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

**New York Philharmonic**

Joshua Weilerstein, who served as the Philharmonic's assistant conductor from 2011 to 2014, returns to conduct an all-Ravel program originally intended for Charles Dutoit, who has withdrawn from the performances. Weilerstein is lucky to be collaborating with the pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet, who is probably the most persuasive interpreter of Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand playing today; the other featured works include "Le Tombeau de Couperin," "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales," and "Boléro." *Jan. 17-18 at 7:30 and Jan. 19-20 at 8.* • In a Saturday-matinee concert, a chamber performance of Franck's Piano Quintet replaces the Ravel Concerto and "Le Tombeau de Couperin." *Jan. 20 at 2.* (*David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.*)

**Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra**

This storied band from Amsterdam, notable for its rich and mellow sound and for its decades of interpretive depth, is currently under the command of Daniele Gatti, an Italian conductor who can be exceptional in German repertoire. His first program is all orchestral, with excerpts from Wagner's "Parsifal" and Bruckner's Ninth Symphony; the glowing Dutch violinist Janine Jansen joins them for the second outing, an evening of music by Bruch (the First Violin Concerto) and Mahler (the Symphony No. 1 in D Major). *Jan. 17-18 at 8.* (*Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.*)

## RECITALS

**Music at the Flea**

The invaluable Talea Ensemble inaugurates the music series at the Flea Theatre's new location with two intriguing programs meant to stimulate discussion. The first features music by Pauline Oliveros, James Weeks, Oliver Knussen, and György Kurtág that pays homage to illustrious forebears. In the second, the cellist Chris Lee and the pianist Steven Beck focus on Fred Lerdahl's Duo for Violin and Piano (2017). The pianist Kathleen Supové, an appealing advocate

for contemporary sounds, follows with a two-night stand marking her début as a composer; music by Miya Masaoka, Milica Paranosic, Randall Woolf, and Annie Gosfield completes her program. *Jan. 18, Jan. 20, and Jan. 23-24 at 7.* (*20 Thomas St., between Broadway and Church St. theflea.org.*)

**Miller Theatre: "Glass + Schubert"**

Simone Dinnerstein, an eloquent keyboard interpreter of both composers (who share a January 31st birthday), comes back uptown to offer a variety of their music: selections from Glass's "Études" and "Metamorphoses," along with Schubert's Impromptus, Op. 90, and the towering Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960. *Jan. 18 at 8.* (*Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799.*)

**Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center: "Homage to Schubert"**

This celebration at Alice Tully Hall is devoted almost entirely to music by the Biedermeier master (save one small work by a Swedish contemporary, Isak Berg): the Sonata in A Major ("Grand Duo") for Violin and Piano, a selection of great lieder, and the Piano Trio No. 2 in B-Flat Major. The musicians include the cellist David Finckel, the pianist Juho Pohjonen, and the young Russian baritone Nikolay Borchev, making his Society début. *Jan. 19 at 7:30.* (*212-875-5788.*)

**"Robert Mealy and Friends"**

Mealy, the city's most prominent exponent and educator of Baroque violin performance, appears at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall with three distinguished colleagues (including the harpsichordist Avi Stein), to explore some of the first fine examples of the sonata genre—works by such masters as Castello, Biber, and Schmelzer. *Jan. 19 at 7:30.* (*212-247-7800.*)

**Kronos Quartet**

Kronos, a group that has redefined the string quartet as an ensemble that is popular, experimental, and classical all at once, has something to say about American musical heritage. It gets another opportunity at Zankel Hall, in one of the first programs launching Carnegie's festival centered on the music, culture, and politics of the nineteen-sixties. In addition to classics by Gershwin and Steve Reich ("Pendulum Music"), there are new compositions by Stacy Garrop ("Glorious Mahalia") and Zachary J. Watkins ("Peace Be Till," a work in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.). *Jan. 19 at 9.* (*212-247-7800.*)

**Jonas Kaufmann**

The superlative German tenor's appearances in New York have grown rare—he last sang at the Met four years ago—but he seems to be making up for it this season, with two appearances at Carnegie Hall. For his first outing, he performs Schubert's classic song cycle "Die Schöne Müllerin," a gentle marvel of Romantic tragedy, with Helmut Deutsch at the piano. *Jan. 20 at 8.* (*212-247-7800.*)

**Janine Jansen and Jean-Yves Thibaudet**

The renowned violinist and pianist join one of the world's finest young string quartets—the Dover—to perform music from the twilight of Romanticism: sonatas for violin and piano by Debussy and Grieg (No. 2), along with Chausson's supremely elegant "Concert" for piano, string quartet, and violin solo. *Jan. 21 at 2.* (*Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.*)



# DANCE

## New York City Ballet

The company begins its winter season under a cloud, having lost its artistic director Peter Martins amid allegations—still under investigation—of sexual misconduct. (Martins denies any wrongdoing.) Still, if the “Nutcracker” run that just ended was any indication, the dancers will soldier on as if nothing were amiss. The first week is devoted almost entirely to works by the company’s founding choreographer, George Balanchine. There is hardly a dud here. Particular highlights include the modernist piece “The Four Temperaments,” from 1946, with music by Hindemith, and the pristine “Apollo” (1928), in which a young god finds his way with the help of three muses (dance, poetry, and mime). Later, a few of the new offerings from last fall (“The Wind Still Brings,” “Composer’s Holiday”) will return, as will Mr. Martins’s lacklustre “Romeo + Juliet.” There will also be opportunities to see some of the best works created in recent years, including “Russian Seasons” and “Namouna, a Grand Divertissement,” both by Alexei Ratmansky, and Justin Peck’s “The Decalogue.” • Jan. 23 at 7:30: “Apollo,” “Mozartiana,” and “Cortège Hongrois.” (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through March 4.)

## Astana Ballet

After the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1991, arts budgets in the former Soviet republics withered. In recent years, however, Kazakhstan has been investing heavily in ballet, building new theatres and nurturing dancers. This free program by the country’s national troupe juxtaposes “Heritage of the Great Steppe,” a montage of Moiseyev-style folk ballet, with two modern pieces by the company’s Brazilian-born resident choreographer, Ricardo Amarante: one set to Edith Piaf, the other to tango. (Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center. 212-707-8566. Jan. 17.)

## Malpaso Dance Company

Since its founding, in 2012, this warm-spirited Cuban troupe has been addressing the imbalance between high-level dance talent and comparatively underdeveloped choreographic excellence on its island by hiring major North American choreographers. For its annual visit to the Joyce, which sponsors the company, Malpaso brings two premières in that vein. Sonya Tayeh’s “Face the Torrent” is dark and twitchy. “The Indomitable Waltz,” by Aszure Barton, is more subtly complex and idiosyncratically elegant. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 17-21.)

## “COIL”

After six years of wandering while waiting on renovations, Performance Space 122 returns to its East Village home, for what’s been announced as the final installment of its long-running sampler. The dance selections continue with “Desert Body Creep,” in which the Australia-based choreographer Angela Goh works in slow motion to expose the horror and the comedy of flesh. In “Petra,” Dean Moss riffs on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film “The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant,” recasting some roles with immigrant performers and using the

melodrama as a lens on diversity in America. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101. Jan. 17 and Jan. 23. Through Feb. 4.)

## “Dances by Very Young Choreographers”

The modern-dance teacher Ellen Robbins has spent much of her life helping her students (some as young as six or seven) channel their imagination into dance. These aren’t just free-form improvisations—they’re full-blown ideas, with carefully selected concepts, music,

and costumes. Many of the older kids, in their teens, already have a choreographic voice, influenced by the myriad styles Robbins exposes them to. The youngest are often surprisingly sophisticated and honest. Her students perform their work at this annual showcase. (New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Jan. 20-21.)

## Contra-Tiempo

This Los Angeles-based troupe mixes Afro-Cuban and salsa dance with hip-hop and contemporary forms to make passionate, culturally inclusive, politically progressive theatre. The troupe returns to New York with a mixed-repertory family program. (Clark Studio Theatre, 165 W. 65th St. 212-721-6500. Jan. 20 and Jan. 27.)

# ABOVE & BEYOND



## The New York City Naturalist Club: Eagle Watch

Inwood Hill Park caps the neighborhood of Dyckman, on the northern edge of Manhattan. In the summer, the park is one of the liveliest spots in New York, rich with the music, food, and night life of the neighborhood’s Dominican residents. In the quieter winter months, Inwood Hill Park also happens to be one of the best locations in the city for eagle watching. Bald eagles have been common in the Manhattan area since the nineteenth century, and restorative efforts along the Hudson River have helped to maintain the population of birds who call the park and the surrounding land home. The New York City Naturalist Club hosts a birding expedition, during which guests of all skill levels can watch for eagles under the guidance of park rangers. Binoculars are encouraged. (Payson Ave. at Dyckman St. 212-304-2277. Jan. 20 at 9 A.M.)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The city’s auction houses get back in the swing of things this week, with offerings of American art and Americana. During a four-day-long sale that kicks off on Jan. 18, Sotheby’s offers a seventeenth-century chair, made in New Haven for one of the city’s first settlers, as well as a needlework sampler created by an eleven-year-old schoolgirl, Zebiah Gore, in 1780. Jan. 17 is devoted to manuscripts and prints, including a large group of atlases. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) • Christie’s offers a sale of Chinese export china, porcelain objects made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to suit European tastes (Jan. 18). These include delicate bowls, one colorfully decorated with a proces-

sion of European men on horseback, a pair of figurines representing dancing Tyrolean couples, and endless jars and vases. Next is an auction of American art and objects (Jan. 19), with outsider art—also known as art brut—coming first, followed by furniture and silver. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • As it is every January, the Park Avenue Armory will be filled to bursting for the Winter Antiques Show, with booths featuring top dealers in art and antiques from around the country (Jan. 19-28). The items on offer include a brightly painted Pennsylvania German wooden chest (c. 1825) from Olde Hope Antiques, bejewelled Russian snuffboxes from A La Vieille Russie, watercolor landscapes from Alexander Gallery, and hand-printed wallpaper from the Parisian house Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz. (Park Ave. at 66th St. winterantiquesshow.com.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### 92nd Street Y

The shadow histories of American professional sports are often as illuminating as the better-known tales of legendary players and plays that are passed down each season. Basketball, for example, became popular among Jewish immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century; the city-friendly street game took hold on New York’s Lower East Side, which in turn produced Jewish stars in a still segregated N.B.A., who faced their own adversity on and off the court. This week, the sports buff and author Charley Rosen zeroes in on this legacy for a revealing look at the political and cultural forces that caused the game to thrive in Jewish communities. (1395 Lexington Ave. 212-415-5500. Jan. 23 at noon.)



# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Werkstatt

509 Coney Island Ave., Brooklyn  
(718-284-5800)

The Viennese restaurant Werkstatt, on a commercial stretch in Prospect Park South, is a warm, casual pub, with metal-enamel signs in German, a mermaid taken from the bow of an old wooden boat, and a vintage Triumph motorcycle hanging from the wall. To uninformed first-timers, it might seem like just a particularly nice corner local, which is part of its appeal. In fact, the owner and operator, Thomas Ferlesch, has been a leading chef in New York since he emigrated from Austria, nearly four decades ago, to run the kitchen at Vienna 79, on the Upper East Side. In his first year there, at twenty-four, he was awarded a four-star review by the *Times*. He later went on to the legendary Café des Artistes. Werkstatt is his “workshop,” he says, where he can cook whatever he wants (specials have included red coconut chicken curry and Tokyo ramen), in a neighborhood near where he lives. He is there most days, spotted giving his wife and co-owner, Robin, a kiss, or wandering among the tables, asking no one in particular, “Where’s my wife?” It feels like his home; its patrons are his lucky guests.

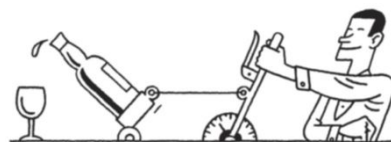
To start, order a big pretzel. The gooey-soft, buttery rope of blistered, browned dough arrives with yellow mustard and

house-made Hungarian Liptauer cheese, blushing with paprika. For dinner, have an unctuous, tangy bratwurst or smoked Polish kielbasa, served on a heaping pile of sauerkraut and potatoes. A leek risotto with Brussels sprouts and mushrooms is creamy, grassy, and addictive. The tender beef goulash with spätzle will make anyone with a grandparent from the Old Country cry. The Wiener, chicken, and celery-root schnitzels are crispy and moist; four vinegary, fresh side salads—cucumber, tomato, cabbage, and potato, redolent with caraway—finish each plate. Even the burger stands out, thanks to a lip-smacking bacon-onion marmalade.

For brunch, the French toast with a tangy apricot filling is a fluffy egg-flour-and-sugar cloud—a reminder that Ferlesch is the rare chef who is as adept with meat as with pastry. (His father was a bread baker.) For dessert, try the apple strudel, the Linzer torte, or the *palatschinken*, an Austrian crêpe, and, when one of the friendly servers offers up a mug of steaming glühwein to wash it all down, accept without hesitation. Ferlesch inherited the art of homey efficiency from his mother, who used to make noodles in their tiny apartment in Vienna, “and dried them on top of her bed,” he said recently. “She removed them at night and put them back in the morning.” Some fifty years later, Ferlesch has created a place as sweet as that memory. (Dishes \$7-\$19.)

—Carolyn Kormann

## BAR TAB



### The Narrows

1037 Flushing Ave., Brooklyn

Across from a glass-goods warehouse on an unassuming, windswept Bushwick block, the Narrows has glossy rewards for the determined seeker of a good drink. Outside, the bar is unmarked; open the door, and a vast dark-copper counter punctuated with candles stretches almost the length of the room. Round a corner, and another slender space greets you, this one replete with plush booths. The black-and-white décor is severe but modish, and the ceiling is a stark high swoop; black wood tables seem to drink in the dim yellow glow from Art Deco light fixtures. On a recent Sunday, refugees from frigid temperatures lined the bar, wearing knit beanies that made them distinguishable from behind only by hair length. From the front, a bristling array of full beards and pointed mustaches suggested that this was a collection of hip locals. Standard-issue pub food and a modest beer-and-wine selection are complemented by sixteen cocktails divided into “house” and “classic” categories. Of the classics, the hot toddy is strong and flavored with piquant orange peel; the Penicillin is as bracing as a crushed pill. Two women in white turtlenecks discussed the travails of love over veggie burgers: “She’s already slept with all the people I think are cute,” one said, of an acquaintance. In a corner booth, a man gently plucked a down-coat feather from a woman’s sleeve and blew it into the air. As for the house drinks, the Pilar (mezcal, Cappelletti, Cocchi Americano) is a pure amber color in a globe-shaped glass, and splutter-inducingly smoky; the Babushka, a simple concoction of ginger, lime, and vodka, offers enough succor to allow the possibility of returning to the bitter cold of the street, where a lone bicycle lies in a snowdrift, buried up to its chain.—Talia Lavín

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT SLASH AND BURN

On his first day as Secretary of the Interior, last March, Ryan Zinke rode through downtown Washington, D.C., on a roan named Tonto. When the Secretary is working at the department's main office, on C Street, a staff member climbs up to the roof of the building and hoists a special flag, which comes down when Zinke goes home for the day. To provide entertainment for his employees, the Secretary had an arcade game called Big Buck Hunter installed in the cafeteria. The game comes with plastic rifles, which players aim at animated deer. The point of the installation, Zinke has said, is to highlight sportsmen's contribution to conservation. "Get excited for #hunting season!" he tweeted, along with a photo of himself standing next to the game, which looks like a slot machine sporting antlers.

Nowadays, it is, in a manner of speaking, always hunting season at the Department of the Interior. The department, which comprises agencies ranging from the National Park Service to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, oversees some five hundred million acres of federal land, and more than one and a half billion acres offshore. Usually, there's a tension between the department's mandates—to protect the nation's natural resources and to manage them for commercial use. Under Zinke, the only question, from the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters, is how fast these resources can be auctioned off.

One of Zinke's first acts, after dismounting from Tonto, was to overturn

a moratorium on new leases for coal mines on public land. He subsequently recommended slashing the size of several national monuments, including Bears Ears, in Utah, and Gold Butte, in Nevada, and lifting restrictions at others to allow more development. (In December, acting on these recommendations, President Donald Trump announced that he was cutting the area of the Bears Ears monument by more than three-quarters and shrinking the Grand Staircase-Escalante monument, also in Utah, by almost half.) Zinke has also proposed gutting a plan, years in the making, to save the endangered sage grouse; instead of protecting ten million acres in the West that had been set aside for the bird's preservation, he'd like to see them given over to mining. And he's moved to scrap Obama-era regulations that would have set more stringent stan-

dards for fracking on federal property.

All these changes have been applauded by the oil and gas industries, and many have also been praised by congressional Republicans. (Before Zinke became Interior Secretary, he was a one-term congressman from Montana.) But, to some members of the G.O.P., Zinke's recent decision to open up great swaths of both coasts to offshore oil and gas drilling represents a rig too far.

Last week, Zinke backtracked. Following a brief meeting with the governor of Florida, Rick Scott, at the Tallahassee airport, the Secretary said that he was removing that state's coastal waters "from consideration for any new oil and gas platforms." The move was manifestly political. In the past, Scott has supported drilling for oil just about everywhere, including in the Everglades, but, with Trump's encouragement, he is now expected to challenge Florida's senior senator, Bill Nelson, a Democrat, in November.

"Local voices count" is how Zinke explained the Florida decision to reporters, a remark that was greeted with jeers from elected officials in other states, who noted that some "local voices" were more equal than others. "Virginia's governor (and governor-elect) have made this same request, but we have not received the same commitment," Senator Tim Kaine, Democrat of Virginia, tweeted. "Wonder why." Walter Shaub, the former head of the Office of Government Ethics, noted that the Florida coast happens to be home to Mar-a-Lago, Trump's winter White House cum dues-collecting club. He suggested that the Secretary "look up 'banana republic'" and then "go



fly a Zinke flag to celebrate making us one.”

Two days after his trip to Tallahassee, Zinke proposed a complete reorganization of the Interior Department, which currently has some seventy thousand employees. (In September, he told attendees of an oil-industry meeting that thirty per cent of the employees were “not loyal to the flag,” by which he seemed to mean himself.) “Now is the time to be transformative,” the Secretary said in a video message that showed him sitting next to a blazing fire. The plan would require congressional approval, but it seems to have been put together without consulting lawmakers. “Neither Zinke nor his assistants have opened the specifics of their proposed reorganization to public or congressional input,” Representative Raúl M. Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat, wrote recently in an op-ed in the *Durango Herald*, which ran under the headline

“RYAN ZINKE IS DESTROYING THE INTERIOR DEPARTMENT.”

Zinke is, in many ways, a typical Trump appointee. A lack of interest in the public interest is, these days, pretty much a precondition for running a federal agency. Consider Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education, or Scott Pruitt, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, or Rick Perry, the Secretary of Energy. Nearly all Trump’s Cabinet members have shown disdain for the regulatory processes they’re charged with supervising. And, when it comes to conflicts of interest, they seem, well, unconflicted. In October, the Interior Department’s inspector general opened an investigation into Zinke’s travel expenses, which include twelve thousand dollars for a charter flight from Las Vegas to Kalispell, Montana, on a plane owned by executives of a Wyoming oil-and-gas company.

Still, Zinke manages to stand out for

the damage he is doing. Essential to protecting wilderness is that there be places wild enough to merit protection. Once a sage-grouse habitat has been crisscrossed with roads, or a national monument riddled with mines, the rationale for preserving it is gone. Why try to save something that’s already ruined? “They’re determined to lease and develop every acre they possibly can, which will minimize the potential for conserving these landscapes in the future,” Jim Lyons, who was a Deputy Assistant Secretary at the Interior Department during the Obama Administration, told the *Washington Post*. “They’re quite efficient, and they know exactly what they want to do.”

In the decades to come, one can hope that many of the Trump Administration’s mistakes—on tax policy, say, or trade—will be rectified. But the destruction of the country’s last unspoiled places is a loss that can never be reversed.

—Elizabeth Kolbert

## BRAVE NEW WORLD DOPPELGÄNGER



Not long ago, Eva Schloss, a survivor of the Holocaust and a childhood friend of Anne Frank’s, left her home in London and flew to Los Angeles, where she spent a week inside a camera-filled dome, answering painful questions about her past. “It was exhausting—the lamps and the cameras and the big globe,” she recalled. In a soft accent, she explained, “We are really worried. We won’t be here very much longer to answer questions.”

In 1938, Schloss’s family left Vienna for Amsterdam, where she met Anne Frank, and later went into hiding. When she was fifteen, her family was taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and she spent nine months in the camp. Her father and her brother were killed in a death march. In 1953, her mother married Otto Frank, Anne’s father, and Schloss became a kind of “posthumous stepsister” of Anne’s, she said. In L.A., Schloss recounted these facts to a hundred and sixteen video cameras, which photographed her from all sides, and logged some fifteen hundred

of her patient answers. The recordings were used to develop an artificial Eva Schloss, housed inside a screen, which schoolchildren might question years from now.

On a recent Monday, the flesh-and-blood Eva Schloss stopped by the Museum of Jewish Heritage, in Battery Park City, to meet her digital counterpart. She wore a cardigan and pearls, and arrived with Heather Maio-Smith, from Conscience Display, which helped build the doppelgänger.

“Have you seen it already?” Schloss asked, beaming. “I haven’t seen it in action yet.”

“The museum did an excellent job,” Maio-Smith said. She was wearing a black sweater and her hair was in a ponytail.

Up on the museum’s second floor, in a large room filled with benches, a mounted screen showed the artificial Eva Schloss seated on a chair. She appeared three-dimensional from the front, and held her hands folded in her lap. She gazed out expectantly. Occasionally, she flashed a shy smile.

The real Eva Schloss approached, tentatively. “It feels funny,” she said, and laughed nervously.

Maio-Smith clicked a mouse on a podium. “Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” Artificial Eva answered. Her voice was unexpectedly loud.

Maio-Smith turned to Schloss. “Do you want to ask a question? You press this when you’re talking.”

“Oh, I see,” Schloss said, and turned toward the screen. She spoke slowly, as if coaxing a child. “So, hello. I think I do know you. Do you know me?”

“Hello,” Artificial Eva said.

Maio-Smith prodded Schloss: “Do you remember any of the questions?”

“I don’t, but I can make up another one,” Schloss said. “How long were you in the camp?” she asked.



Eva Schloss



"I was moved to Auschwitz when I just turned fifteen years old, and I came out when I was still fifteen, and I was there for nine months," Artificial Eva answered.

"Yes, correct." Schloss nodded. She considered her image. "I look a bit white and a bit sad. I'm not always sad."

"You're laughing!" Maio-Smith protested.

"It's good that I move a bit," Schloss said. "You ask one," she told Maio-Smith.

"Can you tell me about your brother?" Maio-Smith asked the screen.

"Well, of course it was different when I was little, and when I was starting to go to school," Artificial Eva began. "I didn't like to go to school; I didn't want to learn anything. I always wanted to play."

Schloss looked at Maio-Smith. "Not really the answer, eh?" she said.

Maio-Smith tried again. "What was your *relationship* with your brother like?"

Artificial Eva was ready for this one. "We had a very, very close relationship," she said. "He was a very protective kind of boy." He would tell her the plots of books he'd read, about Indians, and travelling to the moon, and submarines, and the deep sea. "He was a wonderful storyteller. He said, 'I can make Eva cry within five minutes.' He told me a story that he was an old man, and he was very ill, and he couldn't walk anymore, and then he died—and I burst into tears," she said, smiling.

Schloss had been listening intently. "Yes, that was a good story," she said.

Maio-Smith said that, thanks to natural-language-processing software, Artificial Eva was getting steadily better at responding to visitors. "The thing that kids like about talking to you in this form is that they don't have to be worried about what they ask you."

"They're embarrassed?" Schloss asked.

"They don't want to make you upset," Maio-Smith explained.

Schloss turned toward the screen and asked, quietly, "Do you have a number? On your arm, tattooed?"

"I have a tattoo," Artificial Eva said. "My number is A, fifty-two, twenty-two."

Schloss, even more gently: "Do you think I could see your number?"

"I live in England, in London," Artificial Eva responded.

Maio-Smith tried. "Can you *show* me your tattoo?"

"Ah, yes, you can see that." Artificial Eva rolled up her sleeve and pointed to her forearm. "There was a number on top here."

"Thank you very much," Schloss said. "Because some people don't like to ask."

—Anna Russell

## LONDON POSTCARD FOUR LETTERS



Discussions of public morality often have a teleological bent. People used to behave better, we hear. They never would have got away with this kind of behavior back in the day. But declines, like vasectomies and windbreakers, can occasionally be reversed. Can you put incivility back into the bottle once it's out? So to the Cock, a London pub that recently banned swearing, to try to answer a question of the moment.

The Cock is part of the Samuel Smith chain of pubs. There are more than two hundred of them, and they are owned by a Yorkshireman named Humphrey Smith, whose old-school tastes manifest themselves in cheap prices, a lack of music or televisions, and "uncompromisingly Victorian" décor. Smith is known to make some sudden moves. He is said to have once closed a pub because he felt that its barmen were filling the pints too high. Apparently, last year the company decided that the language in its establishments was getting out of hand. Signs went up: "We wish to inform all of our customers that we have introduced a zero tolerance policy against swearing in all of our pubs. Please kindly respect this policy." Last summer, at the Arlington Hotel in Yorkshire, where "please" and "kindly" were not doing the job, a "mystery man" turned up and, according to the *Guardian*, cleared the bar and kicked everybody out.

Damn. Whether or not that particular word is banned remains unclear (Samuel Smith did not provide a list), but attempting to take the curses out of pubs is a bold maneuver. As a social experiment, it is at once idealistic and author-

itarian. The garden can be got back to, it suggests, as long as we all obey the gardener. At the Cock, the ban was already coming up against metropolitan apathy. "You can do whatever you want in the woodwork—it's more like coming out and being really aggressive," a barmaid said. "We haven't had any problem."

From a table near the door, bits of inoffensive chatter could be heard. "It was basically just biscuits and heavy cream," someone was saying. Had the campaign successfully rendered the public discourse more polite, or just driven the dirty words out of earshot?

A youngish man wearing a cardigan and tie was asked how many times he and his party had cursed since entering the pub: "Zero, because we're in a business meeting."

Nearby, two colleagues in sweatshirts were sitting at a table. They set up conference rooms for a living. "Probably, like, 'fuck,' 'shit,' and 'plonkers,' but that ain't really a swear word," one of them said, making an inventory of profanities.

"Swearing is just bad grammar," another customer suggested. "I use it when I can't find another word."

He was with a friend who claimed that the Irish were the most prolific swearers on earth. "When they pronounce the c-word, it sounds like they spell it with a 'k,'" the friend said.

A pair of women drinking rosé were flouting the prohibition with abandon. "Can you bar it from a pub?" one of them said, letting the four-letter words fly. "Can you bar it from the street?" They were the libertarian flank of pub society.

According to Emma Byrne, the author of "Swearing Is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language," profanity can ease pain, increase productivity, and help foster social cohesion. "It's an intense emotional signal," she said, citing the fusillade of curse words that Rose McGowan has recently aimed at sexual predators and their enablers.

Byrne explained that even chimpanzees can curse. The idea that we were once more courteous and less obscene is a fiction. "That attitude has to come from a place of privilege," she said. "If you can be in this world, and not feel a level of intense frustration, upset, or even desperation such that you do not feel the need to swear, then you are in a very lucky

position indeed.” She continued, “I think the thing that changes is what we consider taboo. It used to be uncivil to talk about bodily functions; now it’s uncivil to be outright fucking racist.” When Donald Trump called Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman,” Byrne said, “he couldn’t use the c-word, because he was on TV, but it was obvious what he meant.” And, if it wasn’t, then came “shithole.”

At the pub, the women had almost finished their bottle of rosé. They were checking their phones for messages. One of them looked up from her screen and said to the other, “I feel fragile tonight for the first time in a while.”

—Lauren Collins

## TEEN SPIRIT DEPT. THE CAMPAIGN



Tahseen Chowdhury, a seventeen-year-old student at Stuyvesant High School, isn’t into skateboards or video games. He spends his weekends running for New York state senator, in the September Democratic primary, against the incumbent, Jose Peralta. “It’s not that difficult,” Chowdhury said one day at the school, referring to his grassroots campaign. “All you need are competent people.” His team consists of about

twenty advisers, most of whom have curfews. His treasurer, Tymur Kholodnyak, is seventeen. “He just read a bunch of books and figured out how to track our campaign donations and expenses,” Chowdhury said.

Chowdhury was preparing for a student-union meeting at school. He was dressed in chinos, a button-down checked shirt, and leather lace-ups. “I dress like this mostly because of the campaign,” he said. Then, after a pause: “But what I used to wear wasn’t much different.” With his chief of staff and his deputy chief of staff, he employs a debate tactic called “spreading,” in which he speaks at speeds of up to three hundred and fifty words per minute. “It’s supposed to help get the work done,” he said.

His start in politics was accidental. Last year, he ran for student-union president unopposed and ended up in an advisory role on the New York City Department of Education’s panel for educational policy. He assumed that he would actually get to influence the decision-making. “But the students were more like props,” he said. Annoyed, he proposed a bill to beef up students’ role on the panel, which is one of his campaign issues.

Chowdhury announced his candidacy in May, outraged by Peralta’s decision to join the Independent Democratic Conference, a group of Democratic senators whose views align with the Republicans’. “He claims he’s progressive,

but I’m not O.K. with that deception,” Chowdhury said. He hopes to convince the working-class neighborhoods in District 13—Corona, East Elmhurst, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and Woodside—that Peralta is a Republican masquerading as a Democrat. Chowdhury grew up in East Elmhurst. His father works at a deli in Manhattan, and his mother delivers newspapers. “They don’t make much,” he said.

He called the union meeting to order. In attendance were Alexa Valentino, the union’s vice-president; William Wang, the deputy chief of staff; Carmen Benitez, the chief auditing officer and Chowdhury’s events coordinator; and Matt Polazzo, a government teacher. Laszlo Sandler, the senior-caucus president, was M.I.A. They sat around a table in mismatched office chairs. “People come in and steal the chairs,” Valentino said grimly.

Halfway through a discussion on repealing some union members’ voting rights, Sandler burst into the room, on his phone. Chowdhury looked annoyed.

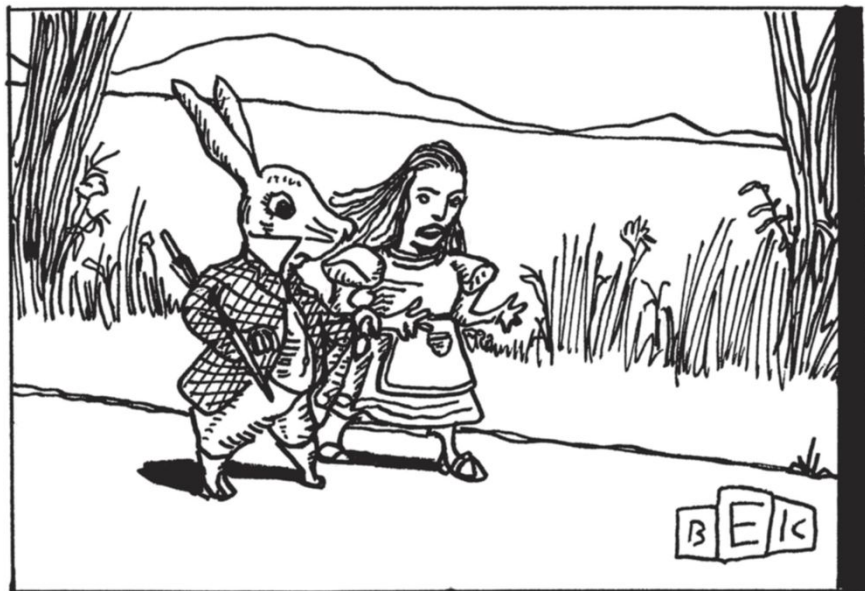
“I won’t even be here next year!” Sandler, a senior, said, grinning.

Chowdhury was at school last Halloween, the day that a truck driven by a terrorist mowed down civilians on a nearby bike path, and he knows that the attack reinforced Americans’ fears of radical extremism. “As a Muslim candidate, I will continue to stand by the Muslim community, as it is one that stands by progressive American beliefs,” he said.

So far, Chowdhury’s age hasn’t been an obstacle. “Some people think I’m not mentally capable of holding the position because my brain hasn’t developed enough,” he said. But his greenness has an upside. While most politicians are perceived as having an agenda, Chowdhury hasn’t been around long enough to be compromised. “Like, literally, I haven’t been on the planet long enough,” he said.

In the evenings, the campaign moves to a co-working space in midtown, lent to Chowdhury by a family friend. “He gets about three or four hours’ sleep a night,” Polazzo said.

On weekends, when the candidate isn’t busy with his campaign, he is at Khan’s Tutorial, in Queens, where he has a job as an Internet marketing coordinator. He got the gig after eighth grade, having told the owner that he wanted to redesign the firm’s Web site. “I was



*“He only likes me when it’s through the looking glass.”*



trying to start my own marketing company then," he said.

Every so often, Chowdhury will allow himself one indulgence: smashing technology. Polazzo said, "He's broken cell phones by biting them." But he prefers bigger quarry. Recently, he and his father



*Tahseen Chowdhury*

attended a police auction, where they scored twenty used laptops for fifty dollars. He stored them in the student-union room and, during long discussions on funding, for instance, would pick up a laptop and throw it against the wall. "It was just a way to, like, blow off steam," he said. "Sometimes keys would come off, sometimes the wiring would come off, whatever. It's better than a fidget spinner."

