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FOREWORD BY
ANTHONY LANE

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5 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

17 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Adam Gopnik on 1914; the chicken club; sign-language don'ts; bowling with Brian Fantana; food closeups.

JONAH WEINER 22 THE IMPOSSIBLE BODY
Storyboard P's Brooklyn street dance.

PAUL RUDNICK 29 HOW MANY?

CALVIN TRILLIN 30 TAMALES ON THE DELTA
A Mississippi town's play for greatness.

MICHAEL SPECTER 34 THE GENE FACTORY
How far will a Chinese research company go?

MATTATHIAS SCHWARTZ 44 A MISSION GONE WRONG
Fighting the drug war on the Mosquito Coast.

FICTION
ANTONYA NELSON 56 "FIRST HUSBAND"

THE CRITICS
BOOKS
JONATHAN ROSEN 62 *The extinction of the passenger pigeon.*
67 *Briefly Noted*

MUSICAL EVENTS
ALEX ROSS 68 *"Falstaff" at the Metropolitan Opera.*

DANCING
JOAN ACOCELLA 70 *Star turns at the Alvin Ailey company.*

THE CURRENT CINEMA
DAVID DENBY 72 *"August: Osage County," "The Invisible Woman," "Lone Survivor."*

POEMS
CHASE TWICHELL 33 *"Roadkill"*
PHILIP LEVINE 48 *"The Future"*
DAN CHIASSON 60 *"Obituary"*

CHRIS WARE COVER
"All Together Now"

DRAWINGS Zachary Kanin, Joe Dator, Roz Chast, Mick Stevens, Charles Barsotti, Carolita Johnson, Emily Flake, Farley Katz, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Christopher Weyant, J. C. Duffy, Michael Crawford, Gahan Wilson, William Haefeli SPOTS Roman Muradov

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THE MAIL

PARTY FOUL

Jeffrey Toobin explores flaws in the Constitution, but he never really questions the division between Republicans and Democrats ("Our Broken Constitution," December 9th). The two-party duopoly, which is partly an artifact of single-member districts, makes it irrational for people to join or to support minor parties, further insulates the two parties from competition, and may well make the electorate appear more divided and extreme than it is. Letting the House and the Senate control their own election rules, and exempting the parties from the Constitution's system of checks and balances, gives the parties undue influence. Shouldn't my senator and representative be answerable foremost to their constituents, rather than to party leaders? The Constitution should be used to emancipate both voters and politicians from the parties' tyranny.

David Rea
Boulder, Colo.

NARRATING HISTORY

Peter Hessler, in examining one of Egypt's oldest archeological sites in the context of the recent revolution, highlights the continuity of Egyptian politics and alludes to an "archeological version of postmodernism," whose adherents insist that "nothing we observe about ancient societies can be accurate, because invariably we're applying our own experiences and viewpoints" ("The Buried," November 18th). Postmodernism's contribution to archeology was really the realization that no historical account can entirely mirror reality because history is narrative and an event is not. To write history, a historian must prioritize clarity over chronology, emphasize causal connections, and suppress irrelevancies. Even an unbiased historian, privy to flawless information, will compose a story that, though it may be inspired by a particular event, isn't a true account of it. When Hessler writes that "the essence of the human mind has changed very little in thousands of years, and basic desires and instincts remain the same," he tells a story about recognizing the familiar in the strange. When skeptics counter that the gulf between antiquity and modernity is unbridgeable, they tell a story about irrecoverable loss. In each case, a "true" historical hypothesis is persuasive because it is well written. To ask, "Is the story true?" misses the point. Instead, ask, "Is the story good?"

Stephen Blair
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Princeton, N.J.

COMPANY MEN

It's a pity that the "visionary leaders of the Internet age," whom Nathan Heller writes about in his article on technology's "new corporations," tend to be so conventional ("Naked Launch," November 25th). There's not much "iconoclastic" innovation when a company settles into the tired corporate form. With its recent I.P.O., Twitter offers a fresh disappointment: fixing itself to the pursuit of stock value, it will be forced to peddle noisome advertising, and user experience will suffer. Twitter could have fashioned itself along the lines of American public radio, which is sustained largely through donations, or the BBC, which is publicly funded yet has editorial independence. Or its leaders could have been truly visionary and produced a new kind of organization altogether.

Matthew McFeely
Brooklyn, N.Y.