Polazzo is supportive, if skeptical. "By the numbers, it looks grim," he said. "The fact that he's not even eighteen counts against him. On the other hand, our political system thrives on freshness and people who are unconventional. Just look at our President."

—*Laura Parker*

## UNDER OUR NOSES DEPT. SEAMAN'S FOLLY



Valentine Seaman was born in Queens County in 1770 and studied medicine in Philadelphia under Benjamin Rush. He defied early-nineteenth-century anti-vaxxers by introducing Edward Jenner's "kine-pock" inoculation to

New York City, initially by administering it to one of his own children. In 1851, his son John Ferris Seaman bought twenty-six acres near the northern tip of Manhattan, in what's now called Inwood but was then known as Tubby Hook. He built an ornate, multi-cupolaed, statue-embellished mansion on the crest of a hill, using marble that had been quarried approximately where Columbia University's football stadium stands today. "If you were coming south into the city on the railroad in the late eighteen-hundreds, the mansion was the first thing you saw," Cole Thompson, a real-estate salesperson and amateur local historian, said one morning, in his office, on West 207th Street. "The Seamans called it Mt. Olympus on the Hudson; others called it Seaman's Folly."

Seaman died in 1872; his widow lived in the mansion until her own death, six years later. "She would sprinkle gold coins at the feet of visitors when they walked into the house," Thompson said. "And she would put clothes and faces on broomstick figures, and place them in the windows, so that workmen outside would think they were being watched." In the late eighteen-hundreds, the mansion was used as a clubhouse by the Suburban Riding and Driving Club, whose members raced horse-drawn carriages on a four-mile-long equestrian thoroughfare known as the Harlem River Speedway. In 1909, the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women borrowed the property for a suffrage outing. In 1938, a developer tore down what remained of the house and its stables, and built five red-brick apartment buildings, in one of which Cole Thompson and his wife live today.

The only surviving element of Seaman's Folly is directly across Broadway from the western end of West 216th Street: a scaled-down marble replica of the Arc de Triomphe. "Seaman completed the arch around 1869, probably to commemorate the death of one of his wife's poodles," Thompson said. It's forty feet wide, twenty feet deep, and three and a half stories tall, but it's easy to miss, because it's set back from the sidewalk and tightly surrounded by commercial buildings. If you stand on the other side of Broadway, though, you can see its top, spattered with graffiti, rising above the blue-red-yellow-and-white sign of JG & Tony Auto Body Repair. The arch

used to be the entrance to the Seaman estate. Today, it's what you drive through when you take your car to be de-dented.

Thompson runs a neighborhood-history Web site, MyInwood.net, and gives regular lectures at the Indian Road Café. One afternoon, he walked up Broadway from his office, at New Heights Realty, to check on the arch. He stopped to chat with a number of people he knew, among them Rafael Toribio, who ran a bodega a couple of doors down from JG & Tony. "The arch is amazing," Toribio said. "I saw it from the inside once, when I was looking for a spot to rent, and I saw how they had incorporated a building into it. They ruined it." He locked the door of his store and joined Thompson.

In the early nineteen-hundreds, the contractor who built the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, in Riverside Park, bought the entire Seaman property and moved his office into the top of the arch. In 1933, a reporter for the *New York World-Telegram* went looking for him. She and a friend climbed "a corkscrew stair that shot up a dark and musty corridor," and found him sitting at an old walnut table, wearing a derby and a red necktie, and holding a blackthorn cane. The stair, the corridor, the office, the walnut table, and the contractor are all long gone. A fire in the nineteen-seventies destroyed the arch's roof and most of the interior, and decades of neglect have gnawed at the rest. Thompson and Toribio walked through a tall doorway and into the arch's northern leg—now full of tires. "A few years ago, someone thought about incorporating the arch into a Brazilian steak house, and later someone was talking about a bowling alley—although I don't know how that would have worked," Thompson said. The owner of a second car-repair shop, next door, has turned the southern leg into a tidy storage room, and created a small office for himself at the top of a ladder-like flight of stairs. But Inwood marble is so porous that acid rain consumes it, and much of the original structure is gone. "This breaks my heart," Toribio said, pointing to a place where, years ago, someone had hacked away a fist-size chunk of marble to create an anchor for a heavy galvanized chain. "If they had known they were destroying a monument, they never would have done such a thing."

—*David Owen*

# RATE YOUR BOSS!

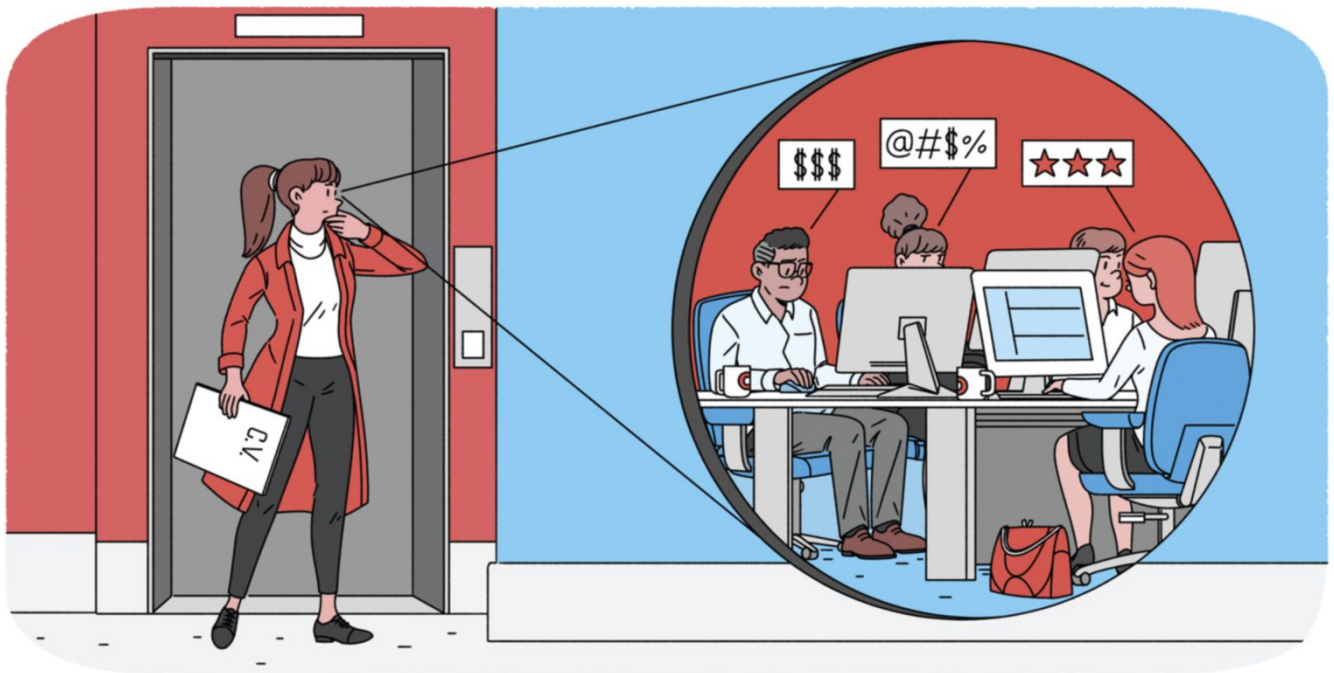
*How companies are adapting to the Glassdoor era.*

BY LIZZIE WIDDICOMBE

One day in 2007, in Seattle, Rich Barton, the C.E.O. of the real-estate Web site Zillow, was getting ready for the company's annual reviews. The process—talking to each employee about his or her performance and whether he or she would be getting a raise—called for discretion and tact. On his computer, he pulled up a spreadsheet containing the salary and stock options for every employee, and pressed Print. How-

where, in the mid-nineties, while running the travel-business unit, he came up with the idea of selling airline tickets through the Internet. Back then, this, too, ran counter to social norms. Responsible people did not give their credit-card information to a computer; if you wanted to buy a plane ticket, you talked to your local travel agent, who gave you crumbs of information. "You had to literally ask what the prices and schedules

In 2003, Barry Diller's company I.A.C. acquired Expedia, and Barton left to start Zillow. A Zillow feature called Zestimate used data from past listings to calculate the price of every house in the country, with the result that everyone suddenly knew the answer to the world's worst dinner-party question: "Nice place. How much did you pay for it?" Barton came to see Expedia and Zillow, which used the Internet to correct "information asymmetries" in markets, as part of the same project. He told me, "We were empowering people with information and tools that they didn't have before." His slogan was "Power to the people," and, after the printer incident, he realized that it could be applied to the world of work, too. Why should a job seeker have to furtively call around to find out how much she should be



ever, instead of sending the document to his personal printer, he sent it to one in the middle of the open-plan office. When Barton's assistant realized the mistake, she rushed across the room to retrieve the document before anyone could read it. She succeeded, but the moment stayed with Barton. As he likes to tell people, it led him to wonder: why, exactly, was this information secret, aside from the fact that making it public could be extremely awkward?

Barton had started out at Microsoft,

where," Barton recalled recently. In 1996, he persuaded Bill Gates to spin off Microsoft's travel unit as its own company, Expedia, which, with other sites, changed the travel landscape. Customers discovered that they could not only buy plane tickets online but also tap into huge caches of information in order to get the best deals. Airlines, now that they no longer had to pay commissions to travel agents, could lower their ticket prices; travel agents could enroll in culinary school, or take up woodworking.

making as an operations manager at Xerox? Shouldn't such information be online? Bosses might be nervous about a potential backlash, but, then again, as Barton said, "if I'm doing a good job as a leader, and the management and H.R. teams are promoting people and paying them fairly, then a sheet like that ought to make sense." He went on, "Everyone ought to be able to look at it and say, 'Yeah, Jane deserves that raise.'"

Barton handed his idea off to a former employee, Robert Hohman, who,

*According to an H.R. director, many job applicants now say, "I read this on Glassdoor. How do you respond?"*



in 2008, launched Glassdoor. Today, it is the second most popular jobs Web site, after Indeed, and is valued at more than a billion dollars. It has job listings, but it is also a Yelp for workplaces, on which people share salary information and post anonymous reviews evaluating their office environments. Among the site's features are company ratings, based on how many stars the employees award the organization, on a scale of one to five; and C.E.O. approval ratings, given as a percentage of how many people approve of the company's leadership. Initially, most of the jobs listed and reviewed were at tech companies in Silicon Valley, but the site now has thirty-three million reviews of more than seven hundred thousand companies in almost two hundred countries.

Glassdoor upended workplace power dynamics in the same way that Rate-myprofessors.com altered the power dynamics of college lecture halls, where, suddenly, professors had to worry about whether their students found them to be "inspirational" or "hot." "It definitely changed the way business leaders thought," Beth Comstock, a former vice-chair of G.E., told me. "There'd been a march for more transparency that had come along with the digitization of business. But suddenly it became very personal. People were, like, 'Wait a minute, they're going to be rating me?'"

To scroll through a company's Glassdoor page is to experience the frisson of setting eyes on hitherto secret stuff: the Pentagon Papers, or your sister's diary. Here, beneath the impressive company logo, are tales of interdepartmental feuds ("Sales reps blame the support team . . . tech support blames sales"), managerial chaos ("Stop the drama. This isn't high school") and insecure bosses ("makes fun of what the employees are wearing, trying to be funny"), weird vibes ("cult-like culture") and smells ("rubbing alcohol"). There are confessions ("I've made a terrible mistake coming here") and earnest pleas ("appreciate the crewmembers!").

Any one review on Glassdoor, like any single restaurant review on Yelp or product review on Amazon, may be misleading, useless, or unhinged. One user I spoke to, Blake Bolan, said that the process of sifting through reviews of a tech company she was interested in was like browsing Yelp reviews of her favor-

ite restaurant, the Red Pepper Diner, near Beacon, New York. "It's in a little building with a gas station. It doesn't look like much, but you walk in and they serve the most amazing Sri Lankan food," Bolan said. It gets many five-star reviews. "But I was recently wondering, as I was eating there for the millionth time: do they have any one- or two-star reviews?" They did. "I looked at it and was, like, Oh, this person got a burger! I'd never get a burger there." Bolan is now happily working at the tech company.

And yet the quirks of anonymous online reviews—typos, digressions, outbursts—also give them a certain authority. Even if you're not looking for a job, there is a voyeuristic fascination in a review left by, say, a vice-president at Goldman Sachs's New York headquarters (pro: "good gym"; con: "Leaving at 5pm is a half day"), or by a dog handler at the Spot Experience, in Tribeca ("They expected me to master this 'alpha' mentality in 4 months"), or by a server at the Trump Hotel on Waikiki Beach, where, according to one reviewer, the pros include "beautiful location with ocean views." The cons:

The Trump Hotel in Waikiki, Hawaii was a complete mess . . . 1 month training, minimum wage, instead of actual training they had us opening boxes and stocking kitchens . . . unorganized . . . not open to suggestions, uniforms were inappropriate for being so close to the beach (stockings and polyester skirts?) . . . LIES about who really owned the property (the TRUMP name had only been licensed) . . . and these people are making 6 figures geez. . . . Umm no thank you but thank you.

(The hotel did not respond to a request for comment.)

Glassdoor claims that eighty-three per cent of job seekers in the U.S. read its reviews. (A recent survey by Software Advice puts the number at just under fifty per cent.) There are reviews of jobs at mall kiosks, truck stops, and Amazon warehouse facilities. But it is in higher-paid industries like tech and consulting, where workers wield the most negotiating power, that the reviews hold the most sway. Beth Steinberg, the chief people officer at the online insurance company Zenefits, who previously worked at Electronic Arts, Facebook, and Nike, told me, "It's pretty rare that a job candidate doesn't look at Glassdoor before they come in. Often,

they bring it up in the interview. They'll say, 'I read this on Glassdoor. How do you respond?'"

Anne Diebel, who works for Q.R.I., a private-investigation firm often hired by investors, recalled using the site to conduct a background check on a C.E.O.: "The Glassdoor reviews taught us that his peers saw him as entrepreneurial, while the staff saw him as arrogant, a perception that was confirmed by interviews we did." Journalists keep an eye on the site. Last year, Glassdoor reviews tipped off a reporter to ethical issues at the Silicon Valley food startup Hampton Creek; reporters later discovered a "mayo buyback" scheme, in which contract employees had shopped for Hampton Creek's vegan mayonnaise in grocery stores. (The company has since been cleared of wrongdoing by the Justice Department.)

Some of the site's biggest enthusiasts are those advocating for social change. Laura Kray, a social psychologist studying gender in the workplace, told me, "In terms of academic research, if your goal is to increase gender equality, it's hard to come up with a downside of greater transparency." Some evidence suggests that women fail to demand higher wages because they experience more backlash than men do for being "pushy" in negotiations. Kray said that a printout from Glassdoor—a list of salaries for comparable jobs in the industry, or results from the site's Know Your Worth feature—can provide "objective criteria you can refer to, instead of saying, 'I think I'm worth this.'"

Glassdoor reviews provide real-time accounts of "boys' club" dynamics, uncomfortable hugs, and demands for sexual favors by management. Jennifer Berdahl, who studies workplace sexual harassment at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business, calls the site "a really exciting development," comparing it to the scribbles on bathroom walls. "This is just putting on the Internet what's been going on forever—women whispering about bad experiences they've had within companies," she said. As recent scandals at companies like Uber and Fox News have proved, internal monitoring systems such as human resources are often "junk," Berdahl said, when it comes to protecting workers from harassment: "They're

only as good as the people who can fire them.” When a company has a toxic or abusive culture, she said, “whistle-blowing—going outside the company—is the only alternative. You can do it by leaving, or by writing about the company online and exposing it to the public, so the shock and condemnation force a change. And hopefully the market will start taking care of it.”

Recent scandals have also shown corporations, and their shareholders, that workplace “culture” is a serious topic—and that a bad culture, left untended, can become an existential threat. In the past two years, Zenefits laid off half its employees and its C.E.O. resigned after the company was caught breaking insurance laws. Reports later emerged of a frat-house atmosphere, where employees drank and had sex in stairwells. Steinberg, one of the executives who joined the company in the aftermath, said that Zenefits has a coordinator who now reads all the company’s Glassdoor reviews, to monitor “day-to-day culture stuff.”

Spencer Rascoff, the C.E.O. of Zillow Group, who took over from Barton, calls himself “the Naked C.E.O.” “I was focussed on corporate culture before it was cool,” he told me. He reads every review of his company on Glassdoor and responds to many of them himself. He said, “It’s common for me to walk out

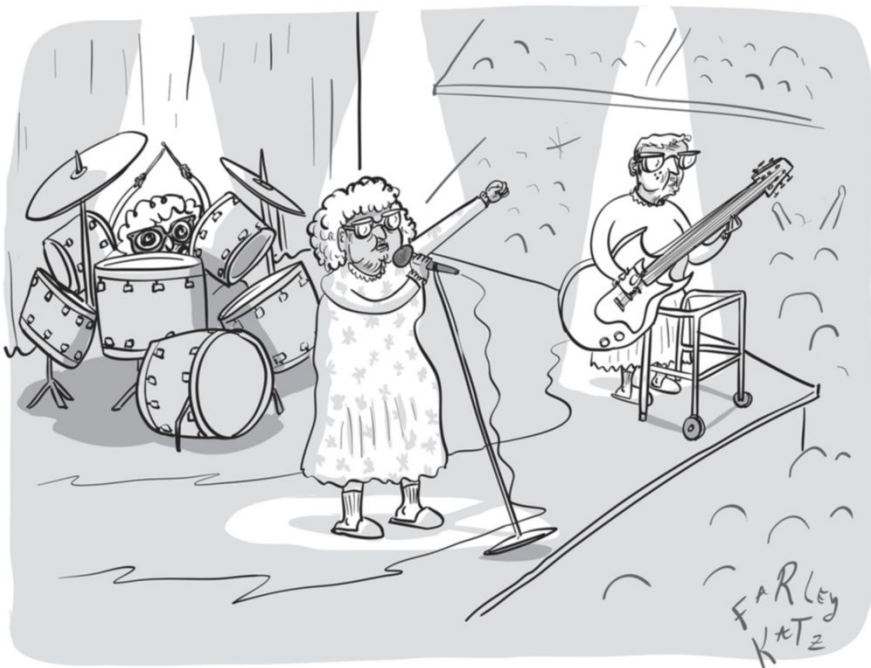
of a meeting and write on Twitter, ‘Just finished a great meeting with @camille reviewing our P.R. goals for 2018.’” The constant communication, he said, “shows my other thirty-five hundred employees that I care, and it gives Camille a thrill. And maybe she amplifies it to her social network, which retweets it and shares it.” Rascoff, whose employees have given him a ninety-three-per-cent approval rating on Glassdoor, said that these efforts build an “employer brand,” which helps in the battle to attract talent in Silicon Valley.

Last year, twenty-one per cent of workers in the U.S. changed jobs, and the consulting firm Deloitte has estimated that companies spend more than two hundred billion dollars annually on finding people to fill the positions. Glassdoor sees an opportunity in this. In addition to publishing job listings, the company sells “enhanced profiles,” which are like display ads in the Yellow Pages. Glassdoor creates a bare-bones Web page for any company that gets a review, which will often appear at the top of a Google search. The company can’t make Glassdoor take the page down, but, for a minimum of six thousand dollars a year, and often an amount well into six figures, it can “claim” its Glassdoor page and make it look nicer—adding photographs and mission statements. For a higher fee, the company can customize

its page for different types of workers, or get rid of advertisements from competitors. Jeremy Heimans, the co-author of “New Power,” a forthcoming book about the implications of growing on-line participation, described to me the process of getting a “Glassdoor face-lift” as “gentle extortion.” Threatening to damage your reputation, Glassdoor charges you to repair it.

One day last fall, I met with Robert Hohman, Glassdoor’s C.E.O., at the company’s Chicago office. He had just hosted a TED-like conference (tagline: “Winning with informed candidates”) where C.E.O.s and talent recruiters took notes on how to operate in the new era of corporate transparency. Hohman, who grew up in Akron, Ohio, resembles the actor Jeff Daniels; friendly and ruffled, he wore jeans, and his blond hair was slicked back. According to Glassdoor, ninety-one per cent of employees approve of Hohman’s performance. The other nine per cent include a former sales director, who recently griped about a “culture of blame” at the company’s Mill Valley, California, headquarters and advised Hohman to “stop standing up in meetings dropping F-Bombs like a 6th grader with a head injury.”

Hohman hasn’t spent a lot of time sending his résumé to H.R. departments. He was hired to work at Microsoft as soon as he graduated from Stanford, where he studied computer science, and became part of Rich Barton’s circle of frequent collaborators, a genial group that reminded me of the all-male crew of actors who regularly work with the movie director Judd Apatow. Another member of the group, the investor Erik Blachford, who is on the boards of Zillow and Glassdoor, described Hohman as a “hard-core technical engineer” who is also “a fun guy.” At Microsoft, Hohman was known for being motivated, but also for having a mischievous streak. He once told the members of his engineering team that, if they hit their ship date, he would shave Barton’s head in front of the entire staff. (It happened.) In 1996, Barton hired Hohman to work for Expedia, where he spent two years running Hotwire, a hotel-booking Web site that the company had acquired. After leaving Expedia, he decided to stay home with his wife and two young kids in Mill



*“We’re not your grandma’s rock band. We’re her friend Irene’s rock band.”*



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Valley and play the online video game World of Warcraft, in which multiple players control character avatars and fulfill “quests” in “guilds.” When Barton came to Hohman with the printer anecdote, he knew that Hohman was ready to start a company of his own. Plus, Barton told me, “I kind of knew Robert was playing a lot of World of Warcraft.”

Hohman told me that, when he spoke to Barton, he had been playing the game for six months straight. Barton’s idea about making salary information transparent had struck him not merely as a good business concept but as an opportunity to mimic the guilds that the game’s characters form and join: “I was thinking that, if we built a platform that let people help each other, by sharing information, that could scale way more than we ever could by researching companies ourselves.” He said yes to Barton—who became an early investor in Glassdoor, and is now the non-executive chairman of its board—and teamed up with Tim Besse, another Microsoft-Expedia alum.

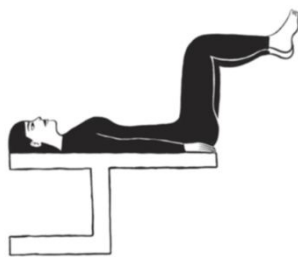
Vault, JobVent, and FuckedCompany already provided workers with places to gossip and rail, but such forums had a reputation as “rant sites for angry people,” Hohman said. In order to keep the conversation on Glassdoor “constructive,” he and his co-founders created a set of Community Guidelines, which included: no profanity or discriminatory language; no personal attacks; no sharing trade secrets; and no naming individuals who are below the level of the most senior executives, known as the “C-suite.”

Some early reviews posed other kinds of problems. “People are doing coke in the bathroom, and the C.E.O. is a drug addict,” Hohman said. “That was a tough one. Is it relevant to a job seeker? Well, yes. But it’s also a criminal matter. The question is, are we the forum to resolve it?” After some discussion, Hohman and his colleagues decided that information about nonviolent crimes—drug use, sexual harassment, financial malfeasance—should be published, since it was relevant. When reviews contained threats of violence or descriptions of violent crime, like rape and murder, they would contact the authorities. (In April, 2013, after a user left a review of a hospital where he used to work which included

a threat to bomb it, Glassdoor contacted the hospital, which called the police. The man was arrested.)

When it comes to sexual harassment, Glassdoor’s spokespeople noted that posting about it on the site should not replace reporting it through “appropriate channels.” But Hohman was enthusiastic about the site’s potential to curb abuse. Bringing up the #MeToo movement, he said, “This time that we’re going through, I do not think it’s an accident that it’s happening as transparency has been on the rise. If you wanted to run a racist, misogynistic company where there was sexual harassment going on, the only way you could possibly do that is to have there be this ironclad veil of secrecy. Which is basically what Harvey Weinstein had.”

In 2008, shortly before Glassdoor’s launch, Hohman called his sister, Melissa Fernandez, in Akron. She had just given birth to her first child and wanted to work from home. He enlisted her to read every review that was submitted to the site, scanning them for violations of the Community Guidelines. When the workload got to be too much, Fernandez recruited Cara Barry, another stay-at-home mom, who recruited a third mom, her neighbor. Eventually, this group—the content-moderation team—grew to include twenty-six people, several of them men, although for years employees at Glassdoor’s headquarters referred to them as “the WAHMs,” for “work-at-home moms.” During the past decade, Glassdoor has built machine-



learning algorithms to screen for fraud and profanity, and the members of Fernandez’s team read anything that users have flagged; these days, they also read half of all reviews submitted to the site regardless—a step that Yelp and TripAdvisor don’t take, Hohman said.

Hohman had also attempted to deal with a common problem plaguing online reviews. In statistics, it’s known as “voluntary response bias”—the fact that

volunteers are more likely to have extreme opinions. Hohman calls it the “J-shaped curve.” If you were to graph the number of stars that voluntary reviewers assign to things, you’d get a relatively large quantity of five-star reviews, from the people who love whatever they are writing about; a low number of fours, threes, or twos; and mostly ones, from the foaming-at-the-mouth furious.

From the start, Hohman instituted a “give to get” policy at Glassdoor. As a user, before you can look at any information on the site you must contribute an anonymous review of your own current job or one that you’ve held in the past five years, or share your salary. (Glassdoor users are allowed one review per year for each company they’ve worked at.) Hohman says that this gives everyday users greater incentive to contribute to the site, and he claims that it shows in Glassdoor’s data. “From the beginning, the average rating has been 3.2, which is not low,” he said. “And, if you looked at the distribution, it’s bimodal. Seventy per cent of reviews are in the middle hump, where you are satisfied with your job but not ecstatic. Like, ‘Things are O.K. Work is fine.’”

Still, the one-star reviews make a strong impression. I learned more about the site from a friend, Alexa Hirschfeld, who, in 2008, founded Paperless Post, a New York tech startup that makes online invitations. Her company recently chose to end an entire business line, printed invitations, in order to put more resources into digital, and laid off fifteen per cent of the staff. “That was when I realized the crazy power of this thing,” she told me. Within days of the layoffs, the negative reviews started trickling in. “We went from a four-star average to a bunch of one-star reviews with very angry descriptions.” The company’s over-all score went down, and potential recruits started asking questions. She went on, “Basically, as a company, you have to make really hard decisions. And, if you make everybody happy, you’re not going to succeed.”

When I mentioned this to Hohman, he sighed. “People will say, ‘I fired that person! Why would you let them write a review?’” he said. “My answer is, that person is writing about their own experience, and their one data point is valid.” He also argued that turmoil and

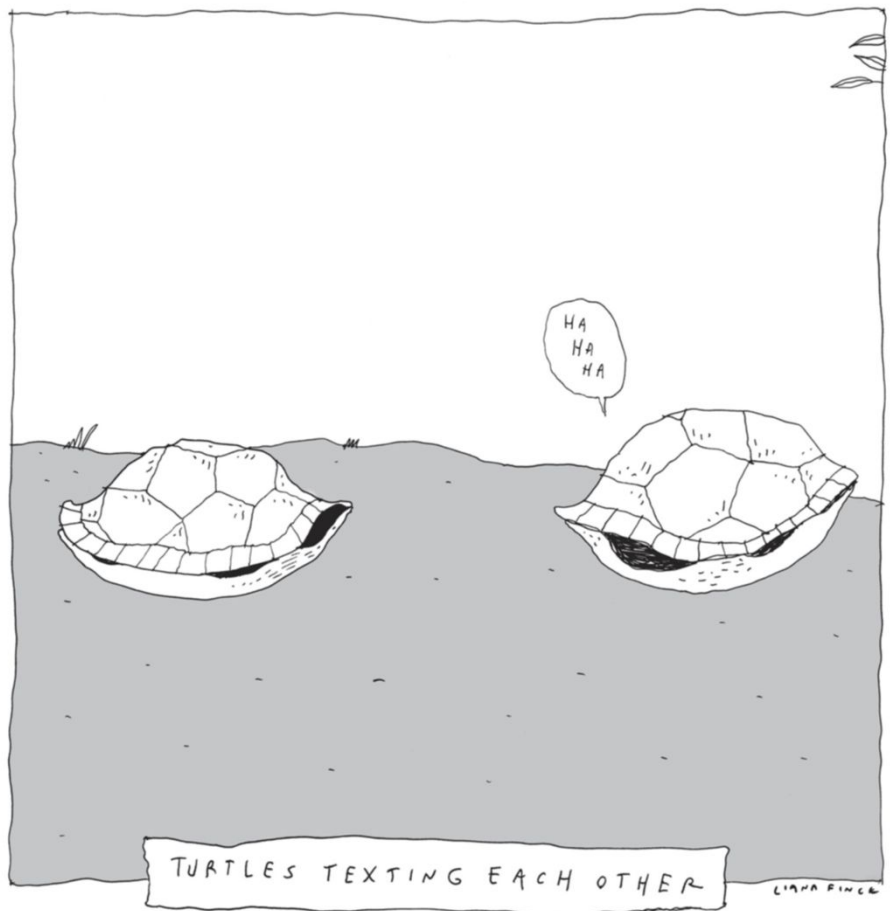


even layoffs do not necessarily result in bad reviews: “How you’re treated when you’re separating says a lot about companies. Caterpillar”—the construction-equipment company—“was one of the big ones. In 2009, they laid off twenty thousand people, and their ratings actually went up, they did such a good job communicating—the communication was just so crisp.”

Last fall, Dawn Lyon, Glassdoor’s chief reputation officer (and now a consultant), told me that bosses often feel wronged by Glassdoor: “People say, ‘I have a Glassdoor problem.’ We deal with that all the time. The question is, do you really have a Glassdoor problem, or is it a reflection of something going on inside the company?” Some people suspect that Glassdoor might make certain allowances to paying clients, but Hohman adamantly denied this. “No special treatment for clients versus non-clients,” he said. “With new sales hires, the first value I lead with is integrity. Everyone needs to know the day they start we’ll never trade a review for money. Because once we do that we’ve lost all credibility as a neutral platform.”

The company insists that, since the reviews and the scores on the site are “a mirror that reflects back on companies,” as Lyon put it, there should be no quick fixes for bad reviews, and no shortcuts to improve a company’s ratings. Josh Bersin, a consultant from Deloitte, said in a speech at Glassdoor’s conference, “The bottom line is, no matter how much you try to influence Glassdoor surveys, the ultimate problem is building the irresistible organization.”

And yet, as Glassdoor’s paying clients will tell you, there *is* an easy way to raise your company’s scores, by increasing what Glassdoor calls “employee engagement.” Glassdoor warns employers not to offer incentives in exchange for reviews: “We will remove positive reviews where we have evidence that employees were compensated and/or coerced.” But there is nothing preventing companies from encouraging their employees to write reviews on the site—especially if they are likely to write good ones. (In response to Hirschfeld’s complaints, a Glassdoor client representative told her that, after she’s had a great conversation with an employee, “you just say, ‘Would you mind leaving your feedback on Glassdoor?’”)



At the conference, Marie Artim, the vice-president of talent acquisition at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, told me that the company reminds managers to tell newly promoted employees, “Congratulations! Go change your LinkedIn profile! Give us a Glassdoor review!” Thomas Pullen, a recruiter for an industrial-chemical company, said that his company’s scores were abysmal until he launched an internal e-mail campaign: “I told everyone, ‘Hey, go to Glassdoor! Leave us a review!’ In six months, we went from 2.8 to 3.9.” In a recent article about corporate change at the online marketplace Etsy, the *Times* noted that the company’s Glassdoor reviews “portray a company in decline,” and that, soon after a reporter contacted the company, several new reviews appeared on the site, with titles like “Why I Love Etsy.” Etsy said that it did not encourage its employees to leave reviews on Glassdoor.

But the “fake positive” review, apparently written by a management-appointed shill, is a common feature of

the site. The biggest tells are often in the “Cons” section—“So much free food. I’ve gained 8 pounds!”; “No cons”; “Sometimes I feel like I love my job too much”—and under “Advice to management,” when the reviewer writes some version of “Keep up the great work!” Hohman has the same attitude toward dubious positive reviews as he does toward agenda-driven rants. “Everything is only a single source,” he said. “It’s when you hear the same thing multiple times, in multiple different voices, that it tends to have an effect.” But almost everyone I spoke with—worker or manager—had a Glassdoor conspiracy theory: the company encourages fake reviews, because they bring in more Web traffic; if you know someone at Glassdoor, she can get a negative review taken down or a positive one pushed to the top of the page; a friend’s comments were deleted under mysterious circumstances. (According to Glassdoor, none of this is true.)

Laurie Ruettimann, who writes about human resources and is a consultant for companies such as Pfizer and Monsanto,

suggested that such mistrust might stem from Glassdoor's business model. The company presents itself as a tool for employees, like a union, but it is funded, in part, by their bosses, like an H.R. department. "It's ambiguous messaging," Ruettimann said. She tells the companies she advises, "Don't hire people to read Glassdoor, don't comment on negative feedback. Once you respond to one review, you have to respond to everybody. It's a black hole that doesn't necessarily yield anything for you." As for the fees, she said, "You're better off, in terms of your company's reputation, if you invest that money in your own Web site and your own management training."

From Chicago, Hohman returned to San Francisco. Dawn Lyon and I went to visit the content-moderation team, which works in an office park in Green, Ohio, five miles from the Akron airport. Melissa Fernandez met us at the door. She has a "Rachel" haircut, wire-rimmed glasses, and an even-keeled demeanor. She introduced her team of moderators—twenty-one other women and four men, working at adjustable-height desks. According to Glassdoor's Glassdoor page, the Ohio office is the happiest of the company's six locations, beating London and San Francisco, with a 5.0 rating—a perfect score. Fernandez explained that this is in part because the team has a great culture, and also because its San Francisco-style startup perks—yoga classes, dogs in the office, flexibility to work from home—are virtually unheard of in Akron, where the biggest employers are factories and call centers. Laura Beth Mercina, the team's head of community care, previously worked at Arby's. She said, "I tell people about my job at Glassdoor, and they're, like, 'Is this place real?'"

Working for a platform like Glassdoor is a little different from working for a traditional publication like *The New Yorker*. There's no investigative reporting, copy-editing, or fact-checking. (A popular office mantra is "We are not the finders of fact.") Whereas a publication is legally responsible for what it publishes, Glassdoor's reviews are the responsibility of its reviewers. This demands a hands-off approach from the moderators, each of whom reads eighty to a hundred reviews per hour—many

years' worth of employment. If they see a violation of the Community Guidelines, they reject the review. If the situation is ambiguous, Fernandez said, they ask themselves, and sometimes one another, "Is it helpful to the job seeker?"

"The C.E.O.'s super fat and greasy," one of the moderators, Cara Barry, said, citing an example. "We get that a lot." This comment would normally be a violation (personal attack), but the moderators decided to make an exception in the case of a fitness company, where someone had noted, "The C.E.O. is obese and smokes a pack of Marlboros a day." (Helpful to the job seeker.)

Barry brought up another review, which Glassdoor had been sent by a British finance company. Under "Pros," the employee had written, "Good place to work for." Under "Cons": "Not enough British ethnics employed!" Was this discriminatory language?

"It's a gray area," Fernandez said, explaining that the comment didn't single out a particular ethnic group for insult. Barry left it up.

Barry leads the fraud team, which reads reviews caught by the fraud-detecting software; these are often sent from fake e-mail addresses. "It's more about gaming—trying to leave multiple five-star reviews to make your company's score go up, or an angry employee trying to leave a bunch of negative reviews to make the company look bad," she said.

The moderators handle a lot of regrets, Barry said. "We get a lot of e-mails where people say, 'I changed my mind! How do I take it down right now?'"

"Or 'I didn't know you were going to publish my job title! Now they'll know who I am!'" Fernandez added. (Glassdoor now allows users to delete their own reviews.)

The closest readers of Glassdoor—and the moderators' main correspondents—are employers. "The employer is always sure they know who wrote the review," Fernandez said. "They say things like 'I know this is Ann Smith from H.R., and she was an alcoholic!'" According to the moderators, they are almost always wrong.

I asked how often employers threaten lawsuits. "Daily," Fernandez said. (Although users are responsible for what they write, the company will go to court

to protect their anonymity from employers; most cases are dismissed, on First Amendment grounds.) Generally, if a boss merely disagrees with a review, his or her only option is to write a response on Glassdoor. But the boss can also "flag" the review, to indicate that it contains a violation of the Guidelines. "There are so many ways employers have found to try to get us to take things down," Fernandez went on. "'That's not an employee!' 'We never had a location in that place!'"

Krystle Neeb, a member of the flag team, read aloud a review that had been flagged by the management of an I.T. company, in which the reviewer had written, "Bleeding heart liberals such as myself may have issue with a few of their clients." He or she disliked having to work on a project "for an anti-gay fundamentalist religious client." A discussion ensued among the moderators.

Fernandez said, "In my opinion, it's not discriminatory. They're not saying anything negative about gays." Neeb wondered if the review could be perceived as discriminatory against anti-gay religious fundamentalists. The moderators reflected, inadvertently engaging in the decision-making process currently under way in the wedding-cake case before the Supreme Court. The review got a pass.

Leann Boso, also on the flag team, rejected a review that advised management, "Sever ties with Head of Communication as quickly as possible." (Negative comment about an individual below the C-suite.)

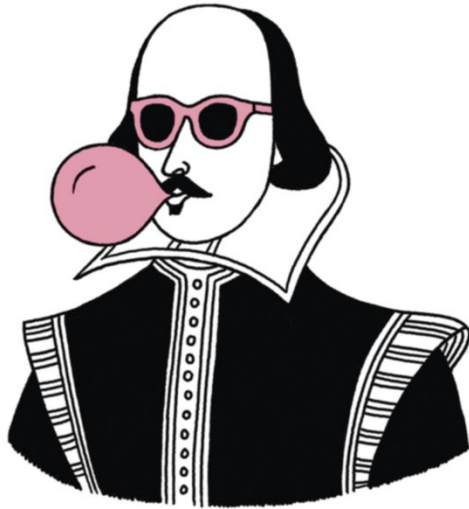
In a message to Glassdoor about another review, headlined "Opportunity," a user had written, "This looks fake as all get out."

"It's probably positive," Fernandez said. Boso scanned the review, which awarded the company five stars and claimed that senior leadership "has done a great job diversifying the business model for long term growth and stability." The only con was that the environment was "so fast paced and dynamic you have to stay focused on core responsibilities."

"This is fine," Boso said.

But what if it was written by the head of the company's P.R. department? "The head of the P.R. department can leave a review, too," Lyon said. "It's allowed." ♦





## SHAKESPEARE, OFF THE CUFF

BY MIKE O'BRIEN AND FRED ARMISEN

*The following are recently discovered quotes from interviews that William Shakespeare conducted while promoting various plays, in which he speaks candidly about writing, life, love, and even battling the common cold.*

- “Writing is everything to me. I love writing in that weird, flowery language. It takes much longer than writing regular, but, in the end, I think it’s worth it. I hope so, at least. Sometimes I worry that people won’t know what the hell I’m saying, but that’s a risk worth taking if you want it to sound all flowery and weird.”

- “Juliet [Capulet] was based on my former downstairs neighbor Carla. And, before you ask, Carla did *not* commit suicide. (Laughs) But she had this annoying thing where whenever she saw someone sleeping she assumed that *they* had. I always made fun of her. We never dated, though.”

- “The carpenters who built my stage? The best. The best guys around. I’m not kidding. I don’t know how they do it. I asked them if they could build it in time for an opening, I think with, like, two months’ lead time? An impossible feat,

ask anybody. They did it. They were hammering the boards down right as the stage manager announced ‘Places!’” (Laughs)

- “I love Stratford. I’m a Stratford guy. I don’t know what it is. The streets? The bread is different. Better than anywhere else. I mean that. There’s this one hat store on Tinker’s Lane. They aren’t the nicest people. I don’t even think the hats are that great. But . . . I love it.”

- “We don’t call it Stratford-Upon-Avon. We just say ‘Stratford.’ I don’t know why anyone would think we’d get so technical. It’s like saying ‘Manhattan of New York.’”

- “I’ve always hated my last name. It sounds pretentious. I wish I had a cool last name, like Jones or Biddle.”

- “I miss my early, little, not-great plays. The ones I wrote when I was struggling to even find a place to put them on. It was all imitation, but, I don’t know, looking back . . . it was fun. So much chaos, but I miss that chaos. There was one time when I forgot to write an ending to this play that was being performed. I was onstage, literally writing out the final lines as the actors were doing a scene. (Laughs) Nobody noticed, since the place was basically empty.”

- “I’m so scared of wolves. I think about them all the time. I wish we could a hundred per cent guarantee that they won’t get us. But we can’t. Wolves can get you when you’re walking down the street. I hear sometimes they even get in your window.”

- “I hate getting notes from theatre owners. They’re always, like, Romeo and Juliet shouldn’t die and stuff. I thought that was a cool ending. I don’t know.”

- “Some girls want to make out with me just ‘cause of ‘Romeo and Juliet.’ And they kind of hint that they’d like me to talk all flowery while we do it. Or something. I don’t know. I fight them off as much as I can, but (laughs) I’m only so strong.”

- “I was partying too hard when I wrote ‘Julius Caesar.’ A lot of my friends had moved away, and I kind of hit this weird, depressed, going-out-too-much phase. But, thank God, I would still write a little when I got home. ‘Cause I cranked out ‘Julius Caesar.’ And I think it’s awesome.”

- “Caesar getting stabbed by his friend and being, like, ‘Et tu?’—that was based on a friend who moved to Stratford and started dating a girl I’d had a crush on forever. She and I had this thing where, like, we couldn’t tell if we were friends or what. I wrote a couple bad poems about her, I’m sure.” (Laughs)

- “When I’ve got a cold, I don’t want to write sonnets or plays or anything! I just want to curl up and take naps.”

- “I actually think the earth could be round, not flat. Just ‘cause, you know, the moon’s round.”

- “Whenever I was walking down the street with Chris [Marlowe], and someone recognized me but didn’t recognize him, he’d get quiet for, like, an hour. I think I’m less sensitive. Ever since I wrote ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ I’m kind of, like, either ya get me or ya don’t. I like my work! I don’t need other people to tell me that ‘Romeo and Juliet’ is good.”

- “I’m scared for it to turn 1600. It’s not that I think the world will end, I just think something weird might happen.”

- “I don’t like classical music. I’m not just saying that to be alternative, either. I really just don’t like it. It’s too . . . violin-y.”

- “I hope my plays are good. I don’t know that they all are. I mean, I know ‘Romeo and Juliet’ is good, but I think some of the others are maybe a little boring.” ♦

## MAKING WAR

*How U.S. support inflames the conflict in Yemen.*

BY NICOLAS NIARCHOS

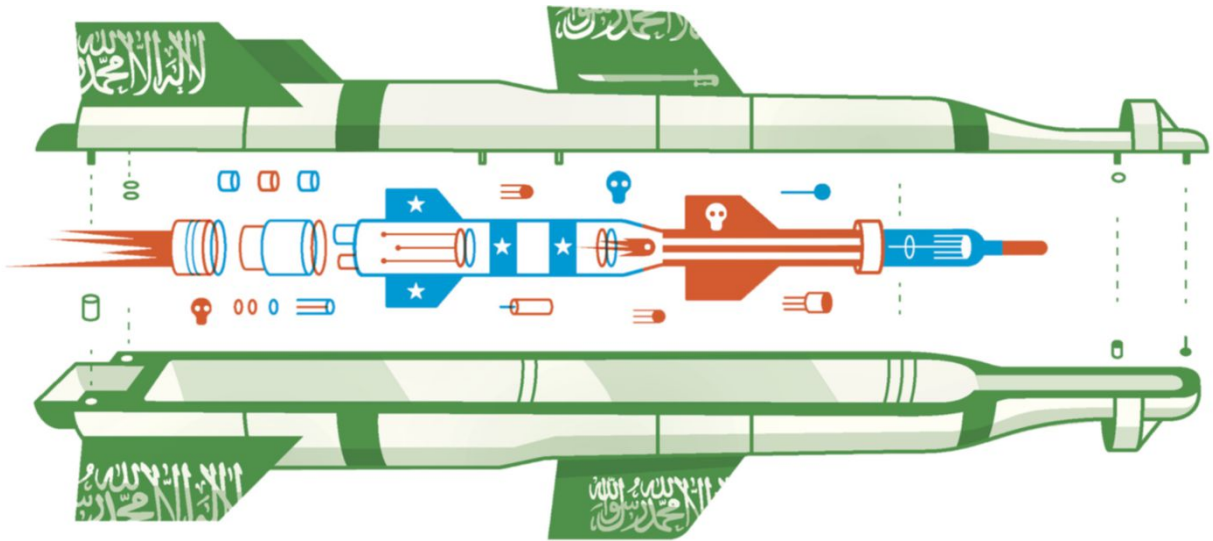
Funerals in Yemen are traditionally large affairs. When prominent figures die, hundreds or even thousands of people come to pay their respects and to pray for them. Abdulqader Hilal Al-Dabab, the mayor of Sana'a, Yemen's capital, could expect such treatment. But Hilal used to ask for a simple burial. "If I get killed when I'm in office, I don't want a state funeral," he told his sons.

intricate mesh of tribal, business, and political affiliations that make up Yemeni society.

Yemen's most recent conflict began in early 2015, when Houthi rebels, from the country's northern highlands, overran Sana'a and a Saudi-led coalition began bombing them. The Houthis allied with a former President and co-opted tribal networks in an effort to solidify and ex-

died. Ruwayshan, the Minister of the Interior, was working with Hilal in negotiating between Yemen's various factions to end the war. The Ruwayshan family announced that it would receive condolences at the Al-Sala Al-Kubra Community Hall, in Sana'a. On the night before the funeral, Hilal's son Hussein called his father and asked him to urge the Ruwayshan family to consider postponing the event. Since the beginning of the war, the Saudi coalition's air strikes have hit large civilian gatherings. Hilal replied that the Saudi Air Force would not bomb the funeral. "Even war has morals," he said.

As Hilal left for the funeral, Ammar Yahya al-Hebari was preparing his d.j. mixing board at the community hall. Hebari is a solid-looking forty-year-old,



*After a hundred and forty mourners were killed at a funeral, the tail fin of a U.S.-made bomb was found in the rubble.*

He wanted to be buried in a grave he'd reserved next to his father's.

Hilal had seen enough devastation to know to make plans for his demise. In the past three decades, Yemen has had nine wars, two insurgencies, and a revolution; Hilal governed a region with strong ties to Al Qaeda, and had survived an assassination attempt. A father of eleven, he was a former marathon runner who won North Yemen's inter-university challenge three times. In Sana'a, Hilal kept a garden with a gazebo, where he received guests. Stephen Seche, the former United States Ambassador to Yemen, recalled sitting there while Hilal explained Yemeni politics. Other diplomats saw him as a moderating force, someone who could negotiate the

and their power. Now they control much of the northwest of the country, while the internationally recognized government holds the south and the east. The Saudi coalition is made up of nine Middle Eastern and African countries, and is supported by the United States.

Sana'a has been in Houthi hands since the start of the war, but Hilal was neutral. "He had a lot of the right characteristics of somebody who you easily could have seen as being the person that would have been a consensus figure to emerge as a new transition President or Vice-President or Prime Minister," Matthew Tueller, the current U.S. Ambassador, told me.

In early October, 2016, the father of Hilal's close friend Jalal al-Ruwayshan

with a white stripe in his hair. He is famous across northern Yemen as a funeral chanter. Like Hilal, Hebari thought there would not be a strike. The rebels and the Saudi government had just agreed to a U.N.-brokered truce, and the funeral "was not a political or political-party gathering," he told me.

In the early afternoon, the hall began to fill with men wearing white head scarves and the traditional curved daggers, called *janbīyas*, in their belts. Many were chewing high-quality khat, a mild stimulant leaf, which had been brought from Khawlan, the seat of the Ruwayshan family. At around one-thirty, Hebari started to chant. He estimated that some three thousand people had crowded into the hall. A rumor spread that the former



President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Houthi ally, would soon arrive. Documents given to Nawal Al-Maghafi, a journalist who made a documentary about the day's events for the BBC, show that informants were providing the Saudi coalition with updates on who was there.

When Hilal arrived, Hebari noticed how relaxed he appeared. At one point, a beggar approached Hilal. His guards tried to shoo the man away, but Hilal reached into his shirt pocket and gave the beggar all his cash. "This was his last act," Hebari told me.

A little after three o'clock, one of Hilal's guards heard a noise. It was a coalition jet, crashing eastward through the hot afternoon sky. "Boss, I heard a jet," he said. Hilal looked at him and shook his head. The hall rumbled with the noise of an aircraft a second time, louder, lower. The guard turned nervously to Hilal. The Mayor grinned and said, "Son, I'm not going to leave."

The third time that the hall shook, Hilal's guard heard the sound of air whistling against the tail fins of a bomb as it zigzagged toward them, its guidance system making corrections to its trajectory. "Sir, it's a missile!" he shouted. Hilal was smiling. The floor erupted in flames. As the guard lost consciousness, he saw a wall collapse and crush Hilal.

More than a hundred and forty mourners were killed and five hundred were wounded in the strike. Afterward, Yemeni investigators unearthed a tail fin of one of the bombs. The serial number indicates that the bomb, a Mark-82—a sleek steel case eighty-seven inches long, twelve inches in diameter, and filled with five hundred pounds of explosive—was produced by Raytheon, the third-largest defense company in the United States. The bomb had been modified with a laser guidance system, made in factories in Arizona and Texas, called a Paveway-II. The weapons are sometimes referred to as "dumb bombs with graduate degrees." "They had been sold to the Saudis on the understanding that they would make their targeting more accurate," Mark Hiznay, the associate arms director at Human Rights Watch, told me. "It turned out that the Saudis were failing to take all the feasible precautions in attacks that were killing civilians accurately."

Many who died had been negotiating between the warring factions. "It was such a foolish strike, because even the Saudis recognized that more people who were sympathetic to the Saudi position than the Houthi position were killed," a senior State Department official told me. I asked a senior Arab diplomat from the Saudi coalition whom he could envisage in a transition government. "Who would you hand Yemen to? Who would be part of that?" he asked. "There is nobody."

Since the war began, at least ten thousand Yemeni civilians have been killed, though the number is potentially much higher, because few organizations on the ground have the resources to count the dead. Some three million people have been displaced, and hundreds of thousands have left the country. Before the war, Yemen was the Middle East's poorest state, relying on imports to feed the population. Now, after effectively being blockaded by the coalition for more than two and a half years, it faces famine. More than a million people have cholera, and thousands have died from the disease. UNICEF, the World Food Program, and the World Health Organization have called the situation in Yemen the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

Yet the U.S. and Great Britain have continued to support the coalition, mainly with weapons sales and logistical help. (A small contingent of U.S. Special Forces fights Al Qaeda militants in the south of the country.) Without foreign assistance, it would be very difficult for the Saudis to wage war. As casualties mount, legislators in the U.S. have begun to question support for the Saudis. Nonetheless, the Administration of Donald Trump has refused to criticize the kingdom.

Yemen's history is marked by foreign interventions that have failed to reckon with the complexity of the country's politics. In the nineteen-seventies, the country was divided into South Yemen and North Yemen. In 1978, Saleh, a young colonel, took power in the North, after his predecessor was killed by a Communist agent with a suitcase bomb. Saleh was little known, and not from the Yemeni elite, but he was skilled at manipulating the country's mixture of tribes, religious groups, and interested foreign

parties—a feat he called "dancing on the heads of snakes." When the two Yemens unified, in 1990, it was under Saleh's leadership.

The Saudis saw Saleh as an effective but unreliable ally, and they began to influence Yemen by going around him. Flush with money donated by sheikhs from the Gulf states, Yemenis who had been living in Saudi Arabia came home and founded schools that promoted Salafi Islam, an austere Sunni doctrine that is closely linked to the Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia. The Salafis soon became a powerful religious and political constituency, and they preached against Zaydism, the branch of Islam that the Houthis practice.

The Houthi movement takes its name from the Houthi family, whose home province, Saada, in the north of Yemen, has always enjoyed a degree of autonomy. (A long-serving State Department employee remembers visiting an open-air arms market there soon after Saleh came to power. He was told that he could order a Polish tank.) In a photograph of the family taken in the nineteen-nineties, Badreddin al-Houthi, a small man with dark eyes and the traditional white turban of an imam, is dwarfed by his sons, who surround him. At the beginning of the nineties, Badreddin began to organize the Houthi clan to counter the Salafi movement around Saada.

Badreddin had four wives and at least thirteen sons, who set up popular summer camps, which, by the mid-nineties, had attracted some twenty thousand people. The camps, using rhetoric borrowed from Hezbollah, in Lebanon, and its Iranian backers, promoted Zaydi Islam. They also embraced the causes of Shiites, whom they saw as being oppressed by Sunnis around the Middle East and North Africa. Badreddin's sons screened videos of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah. In the mid-nineties, Badreddin's eldest son, Hussein, travelled to Qom, a Shiite center of learning in Iran, where he reportedly began developing ties to the Iranian regime. When he returned to Yemen, he started denouncing the U.S. and Israel. He founded Ansar Allah, the political movement that came to be known as the Houthis. In January, 2002, he delivered "A Scream in the Face of

the Arrogant,” a speech that ended with a slogan that is now chanted by Houthis, and which, in red and green Arabic letters, adorns fighters’ assault rifles:

God is great!  
Death to America!  
Death to Israel!  
A curse on the Jews!  
Victory for Islam!

Saleh, who had begun receiving weapons and equipment from the U.S., in exchange for promising to oppose terrorism, found this anti-Americanism untenable, and sent troops to the north. In June, 2004, Hussein took refuge in the mountains and began a guerrilla war. Saleh’s troops found the cave in which he was hiding, poured gasoline inside, and set it on fire. Hussein was soon captured and, in September, Saleh’s government announced that he had been killed, and hung posters of his corpse around Saada.

In the following decade, the Houthis fought six wars with Saleh’s government. “Those wars really were brutal,” Bernard Haykel, a scholar of the Middle East who visited Saada at the time, told me. They “pushed the Houthis to the edge of despair: huge numbers of casualties, lots of generally displaced people.” During this period, the Saudis largely ignored Yemen. “I think that a vacuum was created that was filled by Iran and Hezbollah,” Haykel said. “Lots of Houthis and Zaydis were going back and forth to Beirut and also to Iran.” Still, Iranian investment was limited. As Gregory Gause, an expert on Saudi Arabia who teaches at Texas A. & M., said, “The Houthis wanted to be affiliated with the Iranians much more than the Iranians wanted to be affiliated with them.”

In 2009, at Saleh’s request, the Saudis began attacking the Houthis. Abdulqader Hilal had led efforts at mediation with the Houthis, but he had resigned after he was accused of sending a sweet cake to a rebel leader. The Houthis were more useful to Saleh as enemies: a leaked State Department cable shows that he tried to kill one of his generals, who he thought posed a threat to his power, by telling the Royal Saudi Air Force that his headquarters was a Houthi target; multiple reports from soldiers indicate that Saleh allowed

the Houthis to rearm, and even left them weaponry.

At the same time, Saleh told the U.S. that he was being undermined by the Iranians, and he requested more funding. “The Houthis are your enemies, too,” Saleh told John Brennan, President Obama’s deputy national-security adviser, when he visited that year. “Iran is trying to settle old scores against the U.S.” Seche noted that, since 2002, the U.S. had spent more than a hundred and fifteen million dollars equipping Saleh’s forces.

These days, Hezbollah’s and Iran’s relationship with the Houthis is no secret. Hassan Nasrallah and Abdelmalik al-Houthi, the current head of the movement, praise each other in videos posted online. Iran has not admitted to arming the Houthis, but I recently asked a senior Iranian diplomat whether his country was supporting the Houthis. “Iran has its own self-interest in the region,” he told me. When I pressed him, he smiled and replied, “Iran is no saint.”

**I**n early 2011, April Alley, a researcher for the International Crisis Group, was sitting with Abdulqader Hilal at a friend’s house, where he was hosting a khat-chewing gathering. On TV, protesters in Tunisia were demanding that their President step down. It was the beginning of the Arab Spring. “We were all debating what it would mean for Yemen, exactly,” Alley said. “And I remember him saying it wouldn’t be the same.” Yemen’s situation differed from that of countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where authority was centralized, and most of the weapons were held by the military. Yemen had the second-highest level of civilian gun ownership in the world, and the armed forces had divided loyalties. “Yemen is different going into all these things,” Hilal said.

Protesters gathered in Sana’a, and a violent year followed, in which government troops shot demonstrators and Saleh was wounded in a bomb attack. In February, 2012, he stepped down. Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, a diminutive bureaucrat who had served as Vice-President, began a two-year term. But the Houthis, who had participated in the uprising against Saleh, argued that power-sharing reforms endorsed by Hadi unfairly re-

moved the northern regions’ access to the sea. They started pushing southward, out of their traditional homeland.

After Saleh left office, Abdulqader Hilal was appointed mayor of Sana’a. In 2014, when the Houthis began fighting Sunni Islamists on the outskirts of the capital, he led a negotiating team to enforce a truce that both sides had signed. “We just climbed the mountain to talk to them, and reminded them of what the agreement had been,” his son Hussein told me. “We were successful to stop this round of the war.”

A couple of months later, Saleh resurfaced, having performed a remarkable feat of political acrobatics: after leaving office, he had begun secretly collaborating with the Houthis. With his help, the Houthis invaded Sana’a, where, under the guise of fighting corruption, they began to install their leaders in key positions. After the Houthis took Sana’a, Hilal complained that their forces were stealing municipal equipment. When his car was stolen at a checkpoint, he briefly resigned. Hadi, who, though under house arrest, was still technically the head of state, refused his resignation. Hilal used his position to negotiate the release of high-profile officials who were being held by the Houthis. “We were expecting at any time that the Houthis might also keep my father from going outside his home,” Hussein said. “But that didn’t happen.”

In March, 2015, Hadi managed to escape, fleeing south. The Saudis, along with the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, and seven other Arab and African countries, began bombing Yemen, with the stated aim of restoring Hadi to the Presidency. In Washington and Riyadh, Saudi diplomats and soldiers assured their U.S. counterparts that the war would be over within six weeks. A U.N. Security Council resolution legitimized their intervention.

Some officials in Washington were skeptical of the Saudis’ plans, however. “I think they had a slightly rosier interpretation of how quickly the military effort would be successful,” Nitin Chadda, who was an adviser on national security to the White House, told me. The Saudis had been “choreographing” their desire to take steps against the Houthis, because they were uncomfortable with the idea of an Iranian proxy



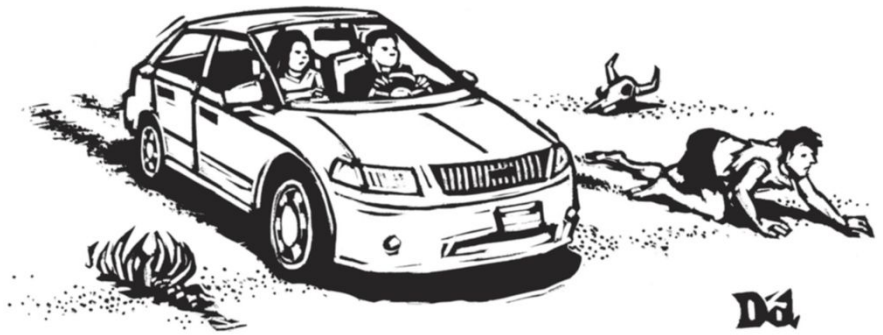
on their border, he said. But the specific plans to attack Yemen were not communicated to the U.S. Within D.C. circles, Chadda said, “there was certainly frustration” that the Saudis had acted so quickly, without clearly defining their long-term objectives.

In May, Andrew Exum was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy. “When I arrived, I sensed a lot of frustration,” he told me. The Administration was unsure about whether it wanted to be involved in the war. “Are we supposed to help the Saudis win or not? I don’t think we ever made our mind up there.”

Hilal decided to remain mayor of Sana’a, because he was concerned for the inhabitants, Hussein told me. “We’re talking about four million lives, we’re talking about people from everywhere in Yemen,” he said. “If he left office, things would be under the control of Houthis,” who had no experience running large metropolitan areas. In speeches to citizens, Hilal urged a kind of Blitz spirit: “Keep going for the glory of Yemen, for the ascendance of Yemen, for the stability of Yemen, for the revival of Yemen.”

The Saudis pounded Saada day and night, using bombs and cluster munitions, but they didn’t manage to dislodge the Houthis. Exum told me, “It was always going to be exceptionally difficult for the Saudis and the Emirates to achieve a desired political outcome through the use of primarily air forces.” Apart from a couple of skirmishes, the Saudis used no ground troops. On May 8th, a spokesperson for the Saudi Army declared the entire city of Saada and a nearby area to be “military targets.” Within two months, air strikes had destroyed two hundred and twenty-six buildings in the city.

In November, 2015, despite American skepticism toward the Saudi war plan and evidence of heavy civilian casualties, the Obama Administration agreed to a giant weapons sale totaling \$1.29 billion. The Saudis were authorized to buy seven thousand and twenty Paveway-II bombs. By the end of Obama’s Presidency, the U.S. had offered more than a hundred and fifteen billion dollars’ worth of arms to Saudi Arabia, the largest amount under any



*“Maybe he’s not leading us back to his parking space.”*

President, including warships, air-defense systems, and tanks.

The history of large-scale arms sales to Saudi Arabia dates to the late sixties, when U.S. weapons manufacturers realized that the Arab-Israeli conflicts of the era were being fought with Soviet and French arms. “For our defense companies, it was very frustrating,” Rachel Bronson, the author of “Thicker Than Oil,” a 2006 book on U.S.-Saudi relations, told me. The arms manufacturers lobbied the U.S. government, contending that arms sales were good policy. After all, U.S. experts would have to assemble and maintain the weapons, which could theoretically be dismantled if the Saudis were pursuing anti-U.S. policies. It was also good business: in 2016, the maintenance contract for the Royal Saudi Air Force’s two hundred and thirty F-15 fighter jets alone was worth \$2.5 billion.

The Obama Administration saw Saudi Arabia both as a bulwark against terrorism and as a counterbalance to Iran. In “Kings and Presidents,” a book on the history of U.S.-Saudi relations, the former C.I.A. officer Bruce Riedel writes that “no president since Franklin Roosevelt courted Saudi Arabia as zealously as did Obama.” Not only did Obama authorize more arms sales than any other U.S. President; he visited Saudi Arabia more frequently than any of his predecessors. On his first trip to the Middle East, Riyadh was his first stop.

But, during the Arab Spring, the Saudis became angered by Obama’s failure to support their allies in Egypt, Tunisia, and Bahrain. The nuclear deal with Iran, signed in mid-2015, upset them

further. “The Obama Administration was legitimately worried that a major fissure between the United States and Saudi Arabia could weaken the Iran deal,” Chris Murphy, a Democratic senator from Connecticut, who has opposed the U.S. government’s policy in Yemen, told me. “I think these arms sales were a way to placate the Saudis.”

The Obama Administration found itself entangled in the complexities of a war that involved so many regional players. The confusion extended to humanitarian concerns. Jeremy Konyndyk, at the time the director of USAID’s office of U.S. foreign-disaster assistance, told me that it often seemed as if the Saudis were thwarting efforts to get food to Yemen’s starving populace. Another former senior Administration official told me that the U.S. government spent four million dollars on cranes to unload relief ships at the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeidah, but the coalition, which had blockaded Yemen, did not allow the cranes into the country.

U.S. officials tried to help the Saudis improve their targeting. They eventually expanded a “no strike” list to include thirty-three thousand targets. “We broadened and broadened and broadened that list over time as the Saudis kept striking things that we would have thought they wouldn’t strike,” Konyndyk told me. The State Department sent an expert, Larry Lewis, to Saudi Arabia. When a civilian target was hit, Lewis wanted to help the Saudis implement ways of investigating the incident, to “avoid the same kind of thing happening again,” he said. Lower-ranking Saudis seemed pained by the

casualties. “There was definitely a feeling that, of course we want to protect civilians, you know, we’re good Muslims,” Lewis said. The Saudi leadership was less concerned; as Lewis put it, from the rank of lieutenant colonel upward “there was less pressure for change.”

In the last months of the Obama Administration, Secretary of State John Kerry tried to mediate between the Houthi-Saleh alliance and the Saudi-backed government. Hilal and Ruwayshan were involved in efforts to negotiate peace. But the meetings collapsed, owing first to Houthi intransigence and then to Hadi’s resistance to a U.N. road map to the negotiations. As Peter Salisbury, a fellow of Chatham House, the British policy institute, told me, the Houthis have few incentives to negotiate, because, “from their perspective, they’re doing the best they’ve ever done.” U.S. officials also noted Iran’s open support for the Houthis. “They were basically waving at our surveillance aircraft,” one official told me. In retrospect, this seems to have been a calculated move. “Remember that the Iranians in Yemen will always get a phenomenally high return on investments,” Salisbury said. “Let’s say they’re spending ten, twenty, thirty million dollars a year on Yemen. The Saudis are spending billions of dollars a year.”

The funeral-hall strike that killed Hilal appalled the U.S. officials who had been working with the coalition to reduce civilian casualties. The Saudi government initially denied responsibility for the bombing. On October 9th, a U.S. spokesman made an unusually harsh statement, saying, “U.S. security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check.” A few days later, the coalition admitted that it had dropped

the bombs, but blamed bad intelligence from its Yemeni partners. The informants had erroneously indicated that Saleh was in the hall: the leader’s security detail had entered, but Saleh had remained outside.

The U.S. saw the Saudi explanation as insufficient. The strike “so clearly symbolized much of what was wrong” with U.S. military assistance to Saudi Arabia, Robert Malley, a special assistant to the President at the time, told me. At the end of 2016, the U.S. halted the sale of precision-guided missiles to Saudi Arabia. “It got to the point where the Saudi intervention was going so off the rails it was destroying the country,” Max Bergmann, a former State Department official, said. Opposition to the Saudi-led coalition grew in Congress. Ted Lieu, a Democratic representative from California, had served as a judge advocate general in the Air Force. “These look like war crimes to me,” Lieu told me. “I decided to try to help those who don’t have a voice. There were really no lobbyists out there championing civilians in Yemen.” In July, the House had passed the Lieu Amendment, which increased the obligation for the State Department and the Department of Defense to report whether the Saudi-led coalition was prosecuting the war in a way that abided by their humanitarian commitments.