EDITORS' NOTE: "A Very Rare Book," by Nicholas Schmidle (December 16th), should have credited the assistance of Claudio Gatti, a journalist for *Il Sole 24 Ore*, Italy's leading business daily, in reporting on the sale of incunabula at the 2005 Milan Book Fair. Gatti co-authored a 2012 book, "Il Sottobosco," that offered the first account of Marino Massimo De Caro's ties to Italian politicians.

•

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ANA JUAN *BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE*
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

JANUARY 2014	WEDNESDAY 1ST	THURSDAY 2ND	FRIDAY 3RD	SATURDAY 4TH	SUNDAY 5TH	MONDAY 6TH	TUESDAY 7TH

OF THE MANY ways to compensate for the excesses of the holiday season, none is more bracing than a swim in the ocean to ring in the New Year. Members of the Coney Island Polar Bear Club, which was founded in 1903 by the early-twentieth-century publishing magnate and fitness guru Bernarr Macfadden, take the plunge every Sunday from November through April. It has become one of the city's most beloved traditions for thousands of people to join them on New Year's Day. Wondering about the benefits of dousing yourself in nearly freezing water at this time of year? The holiday swim is for charity, with donations going to Camp Sunshine, which serves children with life-threatening illnesses and their families.

MOVIES | NIGHT LIFE
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSIE WENDER

MOVIES

The Tramp seeks his fortune in "The Gold Rush," from 1925.

THE CANE MUTINY

Charlie Chaplin's freethinking comedy, at Film Forum.

THE CINEMA'S CONQUEST of the twentieth century finds its exemplary symbol in the character that made Charlie Chaplin famous, the Little Tramp. Chaplin came up with the costume and the mannerisms in February, 1914, just a few weeks into his movie career; Film Forum celebrates the centenary with a weeklong series, "The Tramp 100" (Jan. 1-7).

Joining Mack Sennett's Keystone studio in December, 1913, after a successful run in vaudeville, Chaplin created the persona in reaction to the chase comedies in which he was placed. The first Tramp film to be released—"Kid Auto Races at Venice"—features Chaplin on location at a real-life soapbox-derby competition, as a down-and-out swell cantankerously intruding on the newsreel camera crew filming the action. The template was instantly set: the Tramp's self-conscious artifice launched Chaplin's comic leap into reality. Two months later, he became his own director, and, for one of his first films, "Dough and Dynamite," also from 1914, he alluded to labor conflicts of the day in an elaborately constructed tale that blended rough-and-tumble comedy with an incendiary plot of political violence.

The camera magnified Chaplin's exquisite grace into grandeur. As the Tramp, he embodied the natural nobility of the downtrodden and the despised, yet he was no innocent. He flaunted an anarchic insolence that mocked the arrogance of the rich, the moralism of the middle class, and the crude brutality of street bullies. (In the boxing comedy "The Champion," from 1915, he triumphs by way of a horseshoe hidden in his glove.) He was more than a man of the people; he was the emblem of vulnerable yet combative humanity, and humanity loved him back.

Chaplin leveraged his popularity into wealth and artistic autonomy. In 1916, at age twenty-six, he signed a contract with the Mutual studio that paid him six hundred and seventy thousand dollars per year and granted him a free hand as director, writer, and star. There, he made such pointed films as "Easy Street," set in a rough slum in which the Tramp defeats a fearsome brute and installs a reign of peace, and "The Immigrant," showing the Tramp's American dream tested by the horror of poverty. Chaplin's narrative sense had quickly gained a novelistic amplitude, but he was no nineteenth-century realist. Rather, he became a latter-day Voltaire, who packed angry protest into his caricatures and radical reflections into his whimsy. The sentimental 1921 feature "The Kid," in which the Tramp raises a foundling in his ramshackle tenement, includes a dream sequence—a fantasy of heaven on earth—that turns an allegorical vision of metaphysical power into a nightmare of police brutality.

The Tramp's brazen revolt responded to a higher law, as in "The Pilgrim" (1922), where he plays an escaped convict who impersonates a country preacher. In that guise, he delivers a sermon—in pantomime—of the tale of David and Goliath that replaces false piety with vital Christian inspiration. From there, it was only a question of scale, incremental mastery, and audacity to arrive at the Tramp's great features—the Hollywood boom-town lament of "The Gold Rush," the transcendent tenderness of "City Lights," the Depression-era anti-capitalist outcry of "Modern Times," and the world-historical confrontation with Nazi Germany of "The Great Dictator."