A month after the funeral-hall strike, Donald Trump was elected President. In January, when he was inaugurated, he promised a review of Obama’s foreign policy. “Their objective is a strong relationship with the Saudis, a strong relationship with the Emiratis,” Bruce Riedel told me. “Yemen is just not a pri-

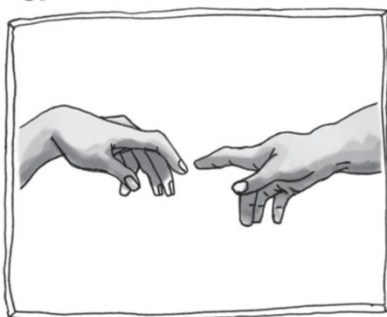
ority.” The Saudis lobbied Trump’s National Security Council for the cranes purchased by USAID for Hodeidah to be returned. The National Security Council acceded, and the cranes have been sent to storage, at the U.S.’s expense. The former senior Administration official told me, “Since January, you’ve seen the humanitarian situation in Yemen fall off a cliff, and I don’t think it’s a coincidence.” According to Rajat Madhok, of UNICEF, the cholera crisis and the malnutrition are unprecedented. “‘Bad’ would be an understatement,” Madhok told me. “You’re looking at a health collapse, a systemic collapse.”

Trump’s connections to Saudi Arabia are hardly hidden. During the 2016 election, his organization opened eight companies there, which he subsequently closed after their existence was made public. Shortly after his Inauguration, in January of last year, as Isaac Arnsdorf reported for Politico, lobbyists for Saudi Arabia checked into a Trump hotel and ended up spending more than a quarter of a million dollars. In April, Michael Cohen, Trump’s personal lawyer, signed on to a partnership with a law and lobbying firm retained by Saudi Arabia.

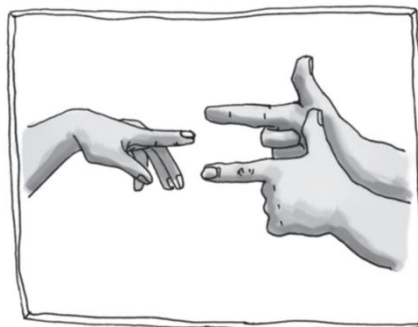
In May, Trump travelled to Saudi Arabia on his first foreign trip. Amid great pageantry, he posed for a strange photograph with the King, their hands atop a glowing orb, and performed a traditional sword dance. According to documents obtained by the Daily Beast, the Saudis presented Trump with lavish gifts, including robes lined with tiger and cheetah fur. While there, Trump announced a hundred-and-ten-billion-dollar arms deal. Reversing Obama’s decision, precision-guided missiles were included in the package. Trump said that the deal would see “hundreds of billions of dollars of investments into the United States and jobs, jobs, jobs.”

Since the election, Saudi Arabia has increased its lobbying presence in Washington. Some of the lobbyists have even found their way into Trump’s government: soon after being hired as a commissioner for White House fellowships, Rick Hohlt, a Republican political consultant from Indiana, filed forms indicating that he had received nearly half a million dollars from the government of

GOD GOES DOWN LOW



ADAM IS TOO SLOW



Maddie Dai



Saudi Arabia. Hohlt declined to speak with me, but he told the Center for Public Integrity that he was involved in lobbying congressional officials about weapons sales.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, is also associated with the Saudis. He has flown to the kingdom repeatedly for secret talks. In a relationship fostered by the Emiratis and by the Lebanese-American businessman Thomas Barrack, who is a friend of Trump's, Kushner has grown close to King Salman's thirty-two-year-old son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, a chief proponent of the war in Yemen. (Gause, the professor at Texas A. & M. University, told me, "This is his war, it was his idea, he owns it.") Kushner negotiated the new arms deal. As initially reported by the *Times*, he called Marilyn Hewson, the chair of Lockheed Martin, and asked her to lower the price of a radar system. According to a number of current and former government officials and weapons experts, Kushner's action was irregular. It was also bad dealmaking. "Usually, a U.S. official would be lobbying a foreign government on behalf of U.S. industry, not vice versa," Andrew Exum told me. "That just struck me as odd."

As Riedel and others pointed out, however, the deal isn't all that it appears to be. Riedel said that the agreement doesn't actually commit the Saudis to purchasing arms. With falling oil prices, he said, "where is Saudi Arabia going to get a hundred and ten billion dollars these days to buy more weapons?"

Still, a parsing of Trump's words is terrifying; when he visited Riyadh, he made no mention of human rights. As the senior State Department official told me, "The Trump Administration has decided to de-link the human-rights dialogue from the security-support dialogue."

Senator Murphy told me that the U.S.'s support for the coalition will prove detrimental to the country's interests. "Our first job is to protect our citizenry, and, to me, these arms sales put U.S. lives in jeopardy," he said. Dafna H. Rand, a Middle East expert who covered Yemen for the State Department under Obama, said, "The longer this war goes on, the longer there's a risk of deep resentment against the

United States that will be radicalizing and lead to full-strain extremism." The Yemenis I spoke to expressed frustration with the U.S.'s role in the war. "We used to love and appreciate the U.S., because a large number of Yemenis live there," Hebari, the chanter, told me. The war has now changed that calculus. "What appears to me is that the U.S. is funding and Saudi Arabia is the implementer."

In August, the alliance between the Houthis and Saleh began to show cracks. The Houthis murdered a top Saleh aide at a checkpoint; in response, to prove his popularity, Saleh threw a huge celebration in Sana'a, with giant banners and blaring music. Sixteen hundred poems were composed in his honor for the event. But his power had been diminished by the conflict. "President Saleh used to say that ruling Yemen was like dancing on the heads of snakes," Nadwa Al-Dawsari, a Yemeni expert in conflict resolution, told me. "Well, now one of the snakes—the Houthis—has bitten him." On the morning of December 4th, a group of Houthi soldiers raided Saleh's house in Sana'a; later that day, a video was released showing his dead body in the bed of a pickup truck.

The State Department insists that it is doing everything it can to bring an end to the war and to reduce civilian casualties. "Everybody, including the Saudi leadership, agrees the war has gone on too long, proved too costly, killed too many lives, caused too much humanitarian damage, too much infrastructure damage," Timothy Lenderking, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State who oversees Yemen policy, told me. "The Saudis are not going to get everything that they want, nor are the Houthis."

But since President Trump's visit to Riyadh, and the new precision-guided-munitions sale, the pace of the coalition's bombing raids has increased. In May, the Saudi foreign minister committed to expanding the no-strike list in Yemen and promised to abide by the laws of armed conflict. But, in a single week this past summer, some sixty civilians were killed in Saudi-led strikes. On August 23rd, coalition bombs killed around fifty farmers who were staying

at a hotel. A journalist who visited the site said that the ceiling of the building turned black with charred blood.

Two days later, a Saudi strike, aimed at what the spokesman for the coalition later said was a Houthi command-and-control center, hit an apartment building in Sana'a. Mohamed Abdullah Sabrah, a forty-two-year-old sales supervisor at a food-importing company, lives in an apartment about thirty yards from the building that was struck. He said that the area had housed a missile-storage depot on a nearby mountain before the Houthis came to Sana'a. Since the beginning of the war, he told me, the Saudis had frequently

bombed the neighborhood. Yet he hadn't seen trucks or soldiers arriving for a long time. "It would be impossible for Ansar Allah"—the name for the Houthis—"to be stupid enough to keep weapons inside that place," Sabrah said.

On the night of the bombing, at around 2 A.M., he heard the thud of ordnance on the mountain. "We went to a corridor in my apartment that has no windows or doors, for fear of glass and shrapnel," he told me. "We hid there. I was holding my granddaughter, and my wife was holding my daughter."

Another blast followed. "Suddenly, the whole world turned upside down, the building was shaking beneath us, and shrapnel came to us," Sabrah went on. It was as if some malevolent spirit had rushed through the room. "Nothing was left. My furniture, the cabinets—every wooden thing was broken."

In the rubble outside, Sabrah saw what he described as "bits and parts" of human beings. "A woman used to live with her children in one floor of the building. They used to get up in the morning and sell boiled eggs," Sabrah told me, his anger rising. "What danger did these children pose to the coalition? What danger did they pose by selling eggs in the street?"

When I asked Sabrah how he felt about U.S. involvement in the war, he replied, "America is the main sponsor of all that is happening to us." He had reached this conclusion only recently. "The Gulf countries are merely tools in its hands." ♦



## BLOOD AND JUSTICE

*Family loyalty made a Mafia family strong, but its treatment of women was its undoing.*

BY ALEX PERRY

In Calabria, Lea Garofalo's disappearance required no explanation. The local Mafia, known as the 'Ndrangheta, had a term for people who simply vanished: *lupara bianca*, or "white shotgun," a killing that left no corpse. Residents of Pagliarelle, the mountain village where Garofalo's family lived, added her name to a list of victims who were never to be mentioned again. In three decades, thirty-five local men and women had been murdered in Mafia vendettas, including Garofalo's father, her uncle, and her brother.

Garofalo, born into the 'Ndrangheta, had eloped with a cocaine smuggler named Carlo Cosco when she was sixteen. The next year, they had a daughter, Denise, and Garofalo implored Cosco to leave the Mob. Instead, a few years later, she witnessed her husband and his brother kill a man in Milan. "You don't live," she once said, of the constrained existence of an 'Ndrangheta wife. "You just survive in some way. You dream about something, anything—because nothing's worse than that life." In desperation, Garofalo collaborated with prosecutors to put Cosco in jail. For thirteen years, she and Denise moved from one small town to another, in and out of witness protection, as his men pursued them. One night, she looked outside the window of the apartment where they were staying and saw that her Fiat had been set on fire.

But, in 2009, Cosco, by then out of prison, seemed ready to reconcile. He called off his men, and invited Garofalo and their daughter to join him in Milan. They spent four days on a quiet family vacation, wandering along the canals, window-shopping, visiting a tanning salon. Later, in court, Denise spoke of eating dinner together each night, as a family. Her father, she said, was showing how "caring and kind" he

was. On the last night of the vacation, Lea vanished; her body was found years later. Afterward, her sister Marisa described her disappearance as almost inevitable. "Lea wanted freedom," she said. "But for people who follow the 'Ndrangheta, this choice is considered very eccentric, very serious. You want to be free? You pay with your life."

At the time of the disappearance, the Mafia prosecutor Alessandra Cerreti had recently arrived in Calabria. She was forty-one, and her appearance—slim and meticulously dressed, with short, stylishly trimmed hair—emphasized cool professionalism. Cerreti had grown up in the Mafia stronghold of Sicily, but she had trained in Milan, where the Mob was considered an embarrassment and a scourge. When she arrived in Calabria, in April, 2009, she was struck by how many Calabrians still accepted the 'Ndrangheta as an immutable fact of life. Even many of her fellow-magistrates seemed to feel that it was too powerful to stop.

By 2010, the Italian state had enough evidence from years of surveillance to suggest that the 'Ndrangheta—whose name, pronounced "n-drahng-ghe-ta," was derived from a Greek word meaning "honorable men"—was running seventy per cent of the cocaine trade in Europe. Other investigations indicated that it brokered arms deals with criminals, rebels, and terrorists around the world, including fighters on opposing sides of the Syrian civil war; extorted billions of euros from businesses; and swindled the Italian state and the European Union out of tens of billions more, particularly through contracts for roads, ports, wind and solar power, and even the disposal of nuclear waste, which it dumped at sea off Somalia. The bosses ran an empire that operated in fifty countries, from Albania to Togo, linking a Mob war in Toronto to a lawyer's assassination in Melbourne,

and vast real-estate investments in Brussels to a cocaine-delivering pizzeria in Queens called Cucino a Modo Mio ("I Cook My Own Way").

Prosecutors estimated the 'Ndrangheta's annual global revenue at as much as a hundred billion dollars, the equivalent of 3.5 per cent of Italy's G.D.P., but acknowledged that the real figure was impossible to gauge. Wiretaps recorded its operatives talking about sacks of cash buried in the hills. In more sophisticated efforts at concealment, tens of billions of euros were routed through restaurants and construction companies, boutique offshore banks and large investment houses, even the Dutch flower market and the European chocolate trade. The 'Ndrangheta was so successful at laundering money that other criminals—from China, Nigeria, Russia, and elsewhere—paid the organization to do it on their behalf, providing huge sums to manage. Around the world, prosecutors said, millions of people lived in the 'Ndrangheta's buildings, worked for its businesses, shopped in its stores, ate in its pizzerias, traded its companies' shares, did business with its banks, and elected politicians it funded. It was difficult to imagine another enterprise with such influence over so many lives, yet almost no one had ever heard of it.

The organization's economic sophistication belied its social coarseness. The 'Ndrangheta hid in shabby hillside villages, dressing like orange farmers and working out of bunkers beneath their homes. Each family was a miniature fiefdom, in which women were little more than vassals of family honor. Fathers married their daughters off as teen-agers to seal clan alliances. Women who did not uphold exacting codes of respect were beaten, often in the street. Wives who were unfaithful, even to the memory of a husband dead for fifteen years, were killed, typically by





SOURCE: FILIPPO MONTEFORTE/AFP/GETTY

*The prosecutor Alessandra Cerreti believed that discontented Mafia women could bring down the organization.*

their closest male relatives, and their bodies were often burned or dissolved in acid to be sure of erasing the family shame.

Italian prosecutors conceded that 'Ndrangheta women led tragic lives. But many didn't consider the women to be of much use in their fight; they were just more victims. "The women don't matter," the prosecutors told Cerreti. As a woman working for the Italian state, Cerreti knew something about patriarchies that belittled women even as they relied on them. She believed that many judicial officials missed the importance of 'Ndrangheta women, because most of them were men, and "Italian men underestimate all women," she said.

The team that she joined in Calabria, run by Giuseppe Pignatone, the chief of the region's anti-Mafia directorate, and his deputy, Michele Prestipino, was an exception. "I found fertile territory," Cerreti said. The team believed that, in a criminal organization structured around family, women had to have a substantial role. Their most important duty was to raise the next generation with an unbending belief in the code of *omertà* and a violent loathing of outsiders. "Without women performing this role, there would be no 'Ndrangheta," Cerreti told me. (We spoke for seven hours, during 2015 and 2016, for the book from which this account is adapted. Cerreti eventually declined further interviews.)

At a time when prosecutors were just beginning to understand "how big the 'Ndrangheta had become and how much we had underestimated it," Cerreti pointed out, female informants were an invaluable source of knowledge. The prosecutor who had taken Lea Garofalo's statements, Sandro Dolce, described her as a uniquely cooperative witness, saying, "She said everything she knew. She hid nothing." But the state had failed to corroborate her evidence, and then, rather than admit its failure, had concluded that her testimony was worthless. She was ejected from witness protection, and within a year she was dead.

Cerreti was convinced that other Mafia women were unhappy with their lives and with their children's prospects. What if her team could convince them that the state could give them a new

life in return for their testimony? "It would break the chain," she said. "It would remove the guardians of the 'Ndrangheta's traditions." The Mafia's violent bigotry was a fatal weakness, she argued: "Freeing their women is the way to bring down the 'Ndrangheta."

When Cerreti was a child, in Sicily, across the Strait of Messina from Calabria, the Cosa Nostra was a state within a state, extracting taxes by extortion, dividing up public contracts



among Mafia companies, settling disputes, and delivering punishments. To outsiders, Sicilians claimed that the Mafia was a fable, a groundless slur. Among themselves, its proponents characterized it as an ancient brotherhood built on courage, honor, and sacrifice.

Not long after Cerreti was born, Francis Ford Coppola arrived in the nearby town of Savoca, to direct scenes for "The Godfather." For years afterward, tourists showed up, asking for directions to "the Godfather's village." Cerreti always detested the romance that surrounded the Mafia; she never understood why anyone would celebrate tyranny and killing. In grade school, when a teacher assigned students an essay about what they wanted to be when they grew up, Cerreti wrote that she wanted to be a prosecutor, putting mafiosi in jail.

In the nineteen-eighties, a war known as *la mattanza*—"the slaughter"—erupted between rival clans, and about a thousand Sicilians died. Mafiosi were shot in their cars, in restaurants, on the sidewalk. Politicians and law enforcement became targets, too. In 1992, the Cosa Nostra killed the celebrated magistrate Giovanni Falcone, with a car bomb that registered on Sicily's earthquake detectors. Falcone's death was to Italians what John F. Kennedy's was to Americans: everyone can remember where she was when she

heard the news. To Cerreti, the killings provided motivation. "Their deaths made us stronger," she said.

Cerreti began studying law in 1987 and qualified as a magistrate in 1997, quickly becoming a specialist in organized crime. In the next decade, she investigated the Mafia's expansion across Northern Italy, uncovered billion-euro tax evasion in the art world, and sat as a judge in a high-profile terror-recruitment case. The threat to her life required stringent security measures: a steel office door, an armor-plated car, and four bodyguards, who accompanied her twenty-four hours a day. It was difficult to meet friends and family, or dine out, or go shopping; her movements had to be planned a day in advance. "We go nowhere with crowds, because of the risk to others," Cerreti said. She is married, but keeps her husband's identity secret, in order to protect him. They have no children. If they did, Cerreti said, "I would have to fear for them. As we are, I have no fear."

To preserve her perspective, Cerreti kept her distance from mafiosi and from their victims, describing herself as driven by "stubbornness." Her office is filled with neat stacks of files and books but has only a few decorations: a photograph (ubiquitous among Italian magistrates) of the murdered prosecutors from Sicily; a pencil sketch of Justice; and a collection of snow globes, precisely arranged in a glass cabinet. Cerreti knew that she could seem aloof, insistent on procedure and discipline. She told herself that passion was for the Mafia; she had to be forensic and self-possessed.

By the time she began working as a prosecutor, a generation of Cosa Nostra bosses was in jail. But, as the campaign in Sicily abated, a new threat arose in Calabria. For most of its existence, the 'Ndrangheta had been considered little more than a group of country bandits, but during the *mattanza* it saw an opportunity to take over the Cosa Nostra's narco-business. It paid the Sicilians' debts to Colombian cocaine cartels, effectively buying them out as partners. In the first decade of the new millennium, the European market for cocaine doubled, to a hundred and twenty-four tons a year, and the

drug became as middle class as Volvos and farmers' markets.

A new wave of prosecutors was dispatched to Calabria to fight the 'Ndrangheta, and Cerreti volunteered to join them. Her first posting, as a judge in Reggio Calabria, wasn't the investigative role she wanted, but it gave her time to research her new adversary. Assembling court records, academic studies, police intelligence, and volumes of folklore, Cerreti found that much about the 'Ndrangheta felt familiar.

Like the Cosa Nostra, the 'Ndrangheta originated in the tumultuous decades after Italy became a nation. Giuseppe Garibaldi united the Italian peninsula in 1861, but the country's regions remained distinct; the north prospered in commerce and trade, while the south declined, and millions of southerners emigrated. The provinces south of Rome came to be known as the Mezzogiorno, the land of the mid-day sun—a dry, torpid expanse stretching from Abruzzo to Lampedusa. The tip of the peninsula is little more than thornbush scrub and mountains, populated by shepherds and small-boat fishermen. When Cerreti's escorts drove her out of Reggio, she passed a succession of empty towns, deserted villages, and abandoned farms. The countryside looked like the aftermath of a disaster—which, if you considered centuries of destitution a disaster, it was.

Still, there was a hard beauty to the place. In the mountains, wolves and wild boar roamed forests of beech, cedar, and holly oak. Below the peaks, woods gave way to vines and pastures, followed by estuary flats filled with citrus orchards. The Calabrians, clustered in ancient mountain towns that were cut off for months in winter by snowdrifts, were poor, resilient, and resolutely autonomous. Some families still spoke Grecanico, a Greek dialect left behind by the Byzantines in the eleventh century. The men hunted boar with shotguns and swordfish with harpoons. The women spiced sardines with hot peppers and air-dried trout, to be turned into a pungent brown stew.

Newspapers called the region "the Greece of Italy," a way of describing its blighted economy; in the first decade of the twenty-first century, unemploy-

ment among the young, at more than fifty per cent, was among the highest in Europe. But Calabria had experienced one form of development. In the eighteen-eighties, according to the historian John Dickie, gangs of inmates known as *picciotti* emerged from the region's prisons and began enforcing a system of intimidation and extortion that quickly dominated the local economy. Organized into cells called *'ndrine*, each with its own turf, ranks, and boss, *picciotti* initially restricted themselves to local matters: appropriating a neighbor's field for the boss's cows, extracting protection money (*pizzo*) from the neighborhood tavern or brothel, or threatening the occasional bureaucrat foolish enough to levy taxes. By the late nineteenth century, enterprising *picciotti* were also engaging in smuggling, cattle rustling, and highway robbery.

With their earnings, they started buying favors from the carabinieri and bribing officials. In time, the families diversified into kidnapping and loansharking, and infiltrated the state, embezzling funds and diverting contracts to Mafia-owned businesses, such as construction firms and trash collectors. Elections were rigged, and more allegiances bought. Those who could not be corrupted or intimidated were beaten, firebombed, or killed.

As the 'Ndrangheta prospered, it built a cult around itself. By the early twentieth century, it was tracing its origins to three Spanish knights: Osso, Mastrosso, and Carcagnosso—brothers who had fled their homeland after avenging their sister's rape. Landing on a tiny island off Sicily's west coast and taking shelter in sea caves, they nursed a sense of righteous grievance



*"If you could spend an hour with anyone, living or dead, who would it be?"*





## HOW THEY WERE NAMED

for thirty uncomfortably damp years. Eventually, their discussions became the basis of a brotherhood founded on mutual defense. With the society sworn to protect all members, no outsider would think of shaming them again. Osso sailed to Sicily and founded the Cosa Nostra, Mastrosso travelled to Naples and set up the Camorra, and Carcagnosso went to Calabria, where he established the 'Ndrangheta, in the name of St. Michael the Archangel.

The story is, as Cerreti knew, bunk. The Calabrian Mafia is not hundreds of years old but barely a hundred and fifty; the story of the three knights is common to criminal groups around the world. But the 'Ndranghetisti adored ritual, and gathered in solemn circles to witness initiates pricking their fingers over a picture of St. Michael. Blood was particularly revered. More than once, they had been seen rushing to the corpse of an assassinated boss, dipping a handkerchief in his blood, and pressing it to their lips. The 'Ndran-

gheta also recruited almost exclusively through family: you were either born into it or you married in.

In her research, Cerreti found evidence to back the team's intuition about the role of women in the organization. At times, they acted as messengers between fugitives or imprisoned comrades, passing along tiny, folded notes—*pizzini*—written in a code of glyphs. Some women acted as paymasters and bookkeepers. In rare cases, when a man was jailed or killed, his wife became his de-facto replacement. A few took part in the violence. In surveillance transcripts, Cerreti read about a meeting to discuss the death of a 'Ndranghetista killed in an internecine feud. The men proposed killing every male member of the rival gang. Then a woman from the clan spoke up. "Kill them *all*," she said. "Even the women. Even the kids."

This co-opting of family, in a country where it was close to sacred, demonstrated a kind of genius. The 'Ndrangheta understood that family itself could

be a source of corruption. The love of a mother for a son, or of a daughter for a father, could persuade the most law-abiding to abandon their principles. And, since the 'Ndrangheta made itself indistinguishable from Calabria's traditional, family-centered culture, anyone thinking of leaving had to fear abandoning everything she'd ever known.

Many prosecutors rejected the idea that women could be persuaded to testify against their relatives. "This was another form of prejudice—the belief that no one, and certainly not a woman, is going to talk about their own family," Cerreti said. She conceded that it would take unusual bravery. But, she argued, "when justice shows people that it is strong and that the state is present and can help you if you want to collaborate, then you find that collaborators appear." Prosecutors hoped to discover another Lea Garofalo. As it turned out, Cerreti found two.

By the precepts of clan rivalry, Giuseppina Pesce and Maria Concetta Cacciola were unlikely friends. The Pesces led the most powerful clan in the 'Ndrangheta stronghold of Rosarno, north of Reggio; the Cacciolas worked as muscle for their competitors, the Bellocos. The two families had plenty to fight over. Rosarno sat next to the port of Gioia Tauro, one of the biggest container facilities on the Mediterranean and a hub of the 'Ndrangheta cocaine empire. The town was an unkempt place of cinder-block warehouses and unfinished houses with glassless windows, but even minor Mafia families there were thought to have millions of euros stashed away. In Rosarno, the Pesces had total dominion. "They completely control their territory and their government," the prosecutor Michele Prestipino said. "People who live there accept that to get something they have to knock on the door of the Mafia and that there is no future other than what the Mafia sees."

When Giuseppina and Concetta were growing up, in the eighties, Rosarno was a hard place, where girls could be beaten for going outside unaccompanied. Pesce remembered watching Cacciola, at the age of eleven, get

dragged home by her hair by her brother, after he caught her playing with some local boys. As schoolgirls, though, they saw each other every day in the playground or on the street. The two were not much alike. Pesce wore bulky woollen V-necks or baggy work shirts, had no time for makeup, and wore her scruffy brown hair at whatever length kept it out of the way. Cacciola, a year younger, favored skinny jeans and half-buttoned blouses, styled her black hair in an undulating curl across her forehead, and wore lipstick and eyeliner like the older girls. “A sunny girl,” Pesce said later about Cacciola. “She was strong. She was an optimist. . . . She cared so much.”

As they grew older, their lives adhered to a prescribed course: marriage quickly followed by motherhood. Pesce left school at thirteen. At fourteen she eloped with a twenty-year-old ‘Ndranghetista named Rocco Palaia, and at fifteen she gave birth to the first of their three children. Soon Rocco was regularly beating her, mostly for speaking out of turn. “He beat me when I said what I thought,” she said later. “He attacked me to get me to shut up.” And it wasn’t long before he was arrested and jailed for Mafia association. Similarly, Cacciola, at thirteen, met a mafioso named Salvatore Figliuzzi. Within a few years, she had eloped with him, begun to endure his beatings (including one in which he held a gun to her head), and seen him hauled off to jail. She, too, eventually had three children with her husband.

It was ‘Ndrangheta custom to confine prisoners’ wives to the home, but the two women found ways to see each other, exchanging confidences as they dropped off their children at nursery school or sneaked visits after Pesce went to work at a family grocery store near Cacciola’s house. Still, Cacciola felt confined, and she described her sense of isolation in wistful notes to her husband. “I go out in the morning to take the children to school but I have no contact with anyone,” she wrote in 2007. “I’d pay anything, take anything, for a little peace.” Pesce, more assertive, found a way to negotiate a little freedom by joining the family business. She began running messages between bosses in jail and laundering

money. In time, she learned how the men in the family moved cocaine through the Gioia Tauro port. She learned which of the roadwork projects on the A3 highway north of Reggio belonged to the Pesces, and the locations around town where her husband had helped bury the family’s arsenal: rifles, pistols, and machine guns, stored in preparation for war. As an ‘Ndranghetista, Pesce had privileges. In restaurants, bills didn’t appear. In grocery stores, the manager would serve her personally. “I lived in this family,” she said later, in court. “I breathed these things—the superiority, the power.”

Deceived by a sense of impunity, or perhaps unable to resist the prospect of a little affection, in late 2009 Pesce began an affair with a man named Domenico Costantino, whom she had met at a family candied-fruit factory. “He was the first man who ever seemed to care for my children,” Pesce, who was then thirty-one, said. “The first man to respect me as a woman, the first who ever loved me.” Cacciola, restricted to the family home, found ways to escape online. “In the land of the ‘Ndrangheta, the Internet is an open window to a closed world,” Cerreti said. “It tends to provoke a kind of emotional explosion.” On Facebook, Cacciola struck up friendships with at least one man and tentatively began to flirt.

With these liaisons, Cacciola and Pesce risked bringing shame upon their families, which by custom had to be punished by death. In the Rosarno graveyard, the remains of Pesce’s grandfather, killed for having an affair, were clandestinely buried under the floor in the family’s chapel. Alongside him was the body of her cousin Annunziata Pesce, who had betrayed the ‘Ndrangheta by running off with a policeman. Kidnapped off the street in 1981, she was shot in the neck while her elder brother looked on.

The men of Rosarno were increasingly wary of betrayal. In 2009, prosecutors had begun putting more pressure on organized crime, especially on the smugglers who moved cocaine through Gioia Tauro. Numerous public officials, including Italy’s President,

Giorgio Napolitano, sent the Reggio authorities messages of solidarity. Italy had declared war on the ‘Ndrangheta.

Just before dawn on the first Sunday of 2010, a scooter sped through the streets of Reggio Calabria. Two figures leaned into the windshield, huddling against the cold. The driver had on tight jeans, a dark jacket, and a helmet with a visor. The passenger, a portly man, wore a striped jacket and cradled a bulky canvas bag in his arms.

For a few minutes, they followed the shoreline of the Messina Strait. Across the water, a string of white lights demarcated Sicily’s coastal road. Then they climbed toward the old town, until they reached the central piazza, where the driver allowed the bike to coast to rest in front of the city’s judicial offices. The passenger pulled his jacket around him as if he were lighting a cigarette. There was a spark. Flames licked up out of the bag. He ran toward the office gates, swinging the bag high to avoid the flames. The driver revved the engine and let the bike roll slowly down the hill. The passenger dropped the bag and ran back to the scooter, and the two sped off. Seconds later, the bag exploded.

The sound of the blast rolled out over the water, and the shockwave shattered windows. In a press conference hours later, a carabinieri commander announced that the bomb was a stick of dynamite attached to a gas cylinder—the kind of crude device familiar to anyone with experience of Southern Italy’s protection rackets. The explosion broke the building’s iron gates but otherwise had done little damage. The attack was meant to convey a message: the mafiosi intended to fight back.

At the time, Cerreti had recently been given the job she wanted—the lead anti-Mafia prosecutor for Gioia Tauro and Rosarno—and she toured the area for the first time. The signs of the ‘Ndrangheta’s influence were unmistakable. The clans, which dominated municipal contracts, had left Rosarno in disrepair. The trees by the roadside were dying, and their leaves were orange and brittle. The park was



just chalky pebbles and dry spiky weeds. The streets were strewn with trash, and the asphalt looked like spilled lava. Everything was covered with crude graffiti.

Drawing on years of carabinieri intelligence and on its own new investigations, Cerreti's team made its first strike against the Pesces in the early hours of April 26, 2010. Code-named Operation All Inside, it involved simultaneous raids in Rosarno, Reggio, Milan, and Bergamo, in which a total of thirty people were arrested. Reflecting the team's beliefs, the raids also took in seven women, including Pesce's mother, sister, cousin, grandmother, and great-grandmother, as well as Pesce herself. The charges included extortion, money laundering, loan-sharking, drug smuggling, Mafia association, and two counts of murder. The range of assets seized—a gas station, a car dealership, a food-distribution company, and a candy distributor—suggested involvement in every part of the town's commerce. A Rosarno radio station, Radio Olimpia, was confiscated after carabinieri discovered that jailed bosses were using its request show to communicate. A prisoner would submit a question—Was my appeal successful? Were my orders carried out?—and his family would call in and request one song to signal yes and another to signal no.

Pesce faced more than a decade in jail, but that wasn't what troubled her. The Calabrian newspapers reported that she had been detained with a man. "Someone who betrays and dishonors the family must be punished by death," she said. "It is a law." If she went to prison, or if she was killed, her children—Elisea, Gaetano, and Angela, who ranged in age from three to fifteen—would be raised by the 'Ndrangheta. A few years back, when Gaetano was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, the boy had replied "a policeman." His uncle beat him, then vowed to get him a gun, to remind him who he was. Pesce's fear, she wrote later, was that, "when I get out of jail, my son could already be in a juvenile detention center.... My two daughters will have to marry two 'Ndrangheta

men and be forced to follow them around."

In custody, Pesce was defiant: she refused to talk to prosecutors, and would not eat the prison food. At times, though, she seemed inconsolable. A few days after her arrest, she tried to hang herself, and three months later she slashed her wrists with a razor. "I couldn't stand the thought of my children without me," she said later, in court. "I wanted a way out."

The prosecutors were unmoved; if an 'Ndranghetista was suffering, they had done their job. And the mafiosi were doing little to encourage sympathy. In the months after the courthouse bombing, a shotgun cartridge was found on a prosecutor's windshield, and other officials discovered that their car wheels had been loosened. Giuseppe Pignatone, the head of the anti-Mafia directorate, got a call saying that a gift was waiting for him around the corner; it turned out to be a rocket launcher, left under a blanket in the street. The carabinieri, for their part, staged more raids, arresting three hundred people throughout the 'Ndrangheta hierarchy; the detainees included businessmen, lawyers, bankers, accountants, politicians, policemen, and public-health-care managers. The prize was the supreme capo, Domenico Oppedisano, eighty, whose arrest was greeted with a standing ovation in the Italian Senate.

When Cerreti heard about Pesce's suicide attempts, she felt little compassion. "I didn't believe she was sincere," she said. But, in October, a letter from Pesce arrived at the Palace of Justice, requesting a meeting without a lawyer present. Prosecutors understood that she was concerned that a defense lawyer in Calabria would be loyal to the Mafia; the letter suggested that she was considering testifying. Pignatone told Cerreti, "If you can make her talk, we'll have done in three years in Calabria what took us thirty years in Palermo."

On October 14th, the two sat across from each other in a meeting room in San Vittore prison, in Milan. "She looked at me with such loathing—such pride and resentment and hatred," Cerreti has said. "I represented the

state, which was ruining her life."

Cerreti had barely introduced herself when Pesce said that she wanted to be moved to a safe house, where she could see her children. In return, she would help the state catch some fugitive 'Ndrangheta bosses. "She wanted to give us a couple of names in exchange for her freedom," Cerreti said. It was a pathetic offer—and, in any case, prosecutors don't negotiate with gangsters. Cerreti closed her laptop and stood to leave.

Cerreti admitted later that she was bluffing: she would have listened to anything Pesce had to say. But Pesce was alarmed. She had expected to negotiate the 'Ndrangheta way: reveal little of what you have, affect nonchalance, and eventually extract as much as possible for as little as possible. Before Cerreti reached the door, Pesce cleared her throat. "Everything I testify to now," she said, "I do to give my children a different future."

Cerreti and Pesce began talking in San Vittore, then continued for several more months at a safe house, south of Rome, where Pesce and her children were placed. It wasn't just the scope of Pesce's knowledge that prolonged the talks. She revealed what she knew hesitantly, torn between loyalties to her children and to the family business. "She was desperate to be reunited with her kids," Cerreti has said. "But it was really hard for her to betray her relatives."

When Cerreti felt that Pesce was holding back on a sensitive matter—her marriage, her affair, the habits of the Pesce men—she asked male carabinieri in the room to leave, so that Pesce would feel less likely to be judged. Cerreti assured her that the government would protect her and her children. "I had to explain to her over and over that it's not normal that, if you cheat on your husband, then you have to die," she said. Pesce, as she spoke with Cerreti, grew calmer and more confident. In their talks, she provided a comprehensive view of her family's empire. At its heart, she said, an *'ndrina* was a collective. "They decided together, as a family, who took state contracts, who handled extortion, who oversaw the drug trade." Her grandmother's house often served as a base of operations.





The family would often discuss at length the delicate question of how much *pizzo* to charge. The younger men tended to squeeze as much as they could out of everyone. Once, the Pesces extorted tickets for the entire family from a visiting circus. The older men warned that driving a business to ruin served no one's interest. Another point of discussion was how to divide the take. Pesce saw many *piciotti* try to resist handing over their revenues to a common family pot, as required. Everyone agreed, however, that there could be no exceptions to paying *pizzo*. "An outsider can't say no," Pesce said. An 'Ndranghetista "would go and ask for money like he was doing people a favor."

Despite the 'Ndrangheta's power, its members operated in a state of constant suspicion. The police and the carabinieri tapped phones, took video of their houses from miles away, mounted secret cameras on the street, and buried bugs in Pesce's grandmother's garden. The family members, for their part, installed microphone detectors, jammers, and scanners but were often reduced to whispering and using sign language in their own homes. For many bosses, the solution was to retreat to their bunkers, which they converted into luxurious second homes. Some were built in olive groves, or into cliffside that provided a view of the sea. The Pesces, instinctively territorial, built their bunkers in town. Before Pesce's father was arrested, in 2005, he had been hiding for years in a carefully renovated bunker under the floor of his mother's house.

Cerreti, whose work entailed constant wariness, felt a sense of recognition. For her, too, the effects of being involved with the 'Ndrangheta were isolation, friendlessness, and fear. She made sure that Pesce was never alone and was always able to call her. She began visiting even when they had nothing professional to discuss. Cerreti was aware that she was breaking her own rules. But her attachment to Pesce felt almost "umbilical," she recalled.

Transcribed, Pesce's evidence eventually ran to more than fifteen hundred pages. It included diagrams of the 'Ndrangheta hierarchy, descriptions of rituals, evidence of murders, locations

of bunkers, and detailed accounts of cocaine smuggling, extortion rackets, money laundering, credit-card fraud, and public corruption. Pesce's evidence both backed up existing cases and prompted new ones. "The whole character of our investigations changed," Cerreti said. Eventually, the team laid charges against sixty-four men and women from the Pesce *'ndrina*. More than the loss of money or personnel, Pesce's betrayal shook the 'Ndrangheta. "Pesce was a name that created terror in Calabria," Cerreti said. "This—breaking the chain—it was like a bomb."

When news of Pesce's testimony reached Rosarno, her clan's rivals reportedly held a party to celebrate. "A woman with the name of Pesce . . . she betrays them and moves to the side of the state," Prestipino, the prosecutor, said. "Immediately, they lose prestige. They lose power. It's devastating. Ordinary people see they're not invincible." For 'Ndranghetisti who wanted out, Cerreti said, "Giuseppina showed that the state could save you and save your family. She was living proof that you could leave the 'Ndrangheta, that you could survive it and be free."

Pesce's old friend Concetta Cacciola was paying close attention. A few months before, anonymous letters had begun arriving at her family home,

claiming that she was having an affair with one of her Facebook friends. Her father and her brother, Michele and Giuseppe, beat her until they cracked a rib. The men refused to let Cacciola be treated in the hospital, arranging for a clan doctor to visit the house instead. It was three months before she was well enough to step outside. Even then, male cousins followed her wherever she went.

On May 11, 2011, the carabinieri summoned Cacciola to pay a fine for a minor offense that Alfonso had committed on his scooter. The walk to the station, twenty minutes across town, was her first time out of the house alone in months. When she arrived, she asked to speak to someone in private, and Officer Carlo Carli led her into an interview room. He closed the door, and she immediately began to describe her predicament. She told him that she was a prisoner in her own home. Her family had accused her of an affair. They beat her senseless. They would kill her if they knew that she was talking to the carabinieri. As if to underline the point, her mother began calling her cell phone, asking where she was.

Four days later, Carli called Cacciola back to the station. This time, she confessed that her family's suspicions were justified: an online friendship had



"Have you seen this bug? It's going around."



*"Remember, guys—what happens in this CrossFit gym is referenced ad nauseam outside this CrossFit gym."*

grown into a romantic relationship. Her brother was just waiting for proof, she said. "Sooner or later, he'll come to me and say, 'Come with me.' Then he'll make me disappear." On a subsequent visit, Cacciola declared that she would testify against the 'Ndrangheta in return for witness protection.

Cerreti and another prosecutor, Giovanni Musarò, met Cacciola and concluded that she was credible. When Cerreti asked whether she wanted to take her children into protection, too, Cacciola demurred. "I need to find my strength in the choices I make," she said, according to an interview that Cerreti gave the organized-crime reporter Clare Longrigg. "Then you can go find them, tell what I've done and why, and they can make their own decision." In late May, Cacciola stole out of the family home and ran to a waiting carabinieri car. She left a letter for her mother, describing her children as "the most beautiful thing in my life" and asking her to give them "a better life than I had." At the end, she added, "Forgive me, I beg you." On the dashboard of the family car, she left a second note, for her father and her brother,

implying that she was going to follow Pesce into witness protection. "I'm going over to my friend Giusy's," she wrote.

Pesce, though, was having doubts. After the carabinieri picked up her children from their aunt Angela's house in Rosarno and took them to the safe house, the elder daughter found a cell phone hidden in her clothes bag. The calls from Aunt Angela started soon after. Were the children eating O.K.? How was she coping without her family? Was she keeping away from undesirables? Aunt Angela said that Pesce had decided to collaborate without considering that it would rip her children away from their family and friends. "Tell your mother you want to be with us. If she wants to go on, she should go on alone," she said. "But you come back to us."

The daughter, who was also named Angela, was torn. She loved her mother, but she had promised her children a better life and then left them stranded. She was soon arguing with Pesce, calling her selfish. She stopped eating and refused to get out of bed. Aunt Angela told her that her mother was making

her ill. It was all so unnecessary, she said: the family would forgive her. Why didn't they all come home? "My daughter started calling me her enemy," Pesce said. "She would tell me how good Aunt Angela was to her, how Aunt Angela loved her."

Aunt Angela was calculating that, if Pesce had started collaborating for the sake of her children, she would stop for them, too. In early 2011, a second cell phone found its way to Pesce in the safe house. Her brother-in-law Gianluca Palaia began calling to instruct her in how to end her collaboration. The family would find her a lawyer to handle her retraction, and then rent her an apartment. No one would do anything to her, Pesce's relatives said. In early April, Aunt Angela and Gianluca showed up at the safe house, saying that they were there to offer "emotional support." Pesce knew that the 'Ndrangheta were in her house, sitting with her children. Unless she did as they wished, they would take them from her. "I couldn't say no," she said.

By Italian law, Pesce had to affirm that her evidence was true by April 11th. The day before, Cerreti travelled to the safe house with nearly two thousand pages of transcribed interviews. The result of six months' work, they contained a singularly detailed portrait of the 'Ndrangheta. It was enough to bring down one of Europe's most powerful crime families, and also an indisputable vindication of the team's intuition about 'Ndrangheta women. Cerreti felt a moment of triumph as she set down the files in front of Pesce.

Pesce told her that she couldn't sign.

Cerreti was stunned. "Are you refusing to sign because everything you've told us is lies?" she demanded.

Pesce, crying, invoked her right to silence. Cerreti packed up her files and stepped out of the room. She returned half an hour later. "Is this really what you want?" she asked.

Pesce began to cry again. "It's not what I want," she said. "It's what I must do for my children."

On April 28th, the provincial daily *Calabria Ora* printed an open letter from Pesce to Calabria's attorney general. In it, she wrote that her testimony was invalid, because she



had been “seriously ill and suffering from being separated from my children” when she gave it. “The more you accuse, the more you are believed. But if you accuse your family you are believed even more. I was so sick that I slandered my closest family members. . . . I feel like they used me. Now that I feel better, I’ve found the courage to withdraw these allegations, even though I fear the monstrous trial that I know awaits me.”

*Calabria Ora* also ran an interview with the Pesce family’s lawyer, who claimed that Cerreti had “extracted” Pesce’s testimony by threatening to cut off access to her children. The lawyer produced a report, by Dr. Nicola Pangallo, a “surgeon and specialist in psychiatry,” saying that she had “particularly serious health conditions that don’t allow custody in prison.” Soon afterward, the newspaper’s editor-in-chief wrote an op-ed, saying, “I’ve never been on the side of laws. I tend to think that it’s right to stand up for the weak, whoever they are.”

Cerreti could feel the case falling apart. But, in early May, she obtained a surveillance video of a conversation in which Pesce’s brother Francesco reassured their grandmother Giuseppa Bonarrigo: “We just have to try to get her home. . . . I’m trying to approach her to tell her I have nothing against her, that I love her.” Giuseppina was a problem made in the home, Francesco said, “and we’ll bring her home.” Giuseppa, seventy-eight years old, mimed the action of strangling a victim.

Cerreti thought over the last conversation she’d had with Pesce. When challenged to disown her evidence, Pesce had gone silent. But refusing to sign wasn’t recanting; it was merely refusing to sign at that moment. “She’s being clever,” she told her staff. To the ’Ndrangheta, Pesce was trying to appear repentant. To Cerreti, she was indicating that “what she had said in all those months of interviews was true.” But there was little time for Cerreti to prove her theory. Uncoöperative witnesses were summarily ejected from witness protection. If Pesce’s family had its way,

she would be murdered within days.

The order for Pesce’s removal from witness protection was issued in early June. On the morning of June 10th, before the command could be executed, Cerreti got a call from Pesce’s protection officers saying that she had left with her boyfriend and her daughter Angela, to spend the day in Lucca, four hours to the north. Angela had been threatening to sneak out and see a friend there, and Pesce felt that she had to accede to her daughter’s wishes. “I was living those days as if they were the last I would ever spend with my children,” she said later.

A trip to Lucca violated the terms of house arrest, which confined witnesses to a specific area. Cerreti told me that she called carabinieri in Lazio and asked them to intercept Pesce on her return. If she could be caught, she could be sent back to prison, where she would be safe. No problem, the carabinieri officer replied. What car were they looking for? Cerreti said that she didn’t know the make, the color, the license-plate number, or even the route it was taking. That was

why she was asking for a hundred carabinieri to be deployed. Minutes later, the commander of Lazio’s carabinieri was on the line. “We wouldn’t use a hundred men for bin Laden,” he said. Cerreti insisted; this witness could take down the entire Rosarno ’Ndrangheta. Cerreti added that she had a valuable asset: Pesce’s cell phone, whose G.P.S. signal indicated that she had just left Lucca.

Within minutes, the carabinieri were setting up roadblocks. As Cerreti watched the G.P.S. screen, the dot approached the first checkpoint, then sailed through. Half an hour later, it passed a second one. Cerreti phoned the commander. “What’s going on?” she shouted. The commander, unaccustomed to being yelled at by a southerner, much less a woman, responded that his men were doing their best. But, one by one, his men all reported seeing nothing. When Pesce was three miles from the safe house, he told Cerreti, “We’ve lost her.”

“You do *not* give up, Commander!” Cerreti shouted.

The officer promised to keep the



*“My parents had a saying: Never go to sleep mad at your computer.”*



line open. A few moments later, he came back: "Hold on!"

There was a commotion, and then a brief silence.

"Don't shoot!" a woman's voice said. "My name is Giuseppina Pesce!"

**B**ecause Pesce had broken the terms of her house arrest, she was forbidden from talking to prosecutors for three weeks after she returned to prison. Cerreti waited anxiously. She was angry that Pesce had jeopardized the case, but there was a risk in going too long without contact. When Pesce was first arrested, fourteen months earlier, she had tried to kill herself. Now she was in jail again, and her children were back with her family in Rosarno. She could be forgiven for wondering what the benefit of collaborating was.

Cerreti was counting on a transformation. A year earlier, Pesce had been defined by the men in her life: her father, her husband, a group of violent relatives whom she had served as a faithful accomplice. In the past year, she had broken with all of them, and it was unthinkable that she would return. Her family evidently agreed. Monitoring Pesce's mail, Cerreti read a letter from her husband, Rocco, that was filled with sarcasm and suppressed fury. Addressing her as "my dearest love (if I can call you that)," Rocco told her that Cacciola had had an affair and begun cooperating with the state. It was "something she should rightly be killed for," he wrote. "Your situation, of course, is very different. Ev-

eryone's forgiven you, me most of all. Still, I wondered if this reminded you of anyone?"

A bug in the prison housing Pesce's mother, Angela Ferraro, revealed that she had stopped referring to her daughter by name. Now she was "the collaborator," "the traitor," or "that whore." When Pesce's daughters, Angela and Elisea, visited, their grandmother demanded that they reject their mother. "She doesn't exist anymore," Ferraro told them. "Tell her! She doesn't care who's in jail."

In Rosarno, the clan was pressuring the children in other ways. Aunt Angela threw them out, and they were forced to live with their grandfather Gaetano Palaia, who often claimed to have no money to feed them. Elisea lost weight and developed leg cramps and insomnia. Gaetano regularly beat his grandson with a belt. One day, he took the boy to a game room, where he was set upon by older kids, as his grandfather watched.

Angela, the child with the most influence over their mother, was made to join in the campaign of blackmail. On July 18th, Pesce received a letter from her older daughter, accusing her of betraying the family. "Making this choice for the second time, you're spitting in the pot you eat from," she wrote. "If you want our happiness and our family's, you should step back." Pesce was devastated, but something in the letter rankled. The phrase "spitting in the pot you eat from" didn't sound like Angela, or like any fifteen-year-old she knew.

Four days later, a second note from Angela arrived. In this one, she said that she was writing in secret, and that the earlier letter had been dictated by her uncles. "You're my mom, and without you I am nothing," she wrote. "Whatever choice you make, I will follow."

**O**n the evening of August 20th, Cacciola's father, Michele, pulled up to Santa Maria Hospital, in Polistena, near Rosarno, in the family's Mercedes. Cacciola was immobile in the back seat, with burns around her mouth and foam spilling from her lips. After seven weeks of testifying, she had e-mailed her older daughter, and her parents had used that contact to reopen communication, saying that unless she retracted her testimony, she would never see her children again. Cacciola left witness protection on August 8th.

Within days, though, she had changed her mind and requested readmission. Cerreti was with a squad of carabinieri, waiting for Cacciola to call and arrange a ride to the safe house, when the news came from a police officer at the hospital that her witness was dead. Her father said that she had been found in the basement of the family home, an empty litre bottle of hydrochloric acid lying next to her. (The family claimed that it was a suicide attempt, even though it is all but impossible to voluntarily drink that much acid.) Three days later, Cacciola's parents sent the prosecutors' office a recording of their



daughter retracting her evidence. Cerreti was shaken by the death, and by its effects. "If this phenomenon of women testifying gathered momentum with Giuseppina, it was going to come to a sudden stop with Concetta's death," she said. "Concetta was a symbol that the 'Ndrangheta could get to you." *Calabria Ora* agreed. "The season of coöperation is over," it declared.

If the killing was meant to intimidate Pesce, it had the opposite effect. On August 23rd, the day the Cacciolas filed their complaint, a letter from Pesce arrived at the Palace of Justice, addressed to a group of prosecutors who had worked on her case. "I think you already know my story, but here I wish to start from the beginning," she wrote. "After six months of imprisonment, on 14 October, 2010, I expressed my desire to Dr. Cerreti to pursue this path, driven by my love as a mother and my desire to lead a better life away from the environment in which we were born and lived. . . . My hope is that we still have time." Driving back from Lucca, she wrote, "I realized the importance of my motivation to collaborate: my children's future, and the love of a man who loves me for who I am and not for my last name." She feared that she had lost credibility, but she assured the prosecutors that her evidence was real. "Your Honor, I would like to tell you that I'm not crazy, like they said," she wrote. "I never told lies. I just had a moment of confusion."

The prosecution of sixty-four members of the Pesce *'ndrina* opened the next month, with the full trial beginning in May, 2012, when Giuseppina Pesce was called to testify. The court convened in the grand marble courthouse in Palmi. The defendants were ushered past the columns of the portico and into a windowless room, where they were placed in a large cage. Pesce gave testimony by video link from a bunker in Rebibbia prison, in Rome; cameras had been arranged so that she could not be seen by her family members and mostly could not see them, unless they stood in the witness stand. For a week, Cerreti led her

through the evidence. In forty hours of nearly continuous testimony, Pesce described the family's empire and detailed numerous murders, the result of an endless war encouraged by the rules of clan feuding: "You killed one of ours, we killed one of yours."

Despite the protection of the video link, Pesce's family made several last attempts to intimidate her. Her brother Francesco coughed whenever she mentioned his name, which she told Cerreti was a message: I hear



what you're saying about me. Her sister Marina persuaded a prison guard to pass her a photograph of the two of them with their children. One day, her father, Salvatore, asked permission to make a statement, and stood in the dock; when Giuseppina saw him on the screen, she began to cry. He was wearing a white shirt with blue stripes that she had given him as a present. "It was her father's way of reminding her of her blood ties," Cerreti said. Salvatore then read from a sheet of paper. "I want to tell my daughter that everybody loves her. And after this is all over, when all the lights have been turned out and all these careers have been improved and when you're all by yourself, you will find us here waiting for you. We'll be here."

The case took nearly five years to conclude. Finally, on March 29, 2017, after all appeals were exhausted, thirty-four sentences were confirmed. Pesce's uncle Antonino, the clan leader, was sentenced to twenty-eight years, her father to twenty, her husband to nineteen, her mother and her brother to thirteen. Her grandmother Giuseppa Bonarrigo had been sentenced to a year and eight months. Seven other relatives were sentenced to between thirteen and sixteen years. Acting on Pesce's evidence, Cerreti confiscated four villas, forty-four apartments, forty busi-

nesses, a hundred and sixty-four cars, sixty plots of land, and two soccer teams, together worth some two hundred and sixty million euros.

After the trial, Pesce and her children were kept under state protection. Members of the Italian witness-protection program lead a cautious, tenuous, and often tedious existence. Typically moving at least once a year through a series of cheap guesthouses and small apartments with basic furnishings, they are often unable to work or to experience more than fleeting human contact. Communication with anyone from their previous life is largely forbidden. An Italian journalist who visited several safe houses described people living with near-terminal boredom, unable to go out, missing the company of friends and family. He said that most of them show little care for the places where they stay, with plates of old food and full ashtrays left sitting around. Still, security demands that most never leave the program.

Cerreti described her former witness as conscious of what she had given up. "She knows what she did is another death," Cerreti said. "It has to be her brother, the same blood, who kills her to restore the family honor. And one day he will get out." But Pesce was at peace, she said; it had been years since Cerreti had seen her doubt herself. In testimony, Pesce had spoken of how the 'Ndrangheta men turned love and sanctuary into hate, intimidation, and fear. "That's the evil I see," she said. "Evil in the sense that this chain doesn't break—this willingness to go on committing crimes. That's why women are always going to meet with prisoners and now are prisoners ourselves." As she broke with the family, she had gone to jail and had seen her children tormented; her friend had been murdered. But her letter to the Palace of Justice suggested quiet acceptance. "All these experiences strengthened me as a woman," she wrote. "I found the strength to make this important decision, to defy a fearsome, powerful, and unforgiving family. I knew the risks for me and for my loved ones. But in the end I did it." ♦

# MOCKERY AND DEMOCRACY

*Can a satirical TV show strengthen civic life in Nigeria?*

BY ADRIAN CHEN

One day last July, the five writers of “The Other News,” Nigeria’s first prime-time political-satire show, sat in an office in Lagos, trying to figure out how to make fun of a king. The Ooni of Ife, the traditional ruler of the Yoruba people, had recently made headlines for an incident that occurred on a flight to Ontario. As the Ooni’s entourage boarded, one of his aides, dressed in a flowing white robe, blessed the plane by rattling a couple of shakers above his head. A passenger caught the rite on his phone and posted a video to YouTube, where it quickly went viral. The writers were working on the pilot episode of the show and hoped to begin with a few jokes about recent news items; the clip, some of them thought, would make perfect fodder.

David Hundeyin, a twenty-seven-year-old writer, argued that the video showed how Nigeria’s traditional rulers had failed to keep up with the times. “They are literally relics of the dead past in the modern world,” he said. Hundeyin has an acerbic sense of humor honed by years of watching “South Park,” and he thought that “The Other News” should take a similarly no-holds-barred approach to Nigerian culture. The writers were huddled in a corner of a small room at the headquarters of the Nigerian news station Channels Television, which was producing the show. It was not an ideal environment for writing jokes. Construction on the building, part of an expansion of the station, had stopped months before, after Nigeria’s economy sank into recession. Two rooms on the top floor, along with a studio, had been hastily outfitted with electricity and air-conditioning for “The Other News.” An empty elevator shaft gaped at the end of the hall, there was no running water, and a cinder block sat treacherously in the middle of a staircase. The Internet was patchy, and when Hundeyin pulled up a photograph on his lap-

top it loaded slowly. The photo showed Queen Elizabeth II driving herself around London in a Jaguar. He suggested that they compare her modest road trip with the Ooni’s preflight ritual. “If it’s good enough for the Queen, isn’t it good enough for the Ooni?” Hundeyin asked.

Some of the other writers urged a more cautious approach. The Ooni is seen by some Yoruba as a descendant of Oduduwa, who was sent down by God to found the Yoruba kingdom. “Sometimes we need to go to the other side of the audience or other people’s culture and try to see how it’s going to look to that person,” Sodi Kurubo, one of the two head writers, said. Nkechi Nwabudike, the other head writer, pointed out that the host of “The Other News” was Igbo, another major ethnic group. “We have to be careful, because we have a host from the east, so we can’t really make fun of someone’s traditions,” she said.

Ned Rice, a longtime comedy writer from the United States, looked on. He had been hired to advise the writers by Pilot Media Initiatives, a Brooklyn-based company that makes television programs modelled on the news-parody format popularized by “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” with the aim of spreading democratic principles in developing countries. Rice had arrived two weeks earlier. He had run a week of workshops, then the team had spent another week writing and filming a test episode. Now they had just one week to write and produce the twenty-two-minute pilot.

Rice reminded the writers that comedy necessarily offends some people. “If you do a comedy show, you’re going to step on toes,” he said. In Nigeria, there are a lot of toes to step on. The country has three major religions and more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups, which sometimes coexist uneasily. During the colonial era, ethnic tensions were exacerbated by the British practice of indirect rule, in which

traditional leaders were pitted against one another for resources and political power. Since the country’s independence, in 1960, its leaders have continued to exploit these rivalries. Disputes can flare into violence. For the past few months, Igbo separatists in the southeast had been agitating for an independent state, prompting fears of a replay of the Biafran war of the late nineteen-sixties. Judging from the photos of hundreds of members of the Indigenous People of Biafra marching in the street, fists raised, they did not seem inclined to take a joke. “I’m not against starting a crisis,” Nwabudike said, laughing. “Just not in the first episode.”

One writer suggested that they read the comments on the video of the Ooni to get a better sense of the public’s reaction. Rice shot the suggestion down. “Jerry Seinfeld used to say, ‘Never read your fan mail—only crazy people write letters,’” he said. The writers decided that they would gently rib the Ooni for the disruption he’d caused on the plane. The brunt of the critique was reserved for Nigerian politicians’ obsession with private jets; no ritual would be elaborate enough for them to fly commercial. It was not the most scathing take, but they now had a few minutes in the can, which is about the most a comedy writer can ask of a morning’s work.

Early in my writing career, I dreamed of working for “The Daily Show,” and I contributed jokes to the Onion. As I spent long afternoons staring at the ceiling, trying to come up with the fifteen headlines that I needed to send in every week, I hoped that, by calling out all the ridiculous things in this corrupt and fallen world, I was performing a sort of watchdog duty, like an investigative journalist, only with dick jokes. Or was this just self-serving claptrap propagated by comedy writers? It’s an old question. But the idea that comedy has a positive role in





*In the U.S., the notion that comedy has a positive role in democracy has taken a hit recently. But now it's being exported.*



democracy has taken a hit in the age of Donald Trump, when bigotry is packaged into ironic memes by white supremacists and any attempt to caricature the President inevitably falls short of the real thing. These days, comedy seems, at best, a tool too dull to defend democracy—and, at worst, one well suited to undermine it. I wanted Dillon Case, the thirty-six-year-old co-founder of P.M.I., to expound on the power, or lack thereof, of political satire. Case, however, is a veteran of international development, and is practically allergic to making any claim that isn't backed up by a peer-reviewed article.

In Nigeria, Case had no time to ponder anything. He was never without a small notebook whose cover read “Comedy for Change,” in which he scribbled constant reminders to himself. P.M.I. was trying to make a polished TV show using equipment that, as one member of the team said, you might find at a U.S. community college. The technical staffers assigned to the show were overworked, and were hard to reach when they weren't on set. There were also cultural differences. The appearance of a bunch of demanding white people and their hand-picked team of young writers had caused some tension. One writer told me that, around the station, the crew had earned the sarcastic nickname the Super Eagles, after Nigeria's national soccer team and its lauded stars.

Case is a tall redhead with a perpetual five-o'clock shadow. Growing up in Park City, Utah, where his mother worked briefly for the Sundance Institute, he had early exposure to the film industry. But, while many of his high-school friends tried to make it in Hollywood, Case got a master's degree in international human-rights law, at the University of Essex. Case is not particularly funny, but he has a good sense of humor. He is amused by international-aid jargon—“capacity building,” “implementing partner”—but is also fluent in it.

Case first got the idea for P.M.I. while employed as a contractor for the United States Agency for International Development in Kyrgyzstan, after a revolution, in 2010, overthrew the country's authoritarian President. “We were working on

a program that was supporting good-governance activities and conflict-mitigation activities,” he told me. The agency wanted to engage young people in democratic politics. “We had actually had the idea in a brainstorming session and thought, Wouldn't it be cool to be something like ‘The Daily Show?’” Soon after, a local sketch-comedy troupe had the same idea, and approached U.S.A.I.D. for funding and support. Case designed a project with them, which got approved.

To help the troupe, Case e-mailed Kevin Bleyer, a former writer for “The Daily Show.” Bleyer has a boyish face that is at odds with his deep baritone. He is aggressively funny, seemingly unable to string together three sentences without cracking a joke, and,

for eight years, he wrote jokes for Barack Obama to deliver at the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner. When he got the e-mail from Case, he had just returned from North Korea, where he'd been shadowing Bill Richardson, whose memoir he was co-writing, as Richardson negotiated the release of an American prisoner. “I was in one vaguely Soviet country and here I am getting an e-mail from another vaguely communist, socialist country,” Bleyer said. Six weeks later, he flew to Kyrgyzstan. He didn't speak Russian, so he relied on his translator, a hard-nosed woman named Gulmira, to act as a sort of barometer. If she laughed at a joke, he figured it was O.K. Four weeks later, the show, called “Studio 7,” aired its first episode.

In 2015, Case moved to New York, after ten years abroad, but the experience of working on “Studio 7” stuck with him. He is a meticulous researcher, and he started to read all he could about political satire and its effects on democracy. He read a study that claimed that the humorous dissection of complex issues helped viewers feel more empowered to participate in political change. He read a book called “Is Satire Saving Our Nation?,” which argued that “one of the strongest supports for our democracy today comes from those of us who are seriously joking.” He began to wonder why nobody had thought to systematically apply

satire to international development.

There was a lot of literature for Case to dive into, because of a decade-long boom in political satire that had reached an apex during the George W. Bush Administration. Liberals, disgusted by the Administration's lies and the media's seeming inability to check them, had turned to a small army of satirists, “culture jammers,” and pranksters, who offered a more pointed critique. “The Daily Show” became the most potent source of liberal catharsis. Jon Stewart, who hosted the show from 1999 to 2015, paired a pitiless attitude toward hypocrisy and bullshit with a rigorous command of facts, which allowed him to directly address issues that mainstream media outlets, bound by norms of balance and objectivity, could only dance around. A much cited Pew survey, from 2007, listed Stewart as the fourth most admired journalist in the country, tied with Anderson Cooper. And studies found that those who watched “The Daily Show” and other political-entertainment programs were more informed, more critical, and more civically engaged than those who didn't.

“The Daily Show” was only the latest example of the American tendency to look to satire as a means to advance liberal-democratic values. In the nineteen-fifties, as Stephen E. Kercher details in his definitive history “Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America,” political cartoonists saw themselves as defenders of free expression and civil rights in the face of an anti-democratic witch hunt. Some of these cartoonists suffered lost syndication deals and F.B.I. scrutiny, but their jokes had a lasting impact. It was the cartoonist Herbert Block who coined the term “McCarthyism,” and though his cartoons, which depicted Joseph McCarthy, in an oversized suit, as a shady peddler of hysteria, may not have put a stop to the Red Scare, they reassured other liberals that they weren't alone in their outrage.

The idea of satire as a “weapon of wit” became so central to the liberal imagination that Gore Vidal, seeing a dearth of it in the cultural landscape of the late fifties, asked, “Should a home-grown Hitler appear, whose voice amongst the public orders would be raised against him in derision?” In fact, as Kercher details, satire was being transformed by a wave of



performers whose barbs came swathed in urbane coolness. The most famous was the standup comedian Mort Sahl, who got his start in the San Francisco club scene and delivered jokes in a rapid-fire staccato frequently compared to the style of jazz musicians. He mocked Eisenhower's golf obsession and his lax support for the civil-rights movement by saying that he hadn't walked the black teen-agers who desegregated Little Rock Central High School in by the hand because he had trouble "deciding whether or not to use an overlapping grip." The new satirists mostly admired John F. Kennedy, who was liberal, cool, and praised by Norman Mailer for his "dry Harvard wit." The mainstreaming of satire threatened its role as a democratic check on power; Sahl himself wrote jokes for Kennedy's campaign.

In the following decades, practitioners of "sick" humor, such as Lenny Bruce and the writers for *Mad* magazine, used comedy to shock their audience into insight, but softer fare prevailed on television. Throughout the seventies and eighties, according to the media scholar Jeffrey Jones, satire's profile was limited by television executives, who worried about offending viewers and advertisers. Sitcoms and middle-of-the-road talk shows dominated the airwaves until the rise of premium cable channels, which provided commercially viable spaces for edgier shows, such as "The Daily Show" and "South Park," and Bill Maher's "Politically Incorrect." This new liberal satire tackled the Bush Administration with the zeal of the McCarthy-era political cartoonists, and was rewarded with high ratings.

That changed with the arrival of Barack Obama, whose wit and coolness were regularly compared to Kennedy's. In this magazine, Emily Nussbaum likened his White House Correspondents' Dinner speeches to a "sophisticated small-club act." As in the Kennedy era, satire came to seem defanged. The image of the heroic, dissenting satirist went abroad, where, it appeared, the struggle between the forces of democracy and authoritarianism loomed larger. In 2009, Voice of America produced "Parazit," a "Daily Show"-style political-satire program that criticized the Iranian government. A couple of years later, a surgeon turned satirist named Bassem Youssef, often called "the Jon Stewart of Egypt," who hosted

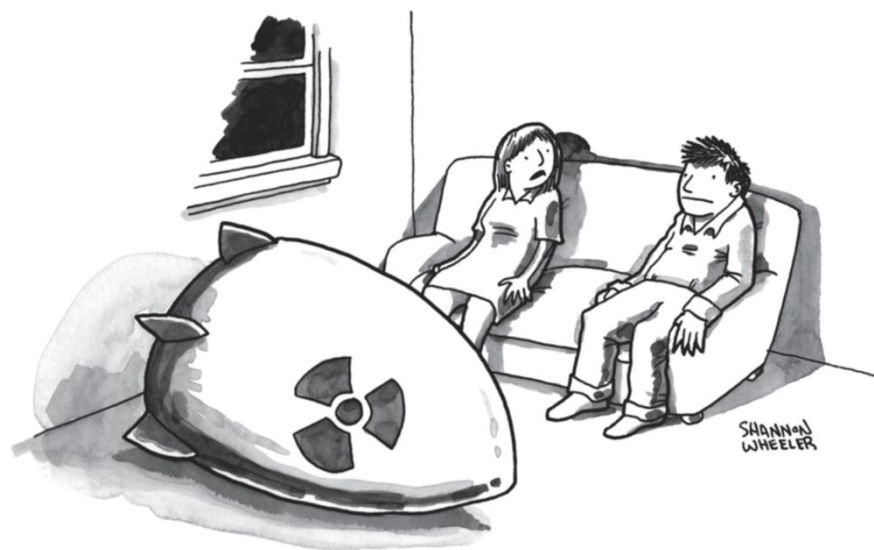
"Bernameg al-Bernameg" ("The Show Show"), became a symbol of the promise of the Arab Spring. His exile, in 2014, became a sign of its failure. Still, it was easy to see political satire as an innovation, like the Internet, that could help democracy take root around the world, not through patronizing and coercive "nation-building" projects but as a natural result of giving people a product that they wanted and enjoyed.