—*Richard Brody*

EVERETT

NOW PLAYING

All the Light in the Sky

The director Joe Swanberg draws magic from a magical location—an oceanfront enclave of homes perched above the lapping waters of the Pacific and doomed by erosion. There, Marie (Jane Adams), a forty-five-year-old actress, floats on the passing time as she does, in a wetsuit, on the shimmering sea below. Awaiting roles that have more or less stopped coming, dreaming of love that never clicks, she hosts her niece from New York, Faye (Sophia Takal), a young actress. In flowing days and evenings of lunches and parties with friends and neighbors, Marie and Faye talk through and play out big questions—the prospect of marriage and children, the artistic calling, the weight of family history. Adams, Takal, and the rest of the cast bring a calm, focussed urgency to every chat and tussle. With his solar measurements and celestial allusions, the real-life environmental entrepreneur David Siskind gives the drama a cosmic context, and Swanberg, who is also the cinematographer, makes luminous images to match.—*Richard Brody* (In limited release and video on demand.)

American Hustle

A series of astonishments, and one of the most pleasurable American movies in years. The director, David O. Russell, takes off from the Abscam affair—a bizarre investigation in which the F.B.I., beginning in 1978, called on an indicted swindler from the Bronx to help ensnare corrupt congressmen. The elaborate sting involved two "Arab sheikhs" (both F.B.I. employees), allegedly eager to invest money in Atlantic City's nascent casino operations. Russell both simplifies and juices up a tale that is already close to preposterous, and he sets the action in a magical space (ruled by Shakespeare and inhabited by Lubitsch and Sturges) that is faster and more volatile than common realism but not as loosely strung as farce. His people act stupidly because they desperately want things. Russell's extraordinary cast, taking huge risks, is the equal of any group from Hollywood's Golden Age. Christian Bale, bearded, toupéed, and forty pounds heavier, is the swindler Irving Rosenfeld; Amy Adams, in dresses cleaved to her waist, is his accomplice; Bradley Cooper, in his best performance to date, plays a high-strung F.B.I. agent who isn't as bright as he thinks he is; Jennifer Lawrence, moving effortlessly from sensual indolence to strident bitchiness, is Irving's luscious nut-brain wife; and Jeremy Renner, with a serious pompadour, is the New Jersey politician they all corrupt.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/16/13.) (In wide release.)

Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues

The comic spontaneity is largely gone from this sequel, set in 1980, which brings Ron Burgundy (Will Ferrell) and his merry band of newshounds (Steve Carell, Paul Rudd, and David Koechner) back from off-the-air exile to New York for a new adventure: the début of the first round-the-clock news channel. There, relegated to the lobster shift, Burgundy challenges the prime-time anchor (James Marsden) to a ratings duel and makes history with an accidental race to the bottom. A dash of outrageous visual humor and crazily crude sex talk can't compensate for the formulaic stiffness—though Carell has some riotous moments of bewildered repression, and Kristen Wiig, as the space-cadet receptionist who plays his love interest, yields loopy wonder. Some intended post-racial humor, meant to knowingly mock stereotypes, perpetuates them with a tin ear. Directed by Adam McKay.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

Computer Chess

This intimate dramatic masterwork of historical reconstruction, set around 1980, tells the story of quietly visionary programmers from around the country who wheel their jerry-rigged P.C.s to a nondescript hotel for a weekend-long tournament that pits their chess programs against one another. Along the way, the director, Andrew Bujalski, brings the designs and fashions of the time—and, even better, its moods and ideas—cleverly and joyfully back to life. He uses a period video camera to conjure the feel of archival footage (mainly washed-out black-and-white) and features onscreen videographers who document the event, from the opening panel discussion, which sets out the intellectual stakes of the tournament, to its poignant anticlimax. The drama arises from tensions between and within the programming teams and, especially, from one computer that exhibits a puckishly domineering philosophical temperament. Sketching the involuted, awkward characters in brisk, subtle strokes, Bujalski captures the virtual realm in its fragile, critical early stages and exposes, at the outset, its unresolved peculiarities.—*R.B.* (Museum of the Moving Image; Jan. 5.)