In 2015, Case and Bleyer launched P.M.I., with an international-media expert named Graeme Moreland. Case figured that they would get grants to start; then, since the show would be entertaining as well as informative, they could attract advertisers after the grant money ran out. This fit with the international-development community's desire for "sustainability." Yet Case found it hard to persuade anyone to provide funding to P.M.I. Jokes imply an irreverence that is at odds with the serious issues many donors wish to address. Case pitched the idea for months, unsuccessfully, until he and Bleyer were introduced to John Momoh, the Nigerian chairman and founder of Channels Television and a former broadcaster for the state-run Nigerian Television Authority. Momoh required journalists at Channels to wear suits instead of the traditional dress worn by state broadcasters. He insisted on balanced coverage, a rarity in Nigeria, where many news outlets are beholden to political players. Momoh told me that, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, he had watched "The Daily Show

with Trevor Noah" religiously, and had started thinking about a Nigerian version. "Some of my colleagues and I thought, Look, we could borrow a little from this," he said.

Case and Bleyer were thrilled. Nigeria is home to "Nollywood," by some measures the second-largest film industry in the world, and a ready source of talent. The advocacy group Freedom House lists Nigeria as "partly free." "That's the kind of sweet spot we're looking for," Case told me. The show could help promote freedom of expression without undue threat of censorship or retaliation. Case approached the Open Society Initiative of West Africa with a proposal to partner with Channels to develop the show, and they were awarded a grant.

One day last summer, weeks before meeting with the crew in Lagos, I stopped by Case's apartment, in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn, where he and Bleyer were reviewing the applications of prospective writers. They had scheduled a Skype interview with Nwabudike, a Nollywood screenwriter who later became a head writer. It was the rainy season in Nigeria, which interferes with the Internet, and during a conference call with Channels two days earlier the connection had repeatedly cut out. Bleyer made a bit out of it, playing the chorus of Toto's "Africa"—*I bless the rains down in Africa*—at inopportune moments, and Case gamely grimaced and shook his head every time. "Kevin has schooled me over time to put aside



*"A second bomb will not make us safer."*



my international-development formality and just be a little more relaxed,” Case told me. Eventually, they were able to hold a call more or less uninterrupted. They asked Nwabudike what she would cover if the show ran that week, and she mentioned that the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, had been missing for weeks, after going to London for an undisclosed medical treatment. “That’s certainly a ripe premise for comedy,” Bleyer said.

Judging comedy writers in a foreign culture was an inexact process. For one thing, Case and Bleyer couldn’t understand many of the jokes that applicants submitted, since they were full of local references. One had written a sketch with a reference to the Liam Neeson movie “Taken,” in which a call from a kidnapper was interrupted by a lack of mobile credit. Bleyer thought that was funny. But, over all, Bleyer and Case were interested less in whether someone could structure a joke than in whether the person was well versed in the news and had a point of view that could give the show critical bite. “We’re not the ones saying, ‘Do this joke, do that joke,’” Bleyer told me. “We’re the ones saying, ‘Here’s how to get the joke to be the best form it can be, and here’s how you get this show done by Friday night.’” To that end, P.M.I. had created a manual running to more than two hundred pages that instructed writers on everything from constructing setups to pitching jokes and structuring their workday.

To find a host, Graeme Moreland had haunted comedy shows in Lagos. He settled on a well-known comic named Okechukwu Onyegbule, who performs under the name Okey Bakassi. Bakassi, who is forty-eight years old, has been doing standup comedy for twenty-five years, and has become a household name throughout West Africa for his film roles. He performs to sold-out crowds of African immigrants in London, Houston, and Salt Lake City. As soon as Moreland saw Bakassi perform, he said, “it was just game over for me, because he’s so adaptable. He’s a proper grownup.” Channels had offered Bakassi a four-month contract, the length of the first season. But Bakassi was holding out for a yearlong contract, which, Bleyer explained, is known in Hollywood as a holding deal. As leverage, Bakassi claimed that he was considering becom-

## MEDIUM

In the nineteenth century,  
I’d have found a medium,  
a knocking table, a crystal ball,

but to conjure him in 2016  
I go online and Google,  
scroll page after page until

his name disappears  
in a list of random links,  
but still there’s his handle on Skype,

still the picture of him crossing the finish line  
of the Portland marathon,  
still the smiling-in-the-wind-on-the-beach photo, still

that e-mail that arrived at 3 A.M.  
back in February, those words of such  
love and affirmation out of the blue

ing the host of a different talk show.

“That’s bullshit,” Case said. “It’s not anything time sensitive. It would still be there if this show tanks.”

Bleyer’s face lit up. “I love it,” he said, gesturing toward Case. “He’s now using Hollywood talk. He says ‘If this show tanks,’ whereas the international-development language would be something like ‘If this show doesn’t find its audience,’ or ‘If this show—’”

“—doesn’t yield the results,” Case said, laughing.

“—yield the results as prescribed in the grant agreement,” Bleyer said.

“Too many challenges prevented it from reaching its desired output,” Case said.

Eventually, Channels nailed down Bakassi. The first time I met him, he was sitting at the head of a table in the executive boardroom of Channels, watching the test episode. His assistant and a Channels producer looked on. Bakassi wore a linen shirt with a black-and-white traditional pattern, black linen pants, and an enormous pinky ring, which he tapped against the table when he was thinking. American comedians tend to be ill-kempt and socially awkward. Bakassi has a stately presence and not a whiff of self-doubt. A trained agricul-

tural engineer, he speaks with a measured precision that brings to mind a newscaster from the golden age of American broadcasting. In his view, Nigeria is a great place for a comedian. “Our people, we’re full of drama,” he said.

Bakassi finished watching the test episode in silence. There was a long pause. Nobody was happy with it. The sound was off, and the editing was wonky. Bakassi had used a pair of white iPhone earbuds as in-ear monitors, and they showed distractingly on the screen. There was a general agreement that the content reflected too much of Rice’s voice, resulting in a watered-down, Jay Leno-as-Nigerian monologue, delivered uncomfortably by Bakassi. “A good effort,” Bakassi said—then he quickly launched into complaints. Some of the team members were “writing for a white audience,” he said. “We still have to make it local in terms of content.”

The son of an Army officer, Bakassi had travelled extensively in Nigeria as a kid, giving him a love for the diversity of the country. His emphasis on Nigerian culture occasionally put him in conflict with the writers, who were younger and well versed in American and British pop culture. Bakassi frequently replaced Western pop-culture references with Nigerian ones, striking a clip from “Harry Potter”

that I knew were strange but didn't query,  
thought maybe he'd been up drinking,  
was feeling sentimental, and

that must have been  
the night of the first attempt  
we found written in his journal,

how he'd thrown himself off a bridge  
into the cold dirty Willamette  
but survived,

and how disappointed  
he must have felt then,  
the body involuntarily countering

with a surge of adrenaline,  
his body feeling at its  
utmost alive.

—Jennifer Grotz

in favor of a clip from a Nollywood movie, and simplifying wordplay for viewers whose primary language was not English. At one point, he argued to Case that the talent should wear Nigerian caftans instead of Western suits, showing him a variety of colorful fabrics. "There is a rising tide of nationalism, and they should nod to that," he said. Case disagreed, saying that the show had to look like other Channels programming.

In the conference room, the P.M.I. staff assured Bakassi that the pilot would be more authentically Nigerian than the test episode. "The first show had a lot of my influence, and I wrote for white TV for twenty-five years," Rice said. "But this show will be a hundred per cent Nigerian all the time."

This exchange was one of many times when I thought of an essay by the Nigerian-American novelist, critic, and photographer Teju Cole called "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," which ran in *The Atlantic* in 2012. The piece responded to "Kony 2012," the viral video with which a U.S. nonprofit, fronted by the California-based humanitarian Jason Russell, launched a campaign to encourage the international community to defeat the notorious Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. In the essay, Cole takes aim

at the long history of Americans using Africa as "a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism." In their zeal to "make a difference," Cole argues, the members of the White-Savior Industrial Complex, which include TED talkers and development economists, journalists and international charities, have tended to seize on dramatic measures that attract tons of media attention and donor funds but don't actually help Africans. Although Case and Bleyer were humble about their project's aims and held a sincere belief in the power of satire to help bolster democracy, I was constantly troubled by the question of whose interests "The Other News" really served.

When I visited Cole in his photography studio, in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, he was unsurprisingly skeptical about P.M.I.'s project. "I think you know what I'm going to say," he said. "It sounds a bit white savior-ish." One of Cole's biggest gripes is that the focus on the savior often erases the agency of the Africans being helped. I told him about Case and Bleyer's idea that they would simply provide the form of "The Daily Show" and let the Nigerian staff fill in the content. For Cole, it wasn't enough just to transplant a successful American format to Nigeria. For the project to work, he continued, it had to be "something that gives you

access to the *Nigerian-ness* of Nigerians."

Nigerians are well practiced at mocking their leaders. The country's first political cartoonist, Akinola Lasekan, was a self-taught artist from southwestern Nigeria, who signed his cartoons, in the anti-colonialist newspaper the *West African Pilot*, "Lash." Cartooning was a European art, and the newspapers it appeared in were introduced to Nigeria by European missionaries. Yet, as the art historian Yomi Ola writes in her book "Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture," Lasekan, in his critique of British rule, drew on a Yoruba tradition of using satire, in the form of masks and statues, to call out bad behavior.

A recurring motif in Lasekan's work is an oversized Briton perfectly balanced on the back of a distressed African, in an echo of Yoruba sculptures depicting royal hierarchies. In a two-panel cartoon done after the Second World War, Lasekan captured the rising resistance to colonialism: in the first panel, a black soldier and a white soldier are marching together; in the second, the black man serves the white man a drink. The caption reads "Comrade in War, Vassal in Peace?" After independence, Lasekan was succeeded by a new generation of cartoonists, who found countless targets in a procession of corrupt, dictatorial, and incompetent Nigerian leaders.

Cole pulled up a clip on his laptop from the playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa's classic sitcom "Basi and Company," in which the greed and corruption that accompanied the flood of oil money into Nigeria in the eighties is represented by the schemer Basi, whose get-rich-quick plans always blow up in his face. More recently, the Internet has unleashed a torrent of memes and viral videos that deflate Nigerian leaders. Patience Jonathan, the wife of the former President Goodluck Jonathan, was a common subject. "She had a persecution complex," Cole explained. "She thought the Chibok girls"—the two hundred and seventy-six schoolgirls whose kidnapping by Boko Haram sparked international outrage—"was done to embarrass her." Her outlandishly dramatic public appearances were chopped up into techno remixes that have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube. There is also a more elevated style. A lawyer who writes under the name *TexTheLaw* has a blog





*"We're all in that room because we believe in that show," one writer said.*

called *Chronicles of Chill*, on which Nigerian political figures feature as thinly disguised characters in a fantasy novel.

"This is why I'm, like, Why is it two white guys?" Cole said. "Nigeria is already way beyond you guys, doing its own thing. We have 'Hitler reacts' videos!" In the famous meme, a movie version of Hitler is made to have a meltdown about a wide range of subjects, including the Seahawks' loss in the Super Bowl and a Twitter service outage. In a clip Cole showed me, Hitler reacts to a viral video of a Nigerian government spokesman who had forgotten the URL of his organization's Web site.

Today in Nigeria, there are slapstick comics, who are as much mimes as comedians; comedians who trade in ethnic humor in local languages; and urban comedians, speaking pidgin, who mock Nollywood celebrities and musicians. Nigerian standup comedians m.c. weddings, birthday parties, and burial ceremonies, where they have largely replaced the radio hosts and television personalities who used to preside. The biggest standup comedians sell out large shows and star in multimillion-dollar-grossing films.

While in Lagos, I went to a café that each Wednesday is converted into a comedy club called *Unknot Your Tie*. Office workers from the nearby business district

sat at round tables drinking large bottles of beer. Multiple comedians took the stage at once. Offstage, a d.j. and a keyboardist accented the jokes. The show's three hosts took turns jumping up onstage to interrupt the performers' five minutes. The performers roasted the hosts in return. Audience members roasted the comedians and other audience members. It felt like a giddy democracy.

The history of standup comedy in Nigeria, as with cartooning, is that of a deep-rooted culture finding resonance with a foreign art form. The formal practice of telling jokes in front of an audience originated with the village spokesmen who host public events, spicing them up with wit and humorous anecdotes, according to Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma, the former head of Nigeria's National Institute for Cultural Orientation. Comedy was also a part of traditional Nigerian theatre and storytelling long before standup came to the country, in the nineteenth-eighties. One of the fathers of professional standup comedy is a fifty-three-year-old comedian named Atunyota Al-laluya Akpobome, who goes by the stage name Ali Baba. He got his start in college, where his talent for making fun of popular students and administrators won him gigs as an opener for school events. Ali Baba watched videos of Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor, and was inspired

by a tradition of African-American comedy that used humor to cope with racism and oppression. He told me, "If standup was used at the time for emancipation, for entertainment, for expression of their feelings, for them to be able to water down the effects of the damage that being enslaved had cost them, then it was wise for me to also use that."

Laughter as an antidote to adversity is a recurring theme. In 1995, the filmmaker and producer Opa Williams launched Nigeria's first and most important comedy showcase, "*Nite of a Thousand Laughs*." As Ayakoroma tells it, one of Williams's inspirations came during a visit to a hospital to shoot a Nollywood film. There, he ran into an actor who had been injured in a car crash, and the cast and crew began making jokes in order to comfort him. "It occurred to me that laughter could be a healing balm," Williams later told a journalist. At the time, the country had been under military dictatorship for more than a decade. Two years earlier, an attempt at transitioning to democracy had been thwarted, when General Sani Abacha seized power and installed a new junta. "The military considered anything you said as the voice of the opposition," Ali Baba told me. In 1998, Abacha died, and his successor, Abdulsalami Abubakar, organized a transition to a democratic government. Nigeria's new democratically elected leader, the former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo, was known for his sense of humor, and he regularly invited Ali Baba to perform at the Presidential palace. "He was kind of my chief marketing officer," Ali Baba told me.

Okey Bakassi's standup routines often traffic in social commentary. One of his most famous bits is called "In Search of Who Wrote 'Things Fall Apart.'" He tells the story of a governor who visits a school and asks a student, "Who wrote 'Things Fall Apart'?" The student thinks that he is being accused of some terrible crime. "Not me!" he replies. The governor is shocked by the student's ignorance of Nigeria's most famous novel. The teacher and the principal don't know, either, and the governor is outraged. He complains to his aide, who leaps into action. "Don't worry, sir," he says. "We'll set up a mission to sniff out who did it." At home, the governor complains to his wife. "They won't tell you because

they're your political enemies," she replies. "They don't want you to succeed!"

Bakassi tells the joke with delight, but underneath boils the frustration that Nigerians have with their dysfunctional government. The country is one of the largest producers of oil in the world, but it is unable to deliver basic services, like education and electricity, to its own people, owing to widespread corruption and incompetence. The election of Buhari, in 2015, brought a surge of hope. He was the first opposition candidate ever to unseat an incumbent, and he promised to crack down on corruption, put millions of unemployed young Nigerians back to work, and end Boko Haram's insurgency. Nearly three years later, his Presidency is bogged down by health problems and weak leadership. "People massively wanted change, and suddenly that change has become like a mirage, and they are so confused right now about what to do that they've become inactive," Bakassi said one day while we were talking in the studio. "I want to be that one program that will bring people together and activate them to bring about change."

It sounded like a campaign speech, and, in fact, Bakassi is one of the rare political satirists who is also a politician. In September, 2008, he was appointed to be a special adviser on entertainment matters by the governor of Imo State, where he grew up. Later, he launched an unsuccessful run for the state assembly. Once, on a radio show, he said that the experience of being "on the inside" had changed his views on politics.

"We cannot say that we are all innocent, because they say society gets the kind of government it deserves," he told me. Politicians aren't inherently evil. The main problem is the widespread practice of selling votes to the highest bidder. Given how little the government does for poor Nigerians, many of them see this as their one chance to benefit from politics. Bakassi objects on pragmatic grounds. If voters accept payment before the politician gets into office, they have little leverage with which to hold him accountable later. In addition, the expense of paying off so many voters means that the politician who wins election must find a way to recoup the money, which leads to corruption. "We demand so much from politicians when they seek elected office that at the end of the day they

need to get money back," Bakassi said.

Last year, Bakassi posted a picture to Instagram over which he'd put the text "@okeybakassi for president." He wouldn't be the first satirist to run for President, but, as far as I could tell, his intention was more sincere than Stephen Colbert's, in 2008. "I'm qualified to be the President," he said. "The only thing I don't have is the resources. I am an educated person and I can discuss national issues and I have the burning desire to serve this country." He continued, "Politics is simply a group of processes that people apply to get what they want."

"If you gather twenty different Nigerians, you might get twenty different opinions," Nwabudike said to me one day. She was explaining why it was so hard for the staff to agree on anything. I had witnessed endless debates about what angle the show should take on a controversial issue, how far to take a joke, and who should be criticized for the problems facing the country. To Nwabudike, the group's fractiousness was a sign of a more fundamental fact of Nigerian life. "In the U.S., a lot of things are sort of communal," she explained. "In Nigeria, it's pretty much the opposite. If that road is bad, nobody's going to fix it, so we all have to buy high cars to get over the potholes. If there are no lights, the government is never going to fix it, so let's all go buy generators for ourselves." The need for self-sufficiency, she said, made it hard to find common ground. Still, the writers shared one thing. "We're all in that room because we believe in that show," she said.

Sodi Kurubo explained to me how he saw the mission of "The Other News." Some young Nigerians, he said, follow American politics more closely than they do Nigerian politics. They love "The Daily Show," along with John Oliver and Bill Maher, whose shows are easily accessible online. "Americans don't realize how America-focussed the rest of the world is. We get your news, we get your media," he said. "We always have to remind ourselves that it's another country." As dysfunctional as our politics may seem to us, there is still a sense that the stakes are real. Kurubo saw "The Other News" as a way to direct young Nigerians' attention back to Nigerian issues, through a form they already know.

As the writers labored over the scripts, the correspondents went around Lagos filming "field pieces," in which they investigated pressing matters by talking to people on the street. One day, I joined Ned Rice as he went to supervise a shoot. Rice is a large man, who wears a uniform of jeans and a tucked-in T-shirt. He grew up in Detroit, and, when he is not racking his brain for one-liners, he speaks with the sonorous Midwestern accent of an oldies-radio d.j. Comedy was his calling. The first time he watched "Late Night with David Letterman," he knew that was what he wanted to do. Rice moved to New York and began bartending at the Improv, which led, eventually, to a career as a comedy writer, including five years for "Politically Incorrect," where he met Kevin Bleyer. Rice loved the undeniable reality of making somebody laugh, but he had been having a tough time recently. He got divorced, and moved from Los Angeles to Ann Arbor; he "wasn't getting work," he explained. Then he got the call from Bleyer to go to Nigeria. "I couldn't think of a bigger adventure than comedy in Africa," he said. Rice nagged and cajoled the writers, whom he often referred to as "kids." He was at once the most vocally touched by his experience in Nigeria and the most obviously uncomfortable with it. After a week of shuttling between his hotel and the offices of Channels, this was his first time going out into the streets of Lagos. "I'm terrified," he said, as we bumped down the road in a van, with a driver, a cameraman, a producer, and two correspondents, Binta Bhadmus and Mo Williams.

Williams is a lanky twenty-six-year-old who grew up in Lagos but speaks with a slight Scottish accent, which he picked up while studying law in Dundee. His comedy career started in a public-speaking class there. For an assignment, he created a standup routine about his thesis. The bit killed. He started to do comedy in clubs, and was soon being invited to perform throughout the small Dundee scene. "I do a lot of gags on my dad," he said. "He's, like, 'You're not funny.'" After graduation, his father summoned him back to Nigeria to find work as a lawyer. Williams wanted to stay in Scotland and do comedy, but in Nigeria, he explained, "you can't stand up to your parents." He continued to pursue comedy, but he was at a disadvantage, because his



jokes were in English, while most standup is in pidgin. “If you do comedy in English in Nigeria, you’re fighting with a handicap,” he said. “You have to be *fire*.”

The van chugged up a long sloping incline overlooking a cattle market. The shoulder of the road was filled with broken-down cars, pedestrians stepping over piles of trash, and livestock. During the week, Case had noticed that people were peeing everywhere, despite the many stencilled “Do Not Urinate Here” warnings. He suggested doing a piece about the public-urination problem. An obvious place to start was to film a bunch of people peeing. (Bonus if they were peeing on a “Do Not Urinate” sign.) Suddenly, the crew began shouting. There was a man standing in front of a bush, his back to the road. “Keep your distance!” Rice said. The driver pulled up, and the cameraman leaned out the window and stuck his lens in the urinator’s face. The man grimaced. The van peeled out, and the passengers erupted into cheers. “Do people in Nigeria say ‘number one’ and ‘number two’ when they talk about going to the bathroom?” Rice asked as we drove on. “Public urination is the *number-one* problem in Nigeria,” he mused.

Some of the funniest parts of “The Daily Show” have typically been field pieces, but they were the biggest challenge for “The Other News.” Owing to limited resources and technical capability, television news in Nigeria doesn’t tend to employ the kinds of filmmaking and investigative work that are commonplace in the U.S. If you flip through the channels on Nigerian TV, you’ll see a lot of press conferences and interviews with officials in their offices. Case believed that, by satirizing a kind of journalism that doesn’t really exist in Nigeria, “The Other News” could actually help bring it about.

The correspondents’ training had included some basic concepts of television production, including the notion that a piece should take a “journey” that started with a question and ended with some new understanding. Yet the field pieces that attempted a complex narrative fell flat; the ones that succeeded featured simple, man-on-the-street interviews. Rice had worked on the “Tonight Show,” where one of his responsibilities had been producing the “Jaywalking” segment, in which Jay Leno approached people on the street and

embarrassed them with simple general-knowledge questions that they couldn’t answer. As we drove to Ogba Market, a large commercial square, Rice suggested some questions that the correspondents could ask. The point was to elicit as many ridiculous answers as possible, so that they had choices in the editing room. “We’re on a fishing expedition,” he said.

At Ogba Market, we stopped in front of a stall that advertised herbal medicine. The crew members hopped out to interview passersby, but they were repeatedly waved off. After a few minutes, a man in a trucker cap approached the crew. “You want to talk to someone?” he asked. He led us across the street, weaving through pedestrians, cars, minibuses, trucks, motorbikes, and yellow *keke* tri-cycles, to a crowd of men gathered around a wooden table under an umbrella. Every inch of the table was covered with newspapers, laid out in neat rows and weighed down with stones. The men swarmed the camera, and soon Bhadmus was happily interviewing them about public urination in Lagos.

Later, Bhadmus explained that the men were “free readers”; in a tradition dating back to military rule, free readers crowd around newsstands all over Lagos, reading the news and chatting about it. Today, there are free-readers clubs all over Lagos; there’s even a Free Readers Association, which fights for the right of people to hang out at newsstands. Bhadmus told me that when she was a student she had frequented the free-readers club near



her house. She had been amazed by how many poor, semi-literate people she met who had informed and intelligent views on politics; other club members kept them abreast of the news. “It’s a really nice public space,” she said.

After Bhadmus interviewed dozens of readers, Rice determined that they had enough material. As we drove back to the station, I noticed caravans of cars, buses, and trucks with colorful banners moving through the streets. The local elections

were days away, and supporters of the two main parties, the A.P.C. and the P.D.P., were travelling between campaign events. Despite spending a week with a political-satire show, this was the first I had heard of the elections. A few days later, I walked out to the gate of the Channels compound and found a crowd of about forty men shouting and waving. They were members of a faction of the A.P.C.; they claimed that their candidate had been violently shut out of a primary by another group. The candidate had been attacked with a machete while trying to force his way into a house where the vote was being held, and the men were trying to get the network to cover the dispute. The candidate stumbled out of the crowd, leaning on a supporter. His shirt was torn, and when he turned around I saw that his back was drenched in blood. Williams heard the commotion and came down to interview members of the crowd. When he returned, he excitedly showed Rice a video of the protesters. Rice thought that it was a great addition to the show. “We just need to find a funny setup,” he said, and paused to think. “I guess people didn’t like the ‘Game of Thrones’ finale.”

The morning of the shoot for the pilot episode, everything seemed to go wrong. The teleprompter operator couldn’t be found. One of the producers was stuck in traffic. Rice had eaten something that disagreed with him, and, because the bathrooms still weren’t working, whenever he needed to go he had to sprint down five flights of stairs, across the courtyard, and up another three flights in the main building. “I nearly threw up on the stairs!” he said, gasping and sweating, returning from another trip. The theme music was still being assembled. It was one of the few times I saw Case lose his cool. “I don’t buy this shit,” he said, upon learning that another producer was in the hospital with an undisclosed illness. “They are not competent. Call it what you want, but that’s it.” Adding to Case’s anxiety was the fact that two representatives from the Open Society Initiative of West Africa would be sitting in on the filming.

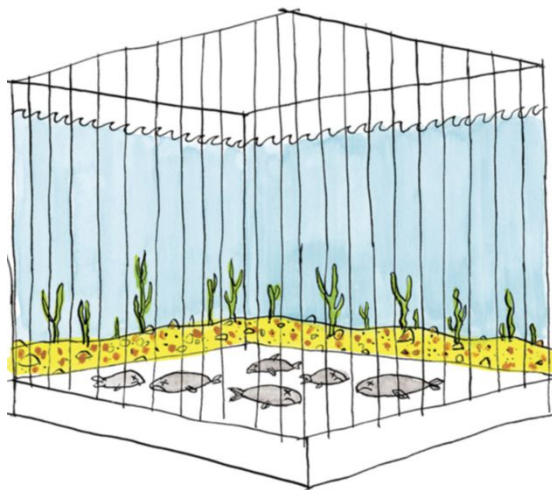
The rehearsal was rough. It took three takes to get through the first fifteen seconds of the show. The opening graphics kept freezing, and ill-timed applause cues from a producer threw off Bakassi. Case

paced around the office, drumming his pen on his “Comedy for Change” notepad, absorbing bad news like body blows.

At two-thirty, the audience—seventeen Channels employees—filed into the studio and sat in plastic chairs about thirty feet from the purple-and-gray stage. There was no camera for crowd-reaction shots, so the plan was to shoot them laughing uproariously before the show and edit in the shots later. A burly bearded correspondent who goes by the stage name Dan D’Humorous was tasked with eliciting the laughs. “It’s a live show, so laugh as if you paid for it and you need to get your money’s worth,” he said. Someone shouted at him to tell a joke. He declined. “Just imagine something hilarious,” he said. D’Humorous began to let out big, fake belly laughs. “Ha! Ha! Ha!” He raised his arms like a conductor. The audience members started to laugh, too, and as the absurdity of what they were doing dawned on them the laughs became real.

Eventually, the producers showed up and the teleprompter operator was tracked down. A headset for Bakassi replaced the white iPhone earbuds that had glared in the test episode. The script worked, more or less. The episode covered the Ooni video, a major corruption case, and a recent debate over restructuring Nigeria’s federal system. There was a field piece by Williams and D’Humorous that dealt with the Minister of Science and Technology’s triumphant announcement that Nigeria would be manufacturing its own pencils. (“What’s next, erasers?”) There was an unfortunate joke comparing a corrupt minister to a woman who couldn’t keep her legs closed. The high point, most agreed, was Bakassi’s interview with Reuben Abati, a newspaper columnist and former spokesman for Goodluck Jonathan, in which they reflected on Nigerian youth’s anger at the state of the country, and in which Bakassi pulled from him a story about the evil spirits that he believed haunted the Presidential complex. Bakassi, wearing a suit with a bright-red handkerchief, seemed energized by the presence of a live studio audience. Perhaps most important, the Open Society representatives were pleased. “It was excellent,” one of them said. “I laughed until I had tears in my eyes.”

After the taping, the crew gathered for a postmortem. Case scolded someone for letting his phone go off during



*“The mural reminds them of their natural habitat.”*

the recording. The applause sign needed to be wielded more carefully. “Everybody has areas where they can improve,” Case said. “I think, on the writing side, there were a lot of clips and—whoops.” The power went off. A few seconds later, the generator kicked in, and as the lights came back Case’s tone lifted. “It really is amazing, guys, the thing we just recorded, so why don’t you pat yourself on the backs,” he said. “It’s going to keep getting better. It’s going to be in a league of its own, and I can’t wait to read about you guys in the Emmys.” With that, the crew dispersed quickly. There was still a lot of work to do, and they had only seven days until the next episode.

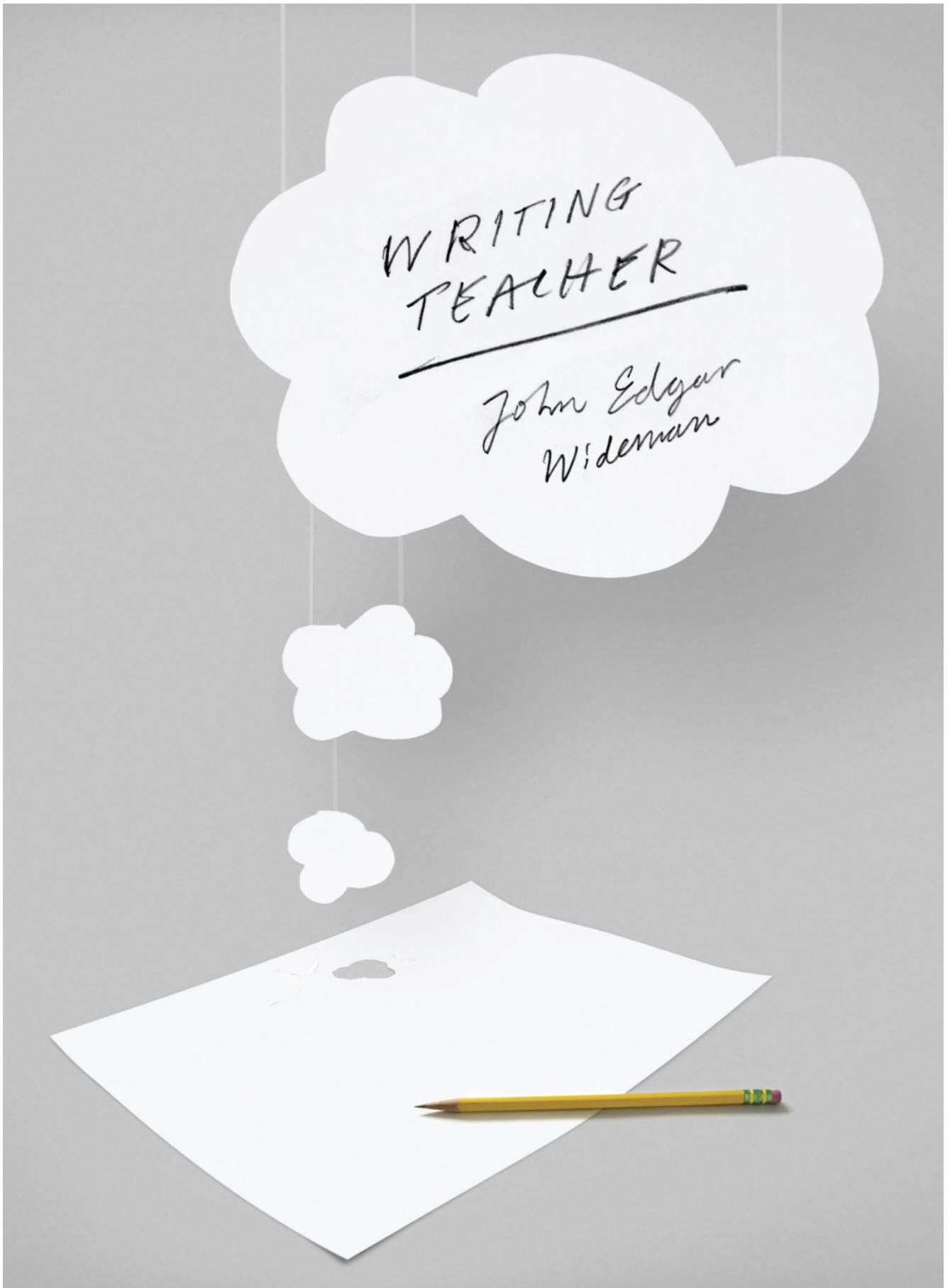
Defying technology failures, skittish lawyers, and power outages, a new episode of “The Other News” aired every Thursday evening at seven-thirty for the next twelve weeks. Nwabudike became the head producer, and, episode by episode, the flow of the show and Bakassi’s delivery improved. The first big hit was a segment in which Dan D’Humorous reported from the “jungle” of Nigerian politics, the green screen behind him filled in with a C.G.I. rain forest. Unauthorized clips of the segment started popping up all over the Internet.

Yet there were issues. “The Other News” rarely displayed the kind of critical bite that some of the writers aspired to; shots were off; the show was accompanied by a distractingly fake laugh track. There was a minor controversy, after a

well-known actress appeared on the show and said that women bore some responsibility for preventing domestic abuse by not provoking their husbands. The incident made Case cringe, but the outrage that it sparked online raised the show’s profile. Before the end of Season 1, Channels had secured enough sponsors to renew the show. Sustainability achieved. When I stopped by Case’s apartment recently, he said that the final episode had been the highest-rated show in its time slot, reaching 1.7 million viewers. P.M.I.’s contract had ended; the staff was on its own.