Her

Even by the standards of Spike Jonze, who made "Being John Malkovich," this is an odd affair. It is set in a future so near yet so subtly transformed that it freaks you out; the hazed-over brightness of the color scheme is like a drug, as befits this brave new world. Joaquin Phoenix plays Theodore Twombly; the name is a mashup of a President and a painter, but Theodore is close to a nobody. He lives alone; his marriage to Catherine (Rooney Mara) has wound down; his job is to write heartfelt online letters for customers whom he will never meet. Into this void comes Samantha: less than a person, because she is just an operating system on his smartphone, but more than most people, because she knows everything, serves our hero's needs, and earns his love. (The fact that her voice is provided by Scarlett Johansson makes her more indispensable still.) The question is, can she love him back, or might she start to crave a higher consciousness? You could see Jonze's film and find it charming, even tender, then see it again a week later and come away darkly disturbed by the shape of things—or minds more potent than mere things—to come. Philosophers should be kept busy for years. With Amy Adams.—*Anthony Lane* (12/23 & 30/13) (In wide release.)

The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug

Peter Jackson's stunning directorial achievement in bringing J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" to life onscreen is not matched here, in the second installment of his three-part adaptation of Tolkien's earlier fantasy novel. The story concerns a group of Middle-Earth dwarves who team up with the hobbit Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) on a quest to regain their mountain kingdom. The mountain is jealously guarded by a fire-breathing dragon (voiced by a preening Benedict Cumberbatch) and filled with riches (which the dwarves, of course, plan to share with the helpful surrounding communities). The tale has no emotional resonance, and the thinness of the plot (only five of the book's chapters are adapted here) and the colorless depictions of the leading characters do it no favors. (Bilbo just seems to have come along for the ride.) The film is paced more swiftly than the previous installment and offers some exciting set pieces (a breakout from an elven prison is barrels of fun), but the adventure is heavily padded.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

Inside Llewyn Davis

Despite the title, the inner life of Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac) proves a hard place to map, although we soon realize how scarred with frustrations it must be. The externals are clearer: the year is 1961, Llewyn is a folksinger, and therefore, by definition, he has a beard, a scarf, a scowl, and no coat to call his own. His tale—more of a meander than an adventure, ranging from New York to Chicago and back—is told by the Coen brothers, who, as expected, lavish unstinting care and wit on the period look. There is fine work from John Goodman, Justin Timberlake, F. Murray Abraham, and a marmalade cat; most disconcerting of all is Carey Mulligan, who smiles like a seraph and swears like a stevedore. Indeed, such is the vigor of this dramatic support that we are left uneasy by the churl at the

OPENING

THE BEST OFFER
Giuseppe Tornatore ("Cinema Paradiso") directed this drama, about an art dealer (Geoffrey Rush) who tries to help an agoraphobic collector (Sylvia Hoeks). Co-starring Jim Sturgess and Donald Sutherland. Opening Jan. 1. (In limited release.)

BEYOND OUTRAGE
Takeshi Kitano directed and stars in this crime drama, about a police detective who single-handedly challenges the Yakuza. In Japanese. Opening Jan. 3. (In limited release.)

INTERIOR. LEATHER BAR.
James Franco and Travis Mathews directed this blend of documentary and fiction, depicting a restaging of sexually explicit footage from William Friedkin's film "Cruising." Opening Jan. 2. (In limited release.)

OPEN GRAVE
A horror film, directed by Gonzalo López-Gallego, about a man (Sharlto Copley) who suspects that he is a mass murderer. Opening Jan. 3. (In limited release.)

THE RAILWAY MAN
A drama, starring Colin Firth as a British Second World War veteran who tries to track down the Japanese officer who tortured him. Directed by Jonathan Teplitsky; co-starring Nicole Kidman, Jeremy Irvine, and Hiroyuki Sanada. Opening Jan. 1. (In limited release.)

ALSO PLAYING

The Crash Reel: In limited release. **A Madea Christmas:** In wide release.

REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

Titles in bold are reviewed.

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—"The Tramp 100." Jan. 1 at 1 and Jan. 5 at 5:20: "The Kid" (1921). • Jan. 1 at 2:30, Jan. 5 at 11 A.M., and Jan. 6 at 1, 3:05, 5:10, 7:15, and 9:20: "The Gold Rush" (1925). • Jan. 1 at 4, Jan. 5 at 1:10, and Jan. 7 at 2 and 4: "The Circus" (1928). • Jan. 1 at 5:30 and Jan. 4 at 1, 4:50, 6:50, and 8:40: "City Lights" (1931). • Jan. 1 at 7:20 and Jan. 3 at 1, 3:10, 5:20, and 9:30: "Modern Times" (1936). • Jan. 1 at 9:10 and Jan. 5 at 6:50 and 9:20: "The Great Dictator" (1940). • Jan. 2 at 1:50, 4, 8:10, and 10:15: Chaplin at First National, including "The Pilgrim" (1922). • Jan. 2 at 6:10: Chaplin at Essanay, including "The Champion" (1915). • Jan. 3 at 7:30: Chaplin at Mutual, Part 1, including "The Immigrant" (1917). • Jan. 4 at 2:50: Birth of the Tramp: Chaplin at Keystone, including "Kid Auto Races at Venice" (1914) and "Dough and Dynamite" (1914). • Jan. 5 at 3:10: Chaplin at Mutual, Part 2 (1916). • Jan. 7 at 6:15: Chaplin at Mutual, Part 3 (1916). • Jan. 7 at 8:15: "Unknown Chaplin" (1983, Kevin Brownlow and David Gill).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER
Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—The films of George Cukor. Jan. 1 at 1 and Jan. 2 at 7:45: "Girls About Town" (1931). • Jan. 3 at 2 and 7: "Heller in Pink Tights" (1960). • Jan. 4 at 2 and 7: "Bhowani Junction" (1956). • Jan. 5 at 1:30 and 8:10: "A Woman's Face" (1941). • Jan. 5 at 3:45: "Her Cardboard Lover" (1942). • Jan. 6 at 6:30: "Travels with My Aunt" (1972). • Jan. 6 at 8:45: "Our Betters" (1933). • Jan. 7 at 3:30: "Love Among the Ruins" (1975).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—The films of Robert Redford. Jan. 3-5 at 11 A.M.: "Three Days of the Condor" (1975, Sydney Pollack).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Dante Ferretti: Designing for the Big Screen." Jan. 5 at 5:30: "And the Ship Sails On" (1983, Federico Fellini). • "The Contenders." Jan. 6 at 7: **"Short Term 12."** • Jan. 7 at 8: "Mother of George" (2013, Andrew Dosunmu). • Through Jan. 19: "The Aesthetics of Shadow, Part 1: Japan." Jan. 7 at 7: "First Steps Ashore" (1932, Yasujiro Shimazu; silent).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"Curators' Choice: The Best of 2013." Jan. 3 at 7: "The Grandmaster" (2013, Wong Kar-wai). • Jan. 4 at 2: **"Viola."** • Jan. 4 at 3:30: "Museum Hours" (2013, Jem Cohen). • Jan. 5 at 2: **"Computer Chess."** • Jan. 5 at 5: "Leviathan" (2013, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel). • Jan. 5 at 7: **"A Touch of Sin."**

DVD OF THE WEEK
A video discussion of Ingmar Bergman's "Saraband," from 2003, in our digital edition.

movie's heart, who proves so adept both at annoying his friends and at fending off our sympathy that his company can feel like a burden. And yet, without fail, that awkwardness dissolves whenever he picks up his guitar and sings; only then does the lost soul find his calling and his poise. With musical supervision by T Bone Burnett.—*A.L.* (12/9/13) (In wide release.)

The Past
An Iranian man, Ahmad (Ali Mosaffa), peaceable and self-contained, arrives in France, to be greeted by his wife, Marie (Bérénice Bejo). He has been absent for some years, and is returning because she wants a divorce; meanwhile, unwisely, he stays in her house. By a kind of narrative drip feed, we learn that Marie has no children by Ahmad, but two children by another man. Now she is pregnant by a third, Samir (Tahar Rahim), whom she wants to marry, and whose young son, Fouad, is also part of the household. As further characters are added (among them, Samir's wife, who is hospitalized), the tangle of relationships grows almost comically knotted. Yet the mood shifts ever further away from comedy, and there are times when the blend of chaos and gloom feels hard to endure; as Fouad, Elyes Aguis, with his tantrums and permanent frown, gives all too persuasive a picture of youthful distress. The director, Asghar Farhadi, caused a stir with "A Separation," set in Tehran; the new film makes less of an impact, in part because its Parisian backdrop is more familiar, and also because some of its symbolic choices—the glass wall that divides the couple at the start—seem more calculated. But his gift for pulling us deep into the story, and for conveying the major burdens of these supposedly minor lives, is unimpaired. In French and Farsi.—*A.L.* (In limited release.)