The third episode of Season 2 was about to air. We sat in his basement and watched it live on the Channels YouTube page. There was a long piece on a new bill to spend a billion dollars fighting Boko Haram; the bill had attracted criticism, because President Buhari had boasted in 2015 that the insurgent group was “technically defeated.” Case was impressed. “Man, this is going to go viral,” he said, at the end of a segment that made fun of the role that Buhari, a former general, had played in three military coups before being elected President. Afterward, he showed me a rough draft of some surveys indicating that the show was having a positive impact on its viewers’ political knowledge. But he seemed more excited by a different sign of success. He had heard a rumor that a rival TV station was creating its own political-satire show. “You know you’re onto something hot when people are copying it,” he said. ♦





I hear from my former students occasionally. A few have gone on to accomplish remarkable work. Hear equally from the ordinary and, remarkable. Requests for recommendations, announcements of new jobs, marriages, children, a photo, copy of a book or film script, story in a magazine or anthology, perhaps inscribed personally to me or sent directly from the publisher. The gift of a snapshot, book, or story meant to break silence that settles in after they leave the university, the silence that being here, a student for a semester in my fiction-writing class, doesn't break, silence of living ordinary lives we all endure whether our writing is deemed remarkable by others or not.

A current student, Teresa McConnell, wants to help other people. The story she submits to my fiction-writing class, though not very long, is quite ambitious. It wishes to save the life of its main character, a young woman of color, a few years out of high school, single, child to support, no money, shitty job, living with her mother who never misses an I-told-you-so chance to criticize her daughter's choices. Voice of the character my student invents to narrate the story reveals the young colored woman to be bright, articulate, thoughtful, painfully aware of how race, gender, age, poverty trap her. Worse now because a baby daughter is trapped with her. Lack of understanding not the narrator's problem. She's stifled by lack of resources, options.

What's a poor girl to do. My student's story, like the fictional young woman it portrays, begins and ends stuck in the midst of an apparently insoluble quandary. If the writer wants her fiction to aid actual people outside it, desires her words to be more than a well-intentioned display of good intentions, more than a dreary recital of a plight suffered by countless young, underprivileged women, the story requires help.

A desire to help is admirable, I think, and in order to help, I will set aside, for the moment, my doubts. Perform the job I'm paid for. Concentrate upon being supportive. Commend strong passages, point out inconsistencies, transparencies characteristic of an undergrad first draft, which, after all, the

story is. Console Miss McConnell that every story—by a novice or Nobel laureate—begins life as a first draft.

I appreciate Miss McConnell's attempt to step outside herself, beyond this cloistered university world where the skin of an overwhelming majority of the students, including her skin, betrays no trace of colored-people's color. My color, by the way. And lucky for her, not hers, since her father a bigot she will admit later, and he flat-out despises colored people. Her mother is different, she adds quietly. Mom taught me to respect people of all races, she says. And I don't ask Teresa McConnell, but I'm certainly curious which parent contributed more to her story's determination to help.

My student's story stuck like most people's because there's no place for it to go. Except to explore the sadness of wanting things not to be the way they indisputably are. A story begins with an author's desire to write it. Starts with a person the author happens to be.

Should I tell my student that in order to overcome the smothering inertia of helplessness, I'm currently reading biographies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Catherine the Great, a novel, "A Dream in Polar Fog," about the Chukchi people, Joseph McElroy's stories in "Night Soul." Contemplating retirement from my day job of college teaching. Resisting the possibility age might retire me from fiction writing. Coping with the likelihood that neither my imprisoned brother nor son will be released anytime soon. Negotiating with sexual desire, strong as ever, though it less reliably elicits a hard-on to fulfill it. Unlearning old-school verities of time, space, memory, identity while I shiver in the icy wind of the only certainty granted by a long, precipitously up and down life—its absolute extinction.

Of course hearing my story does not fix hers. Perhaps I should begin our conference by talking about a different story. Not mine, not hers. One less personal, though familiar to us both. For instance, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale about an emperor's invisible new clothes. Tell her I loved it the very first time I read it or it was read to me, a colored boy hungry for books, for stories that rescued him from

the dismal poverty and unpromising futures of his life. Confess to her my instant envy of the bold kid who exposes a naked emperor. Explain how Andersen's seductively simple fable has grown more complicated as I've aged. Its subject not a guileless, helplessly honest boy, not the foibles of a particular pitiful guy who happens to be emperor, but empire. Empire's power to enthrall, lobotomize, oppress. To ensnare us within our own fantasies. Our vanity, willed innocence, terror.

How can I teach Miss McConnell that it is impossible to write a story without a naked little wannabe emperor squirreled away inside it. Let's undress your story, Miss McConnell, I could say. Except that invitation too suggestive for a teacher to propose to a student. Even though it would be easier to school her if she, I, the story naked.

Instead I play it safer. We keep on our clothes. Stick close to the text. In its very first sentence, with its fifth word, Miss McConnell, your story addresses a "you." The character who is your narrator warns that "you," reader, would be pummeled by tiny fists if her daughter burst suddenly from the phone booth of her crib, masked, caped, armed with the superpowers all down-and-out, unwed teen mothers daydream for their kids. To avoid this beating, reader, "you" better listen up. Change your ways. Surrender privileges that victimize others and drive them to strike back with baby punches or terrorist bombs.

I advise my students that identifying readers as the enemy too early in a story not the wisest strategy. Nobody likes being called out. Pronounced guilty without a trial. Readers bad-mouthed are same readers the story endeavors to woo. The "you" in Teresa McConnell's first sentence too inclusive. Casts a net wide enough to catch her racist dad, her tolerant mom, me, you, people who sneer at reading fiction, curious people who love to read stories. No story able to help everybody. No story is smarter than all its readers.

Lighten up, I remind myself. Don't sound like the narrator's carping mother. Attempts to be playful a virtue of Miss McConnell's draft. Why shouldn't her story, like this story, pose a few



teasing, little, unthreatening threats.

In spite of my intention not to infringe upon any students' writerly prerogatives, I feel obliged to remind them that making up a story also entails making up both an author and an audience. Word by word a story welcomes some readers, shoos others away. Paints faces on invisible characters outside it as well as inside. A face for the author hovering precariously both inside and out. Author who swoops around at warp speed in galaxies no one else has ever seen.

We, my student and I, not characters in a sci-fi drama located in hyperspace. We are seated at a small, round table inside an office outside the story. An office set aside for me a few hours a week inside a university building. Outside the brick building a large city spreads and if this borrowed university cubicle owned a window, we could see whether snow still falls outside as it was falling earlier this morning on a city that starts or ends at a wall of concrete, steel, and glass towers lining the sea. Inside this city is a house my student resides in with her family, not rich not poor, not a colored family, so she's not a colored daughter falling between society's cracks, unwed, broke, child to raise, stuck in a dead-end job, bills, bills, more bills and more trashy jobs to pay them until the end of time. No, that's definitely not her, according to the backstory Teresa McConnell recites as she speaks briefly about herself. My curiosity, no matter how professorially, how gently I probe, would be invasive of her privacy, so I don't pursue more than the little she volunteers. Story she's written for my class enough. Should reveal all the author wishes readers, including me, to know about her.

We're not characters inside the story we sit and discuss inside this office. We only pretend we are. No one's life is at stake. Words on the page are the reason we are meeting. My student's words are what they are. Words. They contain the story, although you could just as appropriately suggest the story contains them. You could say the text is what I desire to help or say that the fact she's written a text intended to help other people is why I want to help her. None of the above helps much, you might be thinking. World remains

as it is—resistant, opaque, you may also be thinking, and is the “you” I'm imagining the same presumptive “you” her story calls out in its initial sentence.

One thing for certain I can say: my student's not the young brown woman inside the story. No one in the universe is that young colored woman. However, in one game a story can play she exists. In another game she doesn't. In another game no game exists, only you and I exist, and not for sure, not for long.

Which game are you playing, I could ask Teresa McConnell. Are readers supposed to pretend you exist or don't exist inside your story. Both. Neither. Are good writers able to help readers negotiate such issues. Does compassion trump technique or technique trump compassion. Is it O.K. to borrow another's identity in order to perpetrate a good deed. If you don't obtain the other's permission, are you an identity thief.

Isn't your story, like every story, a masquerade. Why do you believe your disguise is working. Do you care if your mask slips and uncovers your face. I often worry mine's slipping.

So let's look closer. Together, Teresa. I believe we both care. Look right here, page 3, where your young woman's infuriated by a smug, smart-ass emergency-room clerk who assumes that the female in front of him, because she is young and colored, won't own health insurance to pay a doctor



to sew up a bloody gash in her daughter's head. Why not have your young woman kill him and turn your story into that story.

Show not tell. Don't bother telling me or telling a young woman you are on her side and wish to help. She doesn't need that kind of help. She's quite as capable as you are of dealing with an obnoxious clerk. Your story depicts her as stuck much deeper. She needs more than words, your story

says. So maybe chopping off the clerk's head a way out. A way out of the story and out of yourself, too. Risk letting her do what you would never do. Then maybe the young woman will speak for herself, not you. Speak with action not words. Break free, break bad outside the story's boundaries.

Nobody wrote John Brown's story before he committed the acts that created his story. Nobody could pretend to be him or speak for him or hate or love him until John Brown smote his enemies in Kansas and perpetrated a bloody raid on Harpers Ferry to free slaves. No John Brown story, no John Brown, no Civil War until he showed the way. His way. His acts. The war inside him exploding outside.

Who believes they can experience what another person experiences. Wouldn't a person be many people if such an exchange possible.

I wish I were in love with my student. Maybe it would be easier. Maybe for thirty minutes in this office, maybe during the moments I desire to help her, I am. I do. And help myself. The pair of us celebrating the end of empire. Empire that traps us and neither of us loves. Of course we don't. We wait for it to tip over, fall down and go boom. A vast reverberating, silent crash changing everything. Us, this office, university, city outside, nation inside which the city resides, nation inside the idea of empire wrapped so carefully strand by strand, silk and steel cable of spider webbing wrapped round and round endlessly, a transparent cocoon holding everything inside, binding everything together until in one quiet, crystal-clear instant we decide to say—No. Nothing's there. Emperor naked. Empire naked.

We wait and wait for the moment to arrive. Wait for the time to celebrate. Time to love. We understand empire a chimera, a bad idea. Same bad idea over and over again. Empire dead. Long live empire.

Dark, dark, darker when empire failing. We chew on nothing and nothing lasts a long long time. We dream and starve and die. We wait. Hope to survive as subjects of the next empire.

So here we sit, my student, Teresa McConnell, and I, awaiting our liberation, our chance to help one another.

To celebrate. In this office, this moment. Though around us, inside us, something keeps us in place. A story more powerful, more hungry, more implacable than any one of ours will ever be.

Anyway, the story on the table not mine, I say. It's absolutely yours, I reassure my student, and you must always feel free, feel more than welcome, Teresa, to discard my advice, anybody's advice.

She smiles. I think she's beginning to relax in spite of the uncomfortable surroundings, this unnatural exchange. I believe she senses my desire to help. Perhaps she's offering me what she expects for her story, for herself. No more, no less than the benefit of the doubt. I repeat to her that I truly have no desire nor interest in seeing her change what she's written so it conforms to my ideas. Difficult enough, impossible enough, I say, to revise my own stuff.

She nods and smiles again. On the table her story lies open to the third page, where a young admissions clerk insults a young, brown-skinned mother.

Tomorrow, I want to confide to Teresa. Tomorrow, Teresa, I will gaze up from words on the page and our eyes will meet. Tomorrow, I will tell her, I'm going to look into the possibility of obtaining a weapon. Haven't decided yet the best way to deploy it, if and when I get one. Whatever kind of weapon it turns out to be. Arming myself is the first step. Figuring out the next step the harder part—scale, location, how to maximize what might very well be my single chance to help, chance to inflict damage on the empire. Assassinate a sadistic prison guard, chairperson of a corrupt, merciless pardons-and-parole board. Blow up a building, an airplane, take hostages. Write a story. Fall in love. Raid Harpers Ferry.

Your asshole clerk, I should say. Deal with him. Your way, Teresa. Marry him. Murder him. Whatever. Your way, I will reiterate. Then I must be careful to add, Please ignore my crazy digressions, my playful revisions. They are not as innocent as the baby fists in your story.

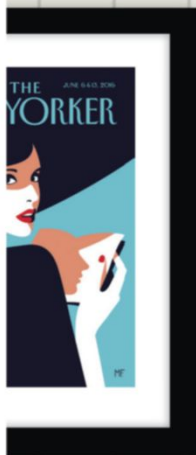
Inside my head I see empires of my desire, empires of my revenge



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THE  
NEW YORKER

## MY PLOT

It seemed as good a time as any to buy  
A cemetery plot. The price is bound  
To spike, the local real estate being  
    What it is  
For both the living and the dead, and seeing  
How few opportunities to make a sound  
Decision are left as our debilities multiply,  
  
I signed up for a double bed, the gruff  
Six inches above an adamant rockledge here  
That doesn't allow for anything but ashes—  
    Yours and mine,  
I trust. Why molder while the family rehashes  
As ghosts the grievances that went in one ear . . . ?  
Weren't the wars one survived aboveground enough?

While waving the check to dry its bottom line,  
I asked the gravedigger who is it owns  
The space next to ours, now a crabgrass aisle.  
    He scratched his chin,  
Then named a woman whose flaking shingle style  
Is eight down from mine, a woman I've known,  
Good God, for decades, who's now by chance assigned

To be playing second harp at the stand right next  
To mine. Mistress Quickly, who has the dirt  
On everybody—the ironies of the hereafter!  
    And that very  
Night, at the village Costume Ball—the laughter,  
The band, the strings of lights, the married flirt  
And the divorcée pretending to be perplexed—

My friends and neighbors were having the time of their lives.

In fact, it was life itself—fizzy and full  
Of contrivances to keep itself afloat.  
    Ahead by three  
Martinis, I heard a snigger-quote-unquote  
About my disguise, admittedly an eyeful—  
That frosted mophead Andy Warhol, deprived  
  
Of pallor or purpose, so trite I am at once  
Singled out in my turtleneck as a fool.  
But by now the sozzled dancers are circling—it's late—  
    The bonfire  
In the middle of the green. I ingratiate  
Myself clumsily, a minor Lord of Misrule,  
Into the conga line of squeals and grunts.

And of course it is *her* hand I'm holding. I can see  
Her face in the firelight, podgy and flushed,  
Her head thrown back, howling, on layers of neck,  
    Greasy, joyous,  
Clearly in charge of this ghoulissh discothèque  
Where flappers and freaks, titans and nuns are squashed  
As she leads their silhouettes toward eternity.

Didn't Warhol say it was a nostalgia for *now*  
That drives us baby boomers—or *then*, do I mean?  
Or for however much time is left to ponder  
    What it was  
We swore we would never play false or squander.  
I watch us wamble down Water Street between  
The moment and the mortuary, somehow

Reassured that when we end up at the Point  
To await the first clumsy hints of dawn,

topple and kick up clouds of dust around my feet as they bury themselves, words spoken and unspoken. I suppress my dream of power, a fantasy I might possess an idea to improve myself or society, let alone possess the means to show any single person what she should or shouldn't do next. I revise. Lean closer to my student for emphasis.

Your clerk, Teresa. This is the point or rather he's the point where for me the energies within your story converge, crackle, glow. He's about your age, your social and economic class more or less, your color more or less, a color, wisely or not, unspecified by your story, but hardly irrelevant, I'd guess, since you imply his color inspires his ugly reaction to the young colored woman.

I think or rather my opinion or rather what I feel is that the clerk is you, Teresa. Something about you, about your father, your mother, me. We're all inside that young guy and he's inside us and that's what allows him to be able and willing to marshal hundreds of years of history, of pillage, blood, suffering, and squash someone or maybe not try to squash, maybe just contain, maybe just loosen a little or sometimes just squeeze the wraps slightly tighter to test, to practice controlling them. Exercising them to make sure they are in place. To be certain they include, surround, protect us. Like the bonds of a story that hold it together and make sense of everything. Of a moment in which the clerk finds his job compels him

to serve a young colored female who by God should expect nothing from him, who on the contrary should be serving him or grateful to him for whatever service she receives, who should make it apparent to him, always with humility and deference, that she's well aware that the invisible strands permitting her to believe she has a right to ask him for help also license him, as he performs his numbing job, to despise her, abuse her, despise himself as he pretends to help so empire won't crash down on both their heads.

Deal with him, with that, Teresa. As I must deal with my responsibilities. Teacher and elder. Subject of empire. Inventor of fictions.

Should I also share with my student



I'll have remembered why our gritty cremains,  
    Mine and yours,  
Will be kept out of sight. A closet shelf explains  
As much as the shovel of earth and a square of lawn . . .  
(—I grin my thanks to the stranger passing a joint.

To take a toke from another tip of light  
I duck behind a rock, and there is Kaye,  
My once and future neighbor, crouched, staring  
    At the sea,  
I sit beside her and take her hand, somewhere in  
Outer space. I offer the roach. "Hey!  
Why not!" Two fingernails hold on tight.)

. . . Explains at least why the dead are shown the door,  
Written out of the script, the tale having taken  
A sudden turn elsewhere and its onetime lead  
    Overnight  
The know-it-alls decide has gone to seed,  
Always unfairly, perhaps unwisely forsaken  
In favor of some comer the director's fallen for.

"Not many nights like this," she slurs. Or not  
Many more, I think to add, but stop  
Myself and toss my goofy wig away  
    As if it were  
The silvery moon unwanted now that day-  
Break's come, whose calendar-page splendor's a flop,  
A drop curtain shown up as both garish and squat.

Weariness and booze and dope can't numb  
My sense that Kaye, old girl, will be just fine.

I look at her again, I look and see  
    Her acceptance,  
Her ease in exchanging gloom for gaiety.  
The getup for each is headed for the clothesline  
To be aired and beaten until the time has come.

"A little sad?" She nods and I know why—  
Midnight's slew of stars, our motley friends  
The comedy's cast with its delicious plot—  
    Revelation,  
Forgiveness and love—the curtain's not  
Coming up on someday soon, no amends  
To be restored where she and I will lie.

I help her up. We're both a bit unsteady.  
When I offer to brush the sand off the back  
Of her Jackie O culottes, she lifts her shades:  
    "Whatever."  
The hour's at hand to brave the barricades  
Of rolling eyes and marketeers and quacks.  
Arm in arm, we both must sense we're ready.

But the view from our private boxes will make  
nothing plain.  
Where are the shepherd, the king's lost daughter,  
the prince?  
There was a letter and a sip of poisoned rum—  
    Now, nothing.  
"Bravo!" is a boy calling his dog to come.  
We'll never know how the story ends, since  
The applause will only be the autumn rain.

—J. D. McClatchy

an unsettling image that intrudes these days when I attempt to situate myself within this nation we inhabit. How I see young people returning from war. Daily, coast to coast, they are landing here and there in small airports and large, in bus depots, unpatrolled spots along interstates, smell of war still in their clothes, in their nostrils, blood dark on hands they furiously, secretly, silently scrub and scrub like Lady Macbeth, wasn't it, I think. Think maybe I'll teach "Macbeth" next semester or something from Shakespeare anyway. "Tempest," perhaps, or Melville's "Benito Cereno" or narratives from Chernobyl that Svetlana Alexievich recorded or Ellison's "Invisible Man," because what else to say to them, how to help.

A few of these young people may receive a government bounty for school and a few of that few might migrate to a class like yours, Teresa, this class in which you seek help to write a story. A story to help others, story for a class in which my job is to help. The prospect terrifies me.

Whether or not any survivors of war wind up in my creative-writing classroom, where are the rest. The ones I think of as veterans returning, and the ones killed in action, and the appalling number who die here inside our country each week by their own hands.

How many alive only an instant in these killing fields before they are gone forever. How many does it take to disturb the frozen quiet, black glisten of

empire. To penetrate, agitate, produce movement. Not the empire's dead invisible carcass thrashing darkly. Something else moving I try to detect in your eyes. In your story.

Where do they go. The ones coming back from combat, jails, exile, from being forgotten, tortured, ignored, from being buried alive. Not spoken of. Spoken for. Your young colored woman, her baby, that kid working at the hospital desk. You. Me.

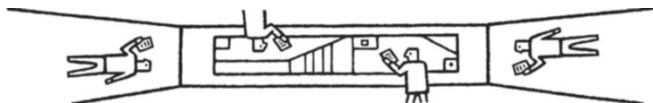
I poke out a hand to break the silence as we both rise. We shake shyly. Our chairs groan chair noise. See you next week, Teresa. ♦

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#### THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST

Zadie Smith, Edwidge Danticat, and others read their short stories from the magazine.

# THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

## VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

*Barbie, Bratz, and the end of originality.*

BY JILL LEPORE

Bratz dolls have swollen heads, pouty lips, spindly limbs, and chunky-heeled shoes. Their waists are barely wider than their necks. Their eyes and heads are so big and their noses so small that if it weren't for their *Penthouse* makeup (icy eyeshadow, cat-eye liner, glistening lip gloss, and eyelashes as long as their fingers) and their come-hither clothes (crop tops, hot pants, micro-minis, and kinky boots), they'd look like emaciated babies, Kewpie dolls in a time of famine. Carter Bryant was thirty-one and working at Mattel in August of 2000, designing clothes for Barbie, when he created Bratz, though he later said—and his legal defense turned on this claim—that he'd got the idea for the dolls while on a seven-month break from Mattel, two years earlier. He drew some sketches of clothes-obsessed, bratty-looking teen-agers—"The Girls with a Passion for Fashion!" he called them—and made a prototype by piecing together bits and bobs that he found in a trash bin at work and in his own collection at home: a doll head, a plastic body, and Ken boots. He meant for his Bratz to come in pick-your-own skin colors and to have monetizably vague ethnic names. Two weeks before Bryant quit Mattel, he sold his idea to a Mattel competitor, MGA Entertainment, which brought out four Bratz girls in 2001—Jade, Cloe, Yasmin, and Sasha—the first dolls to successfully rival Barbie since she made her debut, in 1959, in a zebra-striped swimsuit and stilettos, eyebrows arched, waist pinched.

Mattel sued Bryant; Mattel sued MGA; MGA sued Mattel. In the course of years of legal wrangling, hundreds of

millions of dollars changed hands, but I'm afraid I couldn't possibly tell you exactly how much because, as talking Barbie used to say, her pull string wriggling, "Math class is tough!"

The feud between Barbie and Bratz occupies the narrow space between thin lines: between fashion and porn, between originals and copies, and between toys for girls and rights for women. In 2010, Alex Kozinski, then the chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, who presided over *Mattel v. MGA*, wrote in his opinion that most of what makes a fashion doll desirable is not protectable intellectual property, because there are only so many ways to make a female body attractive. "Little girls buy fashion dolls with idealized proportions which means slightly larger heads, eyes and lips; slightly smaller noses and waists; and slightly longer limbs than those that appear routinely in nature," Kozinski wrote, giving "slightly" a meaning I never knew it had. But only so much exaggeration is possible, he went on. "Make the head too large or the waist too small and the doll becomes freakish." I'd explain how it is that anyone could look at either a Barbie or a Bratz doll and not find it freakish, except that such an explanation is beyond me. As a pull-string Barbie knockoff once told Lisa Simpson, "Don't ask me! I'm just a girl!"

Orly Lobel, a professor at the University of San Diego School of Law, has recently published "You Don't Own Me: How *Mattel v. MGA Entertainment Exposed Barbie's Dark Side*" (Norton). For the book, a hair-raising account of a Barbie Dreamhouse-size Jarndyce and

Jarndyce, Lobel interviewed Judge Kozinski over lunch and happened to mention that, when she was a girl, her mother, a psychologist, told her that Barbie dolls were bad for girls' body image. Kozinski professed astonishment. "The only thing wrong that I saw when I held Barbie," he said, joking, "is when I lift her skirt there is nothing underneath." Last month, Kozinski resigned from the federal judiciary after more than a dozen women, including two of his own former law clerks, accused him of inappropriate behavior. Justice is hard!

Before Barbie, dolls were babies, to be fed and burped and bathed and wheeled around in prams and put down for naps. Barbie, who has hips and breasts, was a ripoff of a magnificently racy German doll called Lilli. Lilli was inspired by the title character in a *Playboy*-style comic strip; she works as a secretary but is usually barely dressed, like the time she shows up at the office in a bikini. "So dumb!" she says. "When I wake up in the morning, I think I'm still on vacation!" ("Gentlemen prefer Lilli," her slogan went.) Ruth Handler, who co-founded Mattel with her husband in 1945, bought more than a dozen Lillis while on a tour of Europe with her children Barbie and Ken in 1956. She had the dolls shipped back home to California, and charged the Mattel designer Jack Ryan, a lesser Hugh Hefner, with making an American Lilli. Handler's husband declared that she was "anatomically perfect." Mattel introduced its doll as Barbie, Teen Age Fashion Model.

Ruth Handler elaborated on Barbie's





*At stake in the legal clash between Barbie and Bratz was a bid for the corporate ownership of sexual politics.*





*“Do I really have to add ‘Just kidding’ after everything I say?”*

German origins only after Ryan, a man she called “the world’s greatest swinger,” began claiming that the idea for Barbie was his, not hers. (“He couldn’t think of anything original,” Handler said about Ryan, “but once you led him, and said what he should make, then he figured out how to make it happen.”) Handler said she named the doll after her daughter, but Ryan insisted that he was the one who named her, after a different Barbara, his wife. (Another of Ryan’s five wives, Zsa Zsa Gabor, claimed, after divorcing him, that she hadn’t been able to bear the fur-lined sex dungeon in his Bel Air mansion.) In 1961, Lilli’s manufacturer sued Mattel, charging that the company had copied Lilli “one to one,” having modified her “only very slightly; et voilà, Barbie was created.” Handler liked to say that Lilli was a freak, that she had an “elongated and distorted kind of look,” while Barbie was entirely natural. “I wanted an American teen-ager, but I wanted a narrow waist, narrow ankles, and boobs,” Handler said. In fact, the two dolls are nearly identical. Mattel settled the case out of court, and bought Lilli’s copyright in 1964. In 1978, Handler, having been investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission, was indicted for fraud; she main-

tained her innocence but pleaded no contest. Two years later, Ryan sued Mattel; Mattel settled. In 1991, after suffering a stroke, Ryan shot himself in the head. Handler, who, after battling breast cancer, had founded a company, Nearly Me, that made prosthetic breasts, died in 2002, the year Bratz won the Toy of the Year Award.

Notwithstanding her lurid origins, Barbie was the world’s top-selling toy for girls for a half century. Mattel is believed to have sold nearly a billion Barbie dolls. Sales have lately been falling (despite Mattel’s introduction, in 2016, of “body diversity” Barbies that come in different sizes, shapes, and colors). Still, nine in ten American girls between the ages of three and ten own at least one Barbie doll, and, even without counting those buried in landfills, there might well be more Barbies in the United States than there are people.

Barbie is both a relic from another era and a bellwether of changing ideas about women and work, sex, and men. Her 1959 debut coincided with the release of the erotically charged film “Pillow Talk.” Doris Day, who looks something like Barbie, plays an extravagantly fashionable interior decorator obliged to share a party line with a rakish play-

boy (Rock Hudson). They flirt over the phone. “This career girl had everything but love,” the film’s trailer announced, introducing “the most sparkling sexcapade that ever winked at convention.” The playboy has a switch in his apartment with which he can lock the door from the couch, so that his dates can’t escape. The interior decorator, who fends off all manner of advances from her clients, wants nothing more than to be carried into the playboy’s lair. (Much of the winking at convention had to do with Hudson’s sexuality: at one point, he plays a straight man pretending to be a gay man; at another point, he is taken for a pregnant man.)

In 1961, Barbie began dating Ken, a Rock Hudson look-alike named after Ruth Handler’s son. Their sexcapade sparkled. “I have a date tonight!” an early talking Barbie said in 1968. “Would you like to go shopping?” Originally marketed to girls between the ages of nine and twelve, the career girl and her beach-blanket-bingo boyfriend weathered the women’s movement and the sexual revolution by appealing, each year, to younger and younger children, which also made Barbie appear, each year, older and older. By the nineteen-nineties, when three out of four women between twenty-five and fifty-four worked outside the home and Mattel was taking in a billion dollars annually in Barbie sales alone, Barbie had become a plaything for three-year-olds—girls who wore footie pajamas and pull-up diapers and who drank out of sippy cups, girls who were still toddlers. Barbie wasn’t their baby; Barbie wasn’t the teenager they wanted to grow up to be; Barbie was their mommy.

If “Pillow Talk” marked the advent of Barbie, the movie version of “Bridget Jones’s Diary,” released in theatres in 2001, marked the debut of Bratz. At a failing London publishing house, another career girl, played by Renée Zellweger, works for Daniel Cleaver, played by Hugh Grant. Much of their office flirting, conducted not by telephone but by e-mail, concerns her clothes: micro-minis and see-through blouses—Bratz clothes.

DANIEL: If walking past my office was attempt to demonstrate presence of skirt, can only say that it has failed parlously—Cleaver.

BRIDGET: Shut up, please. I am very busy

and important. P.S. How dare you sexually harass me in this impertinent manner?

DANIEL: Message Jones. Mortified to have caused offense. Will avoid all non-P.C. overtones in future. Deeply apologetic. P.S. Like your tits in that top.

MGA sold ninety-seven million dollars' worth of Bratz dolls in 2001 and a billion dollars' worth in 2003. Mattel began to panic. To the press, as Lobel recounts, Isaac Larian, MGA's C.E.O., offered all sorts of explanations about where the idea for Bratz had come from, including from a focus group or from his daughter, Jasmine. Eventually, according to Lobel, an anonymous letter tipped Mattel off to the truth: Bratz had been created not by Isaac Larian or by any of his children but by Carter Bryant, who, when he was hired by Mattel, had signed an intellectual-property agreement: everything he created during his employment at Mattel, it said, belonged to Mattel.

“What does it mean to own an idea?” Oren Bracha, a professor at the University of Texas School of Law, asks in “Owning Ideas: The Intellectual Origins of American Intellectual Property, 1790-1909” (Cambridge). Intellectual property takes the form of patents and copyrights, legal instruments derived from the practices of fifteenth-century Italian republics. In Anglo-American law, the first patents and copyrights were issued in the sixteenth century, although they weren't rights; they were privileges, favors granted by the crown, such as the patent that Elizabeth I granted to Sir Walter Raleigh in 1584 for the “discovery” of Virginia and to “Have holde & enjoye the saide Land,” or the copyright that James I granted in 1611 to printers of what became known as the King James Bible. As Bracha points out, early patents and copyrights were not understood to involve ideas. That transformation came in the course of the eighteenth century, when the courts began to understand ideas as things that could be owned and ownership of them as having the characteristics of property rights.

In 1787, patents and copyrights had only lately taken on this meaning and force in English common law when the U.S. Constitution granted Congress the power “to promote the prog-

ress of science and useful arts by securing for limited times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive rights to their respective writings and discoveries.” In the late eighteenth century, a property in ideas came to rest in authors and inventors, on the theory, foundational to possessive individualism, that the act of creation is the act of an individual. Not everyone agreed with this premise, which pits the property rights of authors and inventors against a public interest in books and inventions. Benjamin Franklin famously refused to patent any of his inventions, on the ground that, he explained, “as we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours; and this we should do freely and generously.”

Few followed his lead. Instead, nineteenth-century Americans “democratized invention,” according to the economist Zorina Khan, granting to ordinary

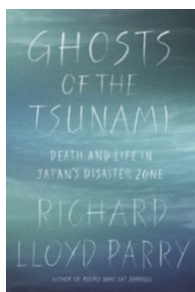
people, as a universal right, what had once been a privilege granted to an elite few. They also adopted a Romantic notion of authorship—fetishizing the originality of the fevered, Byronic genius—though jurists like the Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story found the standard of unstained originality all but useless for adjudicating copyright disputes. “No man creates a new language for himself, at least if he be a wise man,” Story wrote. “Virgil borrowed much from Homer . . . and even Shakespeare and Milton, so justly and proudly our boast as the brightest originals, would be found to have gathered much from the abundant stores of current knowledge and classical studies in their days.”

The reason to protect a property in ideas, at least originally, was to promote creativity both by rewarding authors and inventors for what they do and by, after a fixed time, releasing their ideas to the world. The standard of originality in intellectual property has,





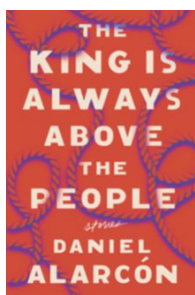
## BRIEFLY NOTED



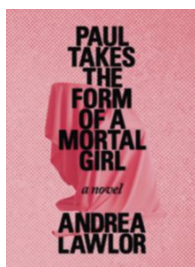
**Ghosts of the Tsunami**, by *Richard Lloyd Parry* (*MCD*). Among the thousands who perished in the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011 were seventy-four children from a single elementary school, the focus of this examination of the tragedy's aftermath. When, after months of digging for remains, municipal workers gave up, one mother, intent on continuing, acquired a license to operate heavy machinery. When officials sheltered behind bureaucratese with the “metallic tang of lawyerly advice,” the parents took them to court—a confrontational course that, Parry notes, was unusual within the quietist norms of Japanese democracy. With exemplary sympathy and detachment, he also writes of exorcism rituals, the many reports of ghosts reflecting the persistence of attachments between the living and the newly dead.