Saving Mr. Banks
One Disney film tells the story of another—or, at least, of its begetting. For twenty years, Walt Disney (Tom Hanks) has fought for the rights to the "Mary Poppins" stories, only to bump into the immovable object of P. L. Travers (Emma Thompson), their creator. Now, at last, she is lured to Hollywood, much concerned at the fate of her characters on their journey to the screen. The light comedy of her clash with Disney and his minions is interleaved with flashbacks to her childhood in Australia, where she saw her beloved father (Colin Farrell) succumb to drink. The director John Lee Hancock's new film is efficient to a fault, arranging for the traumas of the past to be dissolved in present laughter and in the catharsis of creative endeavor; the outcome is, for the most part, no more troubling than a trip to Disneyland. Yet the story is borne along by the expertise of the cast, which includes Paul Giamatti and Jason Schwartzman, and is made more piquant by Thompson. In her blending of snappiness and solitude, she hints that some sorrows are too stubborn to be wished away.—*A.L.* (12/23 & 30/13) (In wide release.)

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty
What would an authentic Mitty movie look like? If it were to honor the intentions of James Thurber, it would take place solely within the precincts of the hero's mind, and do nothing to alter—let alone improve—his flaccid existence. That is too much for Ben Stiller, who directs and stars in this loose new adaptation of the tale. As with the Danny Kaye version, of 1947, Stiller quickly tires of Mitty's dreaming and launches him upon a string of genuine adventures. This means flying visits to Greenland and Afghanistan, plus encounters with volcanoes and sharks; throughout, Stiller seems at once nervous and unmoved, as if acknowledging that such derring-do is not the character's natural terrain. The narrative backdrop is bizarre, daubed with failure and loss; Walter toils for *Life* magazine, even as it shuts down, and we watch him stumble into friendship with a colleague (Kristen Wiig) and go in search of a rogue photographer (Sean Penn). So much here feels grabbed for, at random, rather than thought through; the movie strengthens our conviction that Mitty should really stay home. Who is this guy, if not the symbol of derring-don't?—*A.L.* (12/23 & 30/13) (In wide release.)

Short Term 12
Destin Cretton's second feature, set in and around an intake facility for evaluating troubled teens, looks closely at its fascinating characters to get at the notion of character itself. The story centers on Grace (Brie Larson) and Mason (John Gallagher, Jr.), two of the young adults who are the day-to-day, hands-on guardians. Their ill-defined jobs entail everything from physical restraint and police-like snooping to quasi-therapeutic interventions—and even seriocomic pursuits, through city streets, of youths who slip past the gate. The teens in their care fit a familiar, tightly defined array of ethnicities and personalities, but Cretton narrowly skirts the risk of stereotyping through the force of imagination. His energized dialogue suggests impulses and experiences far beyond the confines of the plot, and Grace and Mason—a droll and sensible couple whose relationship is tested by their work—embody the rare ideal of peaceful people you'd follow into battle. Cretton sees his protagonists through the eyes of the teens and gets to the ineffable core of trust.—*R.B.* (MOMA; Jan. 6.)

A Touch of Sin
With a discerning eye for the whiplash symbol, the director Jia Zhangke sets four shocking crime-blotter episodes in China's Wild West landscape of pop-up cities and lays bare its psycho-political panorama of ruthlessness. In tales of a villager who challenges corrupt officials and predatory businessmen, a brazen drifter who abandons his overbearing family and stalks the new bourgeoisie, and a lonely woman pressed into prostitution at work, Jia sees new layers of outrages piling upon older, still unredressed injustices. In an unlivable tangle of despoiled nature, unwholesome shanties, and oppressive towers, the law—whether with a heavy hand or a cavalier absence—preserves cruel family traditions even as families are wrenched apart by economic despair and raw indifference and a young man's romantic bildungsroman becomes a blanked-out cry into a futureless void. In Jia's methodically furious vision, the ambient violence of unchecked power erupts among the insulted and the injured with a horrific yet liberating sense of destruction and self-destruction. In Mandarin.—*R.B.* (Museum of the Moving Image; Jan. 5.)

Viola
The Argentinean director Matías Piñeiro's intricately lyrical hour-long feature, centered on a young Buenos Aires theatre troupe that's rehearsing a production of "Twelfth Night," plays cinematic Shakespeare smartly—for the music. Piñeiro excerpts and apostrophizes the play, making its lines ricochet off the private lives of three actresses who deliver them, onstage and off, in breathlessly conversational tones and mesh them imperceptibly with daily conversations and concerns as they theorize about love. The plot involves their romantic experiment with a fourth friend—the title character (María Vilar), who works with her boyfriend in a thriving delivery service for artisanally pirated DVDs—whom they want to detach from him in the hope of then seeing them get back together. Piñeiro's images have a kind of music, too, a fluid, modest, street-level glamour that heightens the tones of urban naturalism with the urbane poise of controlled glances and intimate choreography. The lofty, lilting, poetic mood has a joyful abstraction that forges the grit of daily life into something bright and gemlike without looking too closely at its substance. In Spanish.—*R.B.* (Museum of the Moving Image; Jan. 4.)