**What You Did Not Tell**, by *Mark Mazower* (*Other*). “How is it that the places we live in come to feel that they are ours?” a noted historian asks in this exacting memoir, which traces his family’s journey from tsarist Russia to postwar England. The story centers on his grandfather Max, the revolutionary leader of a Jewish labor movement. Max distributed fake passports, illegal weapons, and banned Yiddish tracts. By the time he was thirty-five, in 1907, he’d been arrested and sent to Siberia twice, and he fled to London. Max shared little about his life in Russia, but Mazower, plowing through letters, diaries, and archives, finds that his grandfather’s story encompasses many of the horrors of twentieth-century Europe.



**The King Is Always Above the People**, by *Daniel Alarcón* (*Riverrhead*). The intimate stories in this collection are united by a “sense of dislocation.” The protagonists, mostly male, move through various metropolises, aspiring to escape or to embrace them. In the shortest story, thousands of people build a shantytown in the course of a single moonless night; in the longest, a city boy and his father behave arrogantly in front of friends in their old home town. “Geography is an accident,” one character says. “The place you are born is simply the first place you flee.” Alarcón affectingly describes the feelings of pride and loss that come with migrating to an unfamiliar neighborhood, city, or country.



**Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl**, by *Andrea Lawlor* (*Rescue*). The shape-shifting protagonist of this sex-filled magic-realist novel, twenty-two-year-old Paul Polydoris, belongs to “all the genders,” able to change his body at will. Exploring the malleability of gender and desire, and paying homage to Virginia Woolf’s “Orlando,” the book follows Paul—sometimes Polly—as s/he searches for love and the “uncontaminated truest” self. The quest leads through New York City at the height of the AIDS crisis, Iowa City’s queer punk scene, off-season Provincetown, a womyn’s festival in Michigan, and, finally, San Francisco. Lawlor successfully mixes pop culture, gender theory, and smut, but the great achievement here is that Paul is no mere symbol but a vibrantly yearning being, “like everybody else, only more so.”

historically, been low, because everything, to some degree, copies at least part of something else. Good ideas are cobbled together out of other ideas, even bad ideas, and, for people to keep having new ideas, old ideas have to be set free. As Louis Brandeis explained in 1918, “The general rule of law is, that the noblest of human productions—knowledge, truths ascertained, conceptions, and ideas—become, after voluntary communication to others, free as the air to common use.”

The reign of authors and inventors began coming to a close in the eighteen-eighties, with the rise of corporate liberalism. Authors and inventors there might still be, but, when they were employees, their employers owned their ideas. Corporate ownership of ideas, the dramatic extension of the terms of copyright, and a wild expansion of what counts as protectable intellectual property have together undermined the original purpose of intellectual-property law. Nine out of ten patents granted in the United States are now owned by corporations. Congress passed ten copyright-extension acts in the course of the twentieth century; copyright now lasts for seventy years after the death of the author. Corporations have attempted to claim exclusive legal rights to everything from yoga moves to genetic sequences. LucasFilm, George Lucas’s company, sued two lobbying groups over the use of the phrase “star wars” to refer to the Reagan Administration’s proposed missile-defense system, and licenses the word “droid” to Verizon, even though it was coined in the nineteen-fifties, twenty years before LucasFilm used it in “Star Wars.” By the nineteen-nineties, especially after the passage of the soi-disant Mickey Mouse Protection Act, in 1998, a growing number of legal scholars had begun to question the basic assumptions of intellectual-property law, wondering whether it has ever done what it was meant to do. Insisting on a “freedom to copy,” they argued that the private rights of corporations were overrunning the public interest.

“The central narrative of intellectual property law, that legal protection against copying is necessary in order to promote creative behavior, has been subjected to surprisingly little scrutiny,”



Kate Darling and Aaron Perzanowski observe in “Creativity Without Law: Challenging the Assumptions of Intellectual Property” (New York University), a new collection of essays that looks at creative artists whose work has thrived outside the regime of intellectual property—including chefs, bartenders, pornographers, and tattoo and graffiti artists. Tattoos are protectable intellectual property, but nearly all tattoo artists operate outside that legal realm, following, instead, a set of industry norms. Pornography, which has historically been the first to adopt and adapt to new technologies, is generally lax about copyright enforcement and has instead devised a new business model, based on sharing not content but experiences. By operating outside intellectual-property law, each of these industries has thrived, both creatively and economically. A counter case could be made that industries that are vigilant about copyright infringement—action-figure franchises, say, or television sitcoms—may have made a lot of money for the corporations that own them, but the results have not generally been distinguished for their creativity.

Calls for reform, often sounded, have not been heeded. One of the loudest and sharpest critics of the intellectual-property corporate rampage was Judge Kozinski. “Overprotecting intellectual property is as harmful as underprotecting it,” he wrote, long before issuing his opinion in *Mattel v. MGA*. As Lobel reports, Kozinski is that rare bird—a judicial celebrity. He hobnobs with Hollywooders, and kept his own IMDb page, where he had personally rated more than a thousand films. A movie buff and a libertarian, Kozinski is also a free-speech advocate, a position that extends to both pornography and intellectual property. In one notable opinion, a dissent in a copyright case in which the producers of “Wheel of Fortune” had complained about a Vanna White robot in a Samsung ad, Kozinski wrote, “We call this creativity, not piracy.”

Kozinski, in other words, would appear to agree with Joseph Story and Louis Brandeis. “Nobody writes anything from scratch,” he said in an interview in 2006. “We all build on the past from a shared public domain of

ideas.” In one of the darker ironies of this saga, Kozinski, a jurist known for his promotion of the freedom to copy, was felled by a social movement that involves the repetition of endlessly similar stories and calls itself #MeToo.

“They cannot keep making dolls like this! Something has to be done!” Lisa Simpson fumes, hopelessly, in a 1994 episode of “The Simpsons.” If sexy dolls for little girls have never strayed far from either pornography or debates about intellectual property, they’ve also never strayed far from the politics of the workplace. When Lisa and Marge visit the doll company to complain, a man in a suit whistles from a boardroom to their tour guide, “Hey, Jiggles! Grab a pad and back that gorgeous butt in here!” Miffed, Lisa comes up with her own idea for a doll, a doll with “the tenacity of Nina Totenberg and the common sense of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and, to top it off, the down-to-earth good looks of Eleanor Roosevelt.” She sells exactly . . . one. Her intellectual property is worthless. As Kozinski would write in his opinion in *Mattel v. MGA*, it’s possible to make dolls that don’t look like porn stars but “there’s not a big market for fashion dolls that look like Patty and Selma Bouvier”—a reference to Lisa Simpson’s big-nosed, wide-waisted, thick-ankled aunts.

In 2004, which, as it happens, was the year that the Ninth Circuit Court judge Alex Kozinski was rated the No. 1 male Superhottie of the federal judiciary, by the now defunct legal-gossip blog *Underneath Their Robes* (John Roberts, then chief judge of the D.C. Circuit Court, was ranked No. 5), *Mattel* sued *MGA*. As the case slowly made its way to trial, Bratz sales continued to soar. Marketed as “multiethnic,” and often described as “urban,” and “street,” Bratz dolls were celebrated for racial and ethnic diversity and greeted as markers of the “browning of America.” Their popularity in middle-American suburbia tracked the spreading influence of hip-hop and rap, including hip-hop and rap’s representation of girls and women. (“Cutie the bomb, met her at a beauty salon,” Kanye West rapped in the chart-topping “Gold Digger” in 2005, a best-selling Bratz year. “She

went to the doctor, got lipo with your money.”) *Mattel* had been far worse than tone-deaf on race: it once released a doll called Oreo Barbie, which came in both black and white versions. But Bratz made race into a consumer accessory, and, as the cultural critic Lisa Guerrero has pointed out, Jade, Cloe, Yasmin, Sasha, and the rest of the Bratz never work; they only shop. By 2006, the year the activist Tarana Burke founded an organization called Just Be Inc. to raise awareness about the sexual abuse of black and brown girls, using the slogan “Me Too,” Bratz dolls were outselling Barbies in England, Australia, and South Africa and competing well in the United States, where sales of Barbie dolls were down thirteen per cent, notwithstanding the introduction of the truly porny collectors’ edition Lingerie Barbie, who, in a pink bustier and peekaboo peignoir, looks like nothing so much as a heavily drugged Marilyn Monroe about to pass out.

*Mattel v. MGA* finally reached a California district court in 2008—the year that Judge Kozinski, who, if the stories told about him are to be believed, appears to have fancied himself a “like your tits in that top” sort of boss, was the subject of a judicial inquiry for posting pornographic images to his public Web site, [alex.kozinski.com](http://alex.kozinski.com)—including, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, “a photo of naked women on all fours painted to look like cows.” Perhaps inevitably, pornography played a role in the *Mattel* case, too. During the discovery phase of the initial trial, Lobel reports, a California district-court judge granted *Mattel*’s attorneys permission to scan Carter Bryant’s computer for evidence. On that computer, they found pornography, and also software used to wipe hard drives. During the trial, the judge allowed *Mattel*’s lawyers to introduce the pornography as evidence, and to question him about it. In the end, the district-court jury ruled in *Mattel*’s favor, awarding the company a hundred million dollars, a tenth of the one billion that *Mattel* had sought. Kozinski, meanwhile, was reprimanded for posting pornography, but, after apologizing and shutting down his Web site, he remained on the bench, which is how he came to adjudicate the doll wars when, on appeal, *Mattel v. MGA* went

to Kozinski's court in 2009, Barbie's fiftieth birthday.

"Who owns Bratz?" Kozinski asked at the opening of his landmark opinion. Not Mattel was his answer, in a ruling in which he listed a series of errors made by the lower court, including its finding that the features of an idealized female body were ideas that anyone could own. "America thrives on competition," Kozinski declared. "Barbie, the all-American girl, will, too."

Kozinski's ruling sent the case back to the district court for a second trial, where, as Lobel expertly explains, much turned on MGA's lawyer Jennifer Keller's questioning of the Mattel C.E.O., Robert Eckert.

"Say I am eighteen, doodling away. I place my doodles in my parents' house in one of the drawers of my teen-age closet," Keller said. "Twenty years later, I am hired by Mattel. I visit my parents' home and find the doodles. Does Mattel own them?"

"Yes," Eckert said. "Probably, yes."

Aghast at Mattel's absurd overreach, the jury not only found against Mattel but found in favor of MGA's counter-suit. The judge awarded MGA more than three hundred million dollars in damages.

Some legal scholars thought that an appeal of Kozinski's opinion might carry *Barbie v. Bratz* to the Supreme Court. That never happened, but the legal battle went on with yet another lawsuit. The intellectual-property issues raised by the case have not been resolved, nor have the weightier matters of the intellectual independence of girls or the relationship between men and women at work.

Once told to be hotties (even judges wanted to be hotties!), girls were next told to empower themselves by being hot employees, as both the culture and corporations set aside long-standing concerns about sexual harassment in the workplace—abandoning possible societal, industry-wide, or even governmental remedies—in favor of sex-positive corporate feminism. The 2013 publication of Sheryl Sandberg's "Lean In" marked a steepening in the decline of structural efforts to reform workplaces. Instead of fighting for equal pay, equal work, and family leave, women were told that they needed to empower them-

selves, one by one, through power dressing and personal exertion. Unsurprisingly, Barbie and Bratz leaned in, too. MGA relaunched Bratz with the latest mindless lingo of corporate-friendly girl power in a box. "We have doctors, lawyers, journalists," MGA's C.E.O., Isaac Larian, told *Forbes*. "Now more than ever before, Bratz empowers girls." The re-branded dolls, though, had no discernible interests in such careers. Instead, the Bratz, who, like Barbie, started out as teen-agers, now came with hobbies, including yoga and running, and wardrobes newly inspired by study-abroad travel. Mattel ran its own Sandbergian campaign—"When a Girl Plays with Barbie, She Imagines Everything She Can Become"—and promoted Doctor Barbie, who, with her stethoscope, wears stilettos, a miniskirt, and a white lab coat embroidered, in pink thread, "Barbie."

Empowerment feminism is a cynical sham. As Margaret Talbot once noted in these pages, "To change a Bratz doll's shoes, you have to snap off its feet at the ankles." That is pretty much what girlhood feels like. In a 2014 study, girls between four and seven were asked about possible careers for boys and girls after playing with either Fashion Barbie, Doctor Barbie, or, as a control, Mrs. Potato Head. The girls who had played with Mrs. Potato Head were significantly more likely to answer yes to the question "Could you do this job when you grow up?" when shown a picture of the workplaces of a construction worker, a firefighter, a pilot, a doctor, and a police officer. The study had a tiny sample size, and, like most slightly nutty research in the field of social psychology, has never been replicated, or scaled up, except that, since nearly all American girls own a Barbie, the population of American girls has been the subject of the scaled-up version of that experiment for nearly six decades.

#MeToo arises from the failure of empowerment feminism. Women have uncannily similar and all too often harrowing and even devastating stories about things that have happened to them at work because men do very similar things to women; leaning in doesn't help. There's more copying going on, too: pornography and accounts of sexual harassment follow the same script. Nobody writes anything from scratch. Abandoning

structural remedies and legislative reform for the politics of personal charm—leaning in, dressing for success, being Doctor Barbie—left women in the workplace with few choices but to shut up and lean in more and to dress better. It's no accident that #MeToo started in the entertainment and television-news businesses, where women are required to look as much like Barbie and Bratz dolls as possible, with the help of personal trainers, makeup artists, hair stylists, personal shoppers, and surgeons. Unfortunately, an extrajudicial crusade of public shaming of men accused of "sexual misconduct" is no solution, and a poor kind of justice, not least because it brooks no dissent, as if all that women are allowed to say about #MeToo is "Me, too!" The pull string wriggles.

Inevitably, the doll wars met up with the sex wars. *The only thing wrong that I saw when I held Barbie, is when I lift her skirt there is nothing underneath.* In December, Kozinski resigned from the bench after the *Washington Post* reported on allegations of sexual harassment made by at least fifteen women. In a statement, Kozinski referred to his "broad sense of humor," and said, "It grieves me to learn that I caused any of my clerks to feel uncomfortable." Two of his former clerks assert that he asked them to look at pornography with him in his chambers. "What do single girls in San Francisco do for sex?" he allegedly asked another clerk, which is the sort of thing Rock Hudson's "Pillow Talk" character would say. Dahlia Lithwick, Slate's legal correspondent, met Kozinski in 1996, when she was clerking for another judge. "I cannot recall what we talked about," Lithwick wrote this winter. "I remember only feeling quite small and very dirty." Kozinski sounds like the sort of person who may have snapped a lot of people's feet off at the ankles. No results of any formal investigation have been announced.

"Would you please let me know if I owe you?" Ruth Handler wrote, once upon a time, to the store in Germany where she'd placed an order for a shipment of Lilli dolls, their breasts pert, lips plump. The consequences of that purchase remain incalculable. Mattel owns Barbie. MGA owns Bratz. And corporations still own the imaginations of little girls. ♦



## TOUCH AND GO

*Joan Murray's poetry of the senses.*

BY DAN CHIASSON



The poems of Joan Murray, who died in 1942, at the age of twenty-four, have been lost and recovered many times over. First, Murray's manuscript was pried, from her mother, by W. H. Auden, who wanted to publish it as his inaugural pick as judge of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, in 1947. The resulting book, "Poems," received a few respectful notices but was soon forgotten. In 2003, John Ashbery, a cheerful prospector in overlooked minor poetries, published a short appreciation of Murray, "one of the poets of the forties whom I most enjoy," whose "abrupt transitions and changes of scene" bring readers to "the brink of a momentous discovery." The poems were discoveries in and of themselves. In 2006, the poet and editor Shanna Compton uploaded a PDF of "Poems" to her Web site, where it became a much-plundered treasure.

Murray now had an "underground reputation," in Compton's judgment: more than sixty years after her death, she was a contemporary poet.

The arrival, this month, of Murray's "Drafts, Fragments, and Poems: The Complete Poetry" (New York Review Books) seems to confirm that judgment. It also springs from something of a mishap. In Ashbery's brief piece, here republished as a preface, he notes that, sometime in the nineteen-sixties, a box containing Murray's manuscripts was lost by the men moving the poet's and her mother's papers to the Smith College archives, a nearly slapstick extension of whatever curse doomed Murray from the start. It was said that the box had literally fallen off the moving van. But the new interest in Murray, stoked by a fine essay published by the British poet Mark Ford in 2014,

prompted a search for the missing box, which, when it was discovered, bore a tell-tale dent. Inside were hundreds of pages of drafts of poems, plus Murray's evocative letters and stories. In the alternative universe of American poetry, Murray, had she lived, might have joined a distinguished generation that included Elizabeth Bishop, whose own biography—the bouts of illness, the deracinated childhood, the early intervention of a famous mentor (in Bishop's case, Marianne Moore)—Murray's calls to mind.

Auden occasionally wrote faintly damaging prefaces to his Yale picks: the practice of introducing younger poets, he wrote in a letter, was "deplorable and false," as though the writer were "a debutante or a new face cream." But he managed a few classic sentences in his otherwise wheel-spinning preface to "Poems":

So, in Miss Murray's poetry, the dominant emotion is, I think, a feeling of isolation, and her characteristic images tactile shapes which reassure her that "Here" and "There" are both real and related to each other. In her own words: "We were lovers of things beyond our bodies."

The most interesting word here is "tactile." Murray's poems make an eccentric path through the senses, at times verging upon a kind of synesthesia. ("I have seen hills and rhythm / Will not leave my head," she writes, converting spatial undulation into sonic ups and downs.) But she is especially drawn to the sense of touch. She will choose a panoramic vista, then zoom in uncomfortably close on its variegated surfaces. We're used to visual and oral effects in poetry, but tactile description is comparatively rare. Keats's stunning image, in the "Ode on Melancholy," of a "strenuous tongue" bursting a whole grape by pressing it against a "palate fine" suggests the power of a poetics that exploits the relative novelty of such sensation, especially where we expect another sense to predominate. (Keats says not a word about the taste of that grape.) Here is Murray's "Poem" in its entirety:

Three mountains high,  
O you are a deep and marvelous blue.  
It was with my palms  
That I rounded out your slopes;  
There was an easy calmness,  
An irrelevant ease that touched me  
And I stretched my arms and smoothed  
Three mountains high.

The "deep and marvelous blue" suggests that a conventional poem about the

*Murray, sick for much of her life, relished the tactile glory of the natural world.*



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sublime is under way. Instead, we get a poem about caressing a mountain range, its powerful "you" cuing associations with generations of poems about the sensation of exploring lovers' bodies as metaphorical fields, mountains, and valleys. When Donne described his lover's body as an "America" traversed by his "roving hands," he left out the dirt, stone, and thorns that would make such an experience somehow less than, or at least other than, sensual. Murray's odd little poem substitutes for the lover's body a thing huge, hard, cold, and perilous.

Murray's sensual appreciation for "things beyond our bodies" delivers her to moments of transcendence, when, she writes, "the wall breaks down that always bars my direct contact with the object." You can hear the wall crumbling in "Poem," as Murray's attention rounds and smooths the mountainside. With the repetition of "three mountains high," she transforms herself from the protagonist of her poem to its author, metaphorically "smoothing" the mountains surrounding her into grammatical shape.

This process could be taxing. "I suppose I have to dwindle [the shape of a hill] down to the palm of my hand," she wrote in a letter to Auden; "I would indeed rather spread myself out to its height and length." We find this mixture of triumph and disappointment throughout Murray's work; the world whose immensities so impress her can be captured in a

poem, but not without domesticating it. Her work is fascinating in part for the tensions she knew she had not resolved. The brevity of "Poem," along with its generic title, is part of its boastfulness. But there was no denying that an eight-line poem about a mountain range left some of its majesty untranslated, and Murray seems not to stand atop "Poem" with the same pride that she felt on the summit it describes. The second "three mountains high" takes the action of her verbs, but its passivity is a comedown from the grandeur it first suggested.

Though she suffered most of her life from the congenital heart condition that killed her, Murray, who lived for a time in Saranac Lake, New York, far upstate, loved hiking nearby and in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Auden had seen one of his own attempts at mountaineering end, as his friend Christopher Isherwood wrote, in "laughter, lost footings, slitherings and screams." He mocked these outings as "boy scout stuff," but Murray, who carried a knife with "a reindeer bone handle, my fetish companion," with a scrap of pelt stuck to its sheath, knew that her pioneering off the page was a method of survival linked to her pioneering on it. How moving to imagine this woman, alone on a summit, subduing nature to her will. Murray's defense of her "off pursuits" in a letter to Auden is strange and touching:

You see I never know what to say to people. That is because I have been mentally asleep for



*"I think I know where the passion in our marriage has gone."*

such an endless time. Thank heavens that's over. I'd breathe and get off to a six o'clock start. Here and there I took mental notes of outlines such as hill shape against the horizon so that some day the portentous simplicity and shape would slip into writing. That I like to do. Translate broadly, press down over and over again this is what you must reach. These lines have the loveliness of gulls' wings spread, and that is not far from exact word phrase or subtly pointed thought. These come much more virtually alive in writing to you.

You can hear the strain: it's a letter, after all, from a person barely twenty to one of the most revered poets alive. But the epiphanies here are not reported; they are enacted on the page, as suggested by those ambiguous demonstrative pronouns, which make the most sense if they refer to *these* very lines, and to *this* very moment of transfiguration.

Murray, who endured near-fatal bouts of rheumatic fever when she was eleven and thirteen, ended her formal schooling after ninth grade, a "soul apart," according to the headmistress of the last school she attended. This book is the fruit of a strenuous self-education in poetry conducted by a person in her teens, flowering wildly in her twenties before her death cut short her career. Murray was drawn inexorably to planners and designers, people whose structures of thought, elaborated in the imagination, might someday thicken into what she called "firm reality." Influenced by Auden, whose bleak auspices and eerie decrees rang through poems set in the industrial fringes of human thriving, Murray imagined that she was inheriting not a blank, but a waste: her job was to "recreate what is desolated, to rebuild." She called herself the "universal architect," commissioning forms of her own devising and working them out in mental space, free from the binds of the patriarchy.

Her poems about architects and builders help her think through the paradoxes of her own chosen art, where planning and drafting are not preliminary phases of design but aesthetic accomplishments in and of themselves. In "The Dream of the Architect," the pined-for structure is erected in the consciousness of "the Unemployed Architect," so materially real that dancers appear and delineate its spaces by moving around inside it:

Now the dream of the Unemployed Architect

Turns from the introspective word to the conflict  
Of idea and reality in active motion.  
Unconsciously his mind draws into the cell  
or embryo construction.  
He hazards the subconscious to externalize  
The natural formula that lies  
In the full growth and movement,  
The spring's great marriage and the  
winter's great annulment.

The light broadens. The dancers enter.  
Their movements make explicit the detail  
and the full sweep of the Architect's scheme.

In this little allegory, only one figure coordinates the whole, marries and annuls the seasons, summons the dancers and moves them around in the phantom walls of the dreaming architect: the poet, whose vocation is fulfilled merely by imagining.

Murray belongs to what the poet Farnoosh Fathi calls "the radical arc of American metaphysical poets"—writers like Laura Riding, Emily Dickinson, and Lorine Niedecker, whose boundlessness on the page belies the forms of confinement they suffered in the world. For these poets, composition provides the greatest thrill, both the record of ecstasies and their source. This is what Auden meant when he pointed to Murray's explorations of a reassuring "here" and "there," I think: the intuition that verbal constructions are stable enough to lean upon, as sturdy as a mountain range or a grand building, and also as mysterious and surprising in their branching trails and corridors. She sought "the firm reality of a consciousness" that was composed nevertheless of gauzy and penumbral things, dreams and mysteries. Ironic, then, that she left so much undone. But also miraculous that, among the blueprints, we have so many finished and durable structures:

Men and women only have meaning as man  
and woman  
The moon is itself and it is lost amongst  
the stars  
The days are individual and in the passage  
The nights are each sleep but the dreams  
vary  
A repeated action is upon its own feet  
We who have spoken there speak here  
The word turns and walks away  
The timing of independent objects  
To live and move and admit their space  
And entity and various attitudes of life  
All things are cool and in themselves  
complete. ♦

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ON TELEVISION

# SMOKE AND MIRRORS

*"High Maintenance" and other anthology shows.*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



The new season of “High Maintenance” opens with a modern moment of dread. In an episode called “Globo,” a Brooklyn pot dealer—a character we know only as the Guy—wakes up with his girlfriend. The two are cozy and slovenly, joking about the ethics of sharing dreams. Then they check their phones. Something awful has happened: a terrorist event, the details left vague. “I think I’m going to go to work early,” the Guy says, staring at his screen. “Yeah,” she says. “That makes sense.”

“Globo” lasts just twenty-six minutes. And yet, somehow, in its spiky, elliptical, warmly observant way, as the camera floats without judgment from one thread to another, from bistro to crash pad to brownstone stoop—sometimes following the Guy as he delivers weed to customers, but just as often not—it manages to sug-

gest an entire city looking for comfort. A fat man struggles to maintain his workout regimen, but each time he tries to post his progress on Facebook he sees someone grieving and deletes the draft. A woman and two bros hook up at the McCarren Hotel, a decadent bubble far from the headlines. An exhausted immigrant waiter takes a long subway ride. Each plot gets an O. Henry twist, one funny, one filthy, one sweet. It never feels contrived, because the stories seem spontaneous, as natural as a train of thought. It’s a remarkable achievement of narrative efficiency, fuelled by humility.

That’s long been the gift of this unusual series, which debuted, in 2012, on Vimeo. The Web version of “High Maintenance” was the self-funded creation of a married couple: the grizzled, bug-eyed Ben Sinclair, who plays the Guy, and

who until this show had mostly done cameos as homeless guys; and his then wife, Katja Blichfeld, a casting director with a Rolodex full of similarly underused talents. For viewers accustomed to the rigid rules of TV formula, those early seasons felt visionary. Some episodes were just eight minutes long. Others were nearly silent, or spliced from tiny edits into montages. The series managed to be poetic without being pretentious—and although it was funny, it wasn’t quite stoner humor. The visual trumped the verbal. Every episode told a new story.

After nineteen episodes, the series shifted to HBO. The transition was bumpy. You could see the money gleaming, heavily, on the screen. Episodes were longer; the pacing dragged. There were still several gems, particularly “Grandpa,” a joyful episode from the P.O.V. of a dog, and the lovely “Tick,” which combined two stories about eccentric parents. But the tone was uneven. Sinclair has said that, when he and Blichfeld ended things romantically, their series began to dwell on people extricating themselves from relationships. For whatever reason, a tinge of sourness—or self-loathing, or at least self-consciousness—had harshed the show’s trademark mellow.

This new abrasiveness led to some daring experiments, like a story in which a gay man and his female friend degenerate from codependence into rank pathology. But other scenarios were clunky, and, in a few cases, shadowed by something like white guilt. The show’s early focus had been on a small slice of Brooklyn—a creative-class demographic adjacent to that of “Girls,” which is to say, people who use drugs without fear of the cops. Over time, the lens widened, but the results could be stagy, sometimes literally so, as in a sequence in which a crude, trash-talking black bodybuilder turns out to be a British Method actor. The frame distracted from the picture.

In the show’s second season on HBO, airing this month, the ease is back, thank God, and the series feels, even in slighter moments, newly confident, with an increased ability to reflect a larger world in flux. Each of the five episodes sent to critics is worth watching. In one, Danielle Brooks (Taystee, on “Orange Is the New Black”) plays an African-American real-estate agent hoping to cash in on a changing Bed-Stuy. In another, two artists

*“High Maintenance”’s stories seem spontaneous, as natural as a train of thought.*

(John E. Peery and Candace Thompson) win a low-income-housing lottery and move into a Greenpoint co-op, only to discover that the amenities—a roof deck, a sauna—are available only to rich tenants. One screwball sequence takes place in Bushwick, where a feminist resistance group bubbles with racial anxiety, to the point that a white member sneaks off to the kitchen and, going through her Instagram contacts, begins panic-inviting women of color. Miraculously, none of these stories feel preachy—and often they kink into a joke, or a surreal image, or some other unusual narrative swerve. One episode has a snake that wriggles from one plot over into another. Two have fart jokes.

The show has always had a native sympathy for tricksters and hustlers, and, almost by definition, it's down to party. More recently, Sinclair and Blichfeld have shown a willingness to dwell on more uncomfortable aspects of its subject matter, too, especially in a dreamy episode in which the Guy lands in the E.R., sneaking tokes when the nurses look away. The story includes a rare scene that actually qualifies as stoner humor: just two people, getting high, killing time, giggling at jokes that make sense only to them. But it somehow manages to find the "High Maintenance" sweet spot anyway, emphasizing the way isolation and intimacy can overlap. It doesn't judge. But it doesn't look away.

**I**n the five years since "High Maintenance" first aired, the anthology model has taken off, especially on streaming and cable. It lets creators mess around, and frees viewers from

the binge-watch. Still, the genre is not a guaranteed good time. Since 2011, Charlie Brooker has produced the digital dystopia "Black Mirror," but his fourth season, on Netflix, is atypically spotty. (The "USS Callister" and "Hang the DJ" episodes work best.) Other anthologies include "Electric Dreams," a Philip K. Dick adaptation, on Amazon; the affably odd "Room 104," by the Duplass Brothers, on HBO; and "Easy," on Netflix, now in Season 2. The genre's influence is apparent elsewhere, too: one of the three good episodes in Season 2 of "Master of None" was a "High Maintenance" ripoff (or homage, if you want to be nice).

Of this cadre, the most interesting is "Easy," because it's terrible. By rights, the show should be a Midwestern twin of "High Maintenance." It's another portrait of a city: Chicago. The creator, Joe Swanberg, is an entrepreneurial upstart, whose specialty is mumbly domesticity. And the series uses superficially similar techniques, all glimpses and epiphanies and montages and gazes and tinkly music and improvisational dialogue, with the occasional dark comic twist. It also benefits from a remarkable cast, giving performances so strong that they elevate weak material. (Believe me, it is hard to pan a show that includes both Jane Adams, as Marc Maron's soft-hearted feminist crony, and Gugu Mbatha-Raw.)

Yet "Easy" stumbles, again and again. It's smug where "High Maintenance" is humble. It's formless where "High Maintenance" is graceful. It's twee instead of funny, with a misplaced confidence that all human behavior is worth

watching. When a moral theme bubbles up—a frequent occurrence for such a chill, indie show—it's pedantic. In the worst stories, like a truly irksome doubleheader about artisanal breweries, the characters resemble the "Portlandia" ensemble, minus the satire. But even the best are full of passionate banality. A three-day babysitting montage is sweet, then, finally, so idyllic that it verges on propaganda for egg-freezing. A feminist writer/sex worker has some fun, gonzo sex scenes, but her story goes nowhere, making her seem less like a person than like a set of talking points in lingerie. The standout first-season episode "Art and Life" is rude, well-plotted, and genuinely sexy. Over time, however, even the nudity gets old, with conventional guy-gaze voyeurism rebranded as liberatory hipness.

On "High Maintenance," by contrast, the most alarmingly graphic sex scene has a purpose: it tests the viewer and sets up a reveal. As in the short stories of Grace Paley, the plotlessness is, finally, a higher form of rigor, at once a philosophy and a misdirect. In "Derech," one of the best new episodes, Anja, a writer for Vice, manipulates her way into a support group for former Orthodox Jews. The story feels as though it's about exploitation—until suddenly one plot collides with another, in which glittercaked drag queens primp for a rave. There's a shocking, nearly violent climax. But there's also time along the way for a sing-along with lyrics about the actress Elisabeth Shue. As ever on the show, these detours aren't delays. You just don't know where you're going until you get there. ♦

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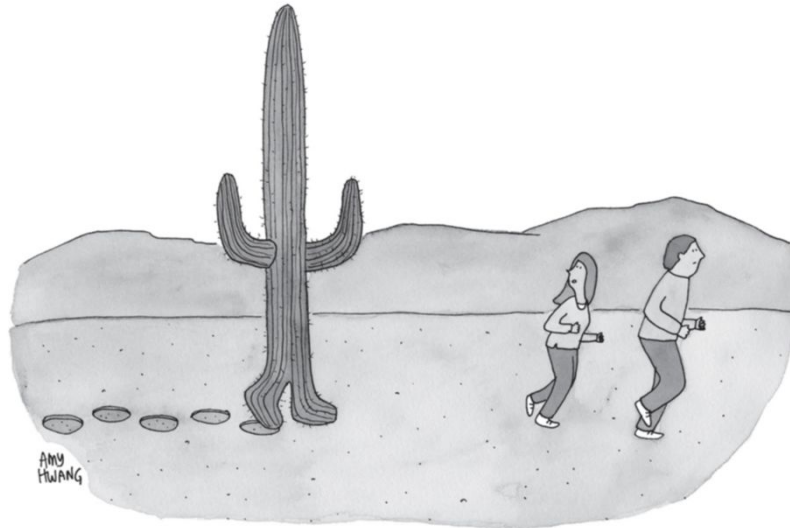
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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

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 Amy Hwang, must be received by Sunday, January 21st. The finalists in the January 8th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 5th 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



“Somebody carve 911.”  
Seth Mayeri, New York City

“My insurance doesn't cover prehistoric conditions.”  
Josh Eisenberg, Beaverton, Ore.

“The doctor said it will eventually just go extinct.”  
André Clair, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

### THE WINNING CAPTION



“It's cheaper than coach, and he gets more legroom.”  
Eric Weingarten, Bloomington, Ind.



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