EVERETT

NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

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

Mary Gauthier

This American troubadour writes and sings with an admirable directness and simplicity, gently but firmly commanding your attention from the first guitar strum and declarative line of verse. She was left at a New Orleans asylum as a baby, and later adopted, but she ran away at fifteen, and led a rough, drug-addicted life on the road; later she opened a restaurant, got clean, and wrote her first song, at thirty-five. She sings with sympathetic but unvarnished honesty about her own journey and those of the characters she's met along the way. Her latest album, "Live at Blue Rock," recorded outside Austin, uses fiddle accompaniment, but she's more than capable of conveying considerable emotion as a solo performer, as this program in the "Naked Soul" series at the Rubin Museum of Art will confirm. (150 W. 17th St. 212-620-5000. Jan. 3.)

"The Icons of Funk"

The guitarist **Leo Nocentelli,** of the Meters, the New Orleans group that served as the house band for Allen Toussaint in the seventies, is joined by the keyboardist **Bernie Worrell,** an integral member of George Clinton's team of interplanetary explorers, who, in the eighties, provided lift to the Talking Heads, and the trombonist **Fred Wesley,** James Brown's longtime musical director. (B. B. King Blues Club & Grill, 237 W. 42nd St. 212-997-4144. Jan. 3.)

Potty Mouth

This all-female rock quartet is based in Northampton, Massachusetts, a town that prides itself on local musicians like Dar Williams, J Mascis, and Kim Gordon. The band, fronted by the singer and guitarist Abby Weems, recently released its first long-player, "Hell Bent," on Old Flame Records. The songs are heavily informed by the zippy urgency of lo-fi basement punk and riot-grrrl, and the band's live shows are inspiring. (Glasslands, 289 Kent Ave., between S. 1st and S. 2nd Sts., Brooklyn. Jan. 6.)

Leon Russell

Rock and roll's greatest sideman started out in Tulsa, Oklahoma, while still in his teens, playing piano in night clubs. He went on to join the group of L.A. session musicians known as the Wrecking Crew, served as the musical director for Joe Cocker's "Mad Dogs & Englishmen" tour, and became a solo star in the seventies. Along the way, he wrote standards like "A Song for You," played piano on Badfinger's "Day After Day" and other hits, and developed professional friendships with everyone from George Harrison to Willie Nelson. His long, increasingly white beard became iconic, and, after a period of semi-retirement brought on in part by health issues, Russell reëmerged in 2010 with "The Union," a duet album with Elton John. Don't miss him at City Winery: he's a repository of rock history and one of the few legitimate living legends. (155 Varick St. 212-608-0555. Jan. 5-6.)

Neil Young

Young is never idle, but this past year was relatively quiet, by his standards: after 2012, a year in which he released two albums with Crazy Horse ("Americana," which delivered rough, loud updates of ancient folk standards, and "Psychedelic Pill," which pulled apart and reconstituted Young's own hippie dreams) and his long-awaited memoir ("Waging Heavy Peace"), he limited his output in 2013 to one album, the archival set "Live at the Cellar Door," from 1970. The release offers a fine document of vintage Young, including a rare piano-driven version of "Cinnamon Girl." He'll be coming to Carnegie Hall for a solo residency, performing four shows in five nights. (Seventh Ave. at 57th St. 212-247-7800. Jan. 6-7 and Jan. 9-10.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Aslan-Solla Tango Quartet

The spirit of Astor Piazzolla, the towering figure of modern Argentine tango, informs but doesn't overwhelm the originality and jazz-tinged excursions of the bassist Pablo Aslan and the pianist Emilio Solla's own contemporary tango quartet. Some things never change, though: dancing is encouraged, and pre-performance tango lessons are offered. (Zinc Bar, 82 W. 3rd St. 212-477-9462. Jan. 5.)

Jeff Daniels

These days, it's no great leap for a Hollywood fixture of a certain age to jump on a cabaret stage and croon standards, but Daniels provides a twist: he writes his own satiric and wistful songs and accompanies himself on guitar. As he reminds us about multitasking celebrities in one of his barbed opuses: "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too." (54 Below, 254 W. 54th St. 646-476-3551. Jan. 2-4.)

Bucky Pizzarelli Birthday Bash

Jim Hall, jazz's premier guitarist, died recently, but this six-string (and seven-string) summit meeting reminds us that there are still brilliant mainstream guitarists in our midst, none more illustrious than Pizzarelli, who celebrates his eighty-eighth birthday in the company of **Gene Bertoncini, Frank Vignola,** and **Ed Laub.** Elegance, virtuosity, and swing in equal measures are assured. (Cutting Room, 44 E. 32nd St. 212-691-1900. Jan. 7.)

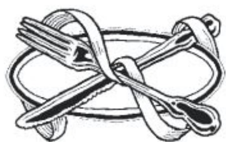
Kenny Werner

A formidable pianist and sharp composer who has a knack for assembling terrific post-bop bands (his current quintet includes the trumpeter **Randy Brecker** and the saxophonist **David Sanchez,** as well as **Scott Colley,** on bass, and **Ari Hoenig,** on drums), Werner is also a musical guru of sorts. He's a noted educator who has written a much called-on method book, "Effortless Mastery," which strives to liberate the imagination of rules-bound improvisers. (Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9595. Jan. 2-5.)

NEWYORKER.COM
John Seabrook selects his ten favorite Top Forty songs of 2013.

Leon Russell, who has crossed paths with just about every great rock-and-roll musician, comes to City Winery for two nights.

ILLUSTRATION BY JASHAR AWAN



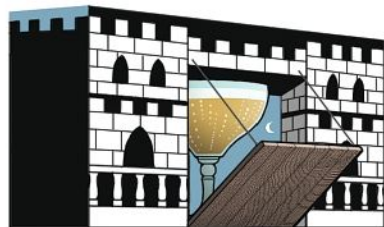
FOOD & DRINK

BAR TAB BURP CASTLE

41 E. 7th St. (212-982-4576)

Like the Sistine Chapel, this East Village bar is decorated with murals with Christian themes (here, it's monks getting into trouble) and is quieted, at intervals, by definitive shushing that seems to float down from On High. Unlike the Sistine Chapel, it serves beer, of a Belgian, Trappist focus, with a selection and quality that have earned faithful devotees. In the nineties, the bartenders wore monks' robes and played a soundtrack of Gregorian chants; now it's more of a reform situation, allowing for jazz and civvies. On a recent evening, Christian, a young bartender in a wool vest, served beers with a holiday flavor: Dupont Avec les Bons Voeux (tart, complex, originally the Christmas gift of the Dupont Brewery), Delirium Noël (Delirium Tremens's seasonal cousin), Wells Banana Bread (banana nose, banana taste, bread finish). When a conversation at the bar about "The Princess Bride" got boisterous—"The Dread Pirate Roberts!" "The six-fingered man!"—down came a "Sh-h-h," and tranquillity returned. At peak times, when the room fills with college students and the unobservant, the atmosphere can be less than monastic. "We don't let people shush other people," Christian said. "I've had to ask, 'Who wants to go to jail for a shush fight?' "

—Sarah Larson



TABLES FOR TWO

AITA

132 Greene Ave., Brooklyn (718-576-3584)

IF YOU HAPPEN TO LIVE close to Aita, on a quiet corner in Clinton Hill, where the dining scene is still catching up to the real-estate boom, consider yourself very lucky. It's the ultimate neighborhood restaurant, the type of place where the food hits the sweet spot of being good (not to mention affordable) enough to warrant regular visits by locals but not so outstanding or in vogue that those locals find themselves vying for space with the destination-eating hordes. On weeknights, there's hardly ever a wait for a table in the elegantly homey dining room, and when there is you're invited to have a drink at the marble bar or at the adjoining candlelit speakeasy, the Mayflower. The list of craft cocktails is long, but, at this uncomplicated trattoria, none feels quite so appropriate as the nine-dollar Americano—with just Campari, sweet vermouth, and soda water, on the rocks.

The Italian-born chef and co-owner, Roberto Aita, a shy and gentle-seeming man who was last the chef and co-owner of Williamsburg's similarly humble Fiore, has an instinct for appetizers, and, especially, vegetables. On a recent evening, a vinegar-sweet caponata of squash, celery root, and parsnip made an inspired foil for burrata. A hearty salad of kale and pumpkin flecked with grains of quinoa and tossed in a sour-cream vinaigrette was perfect topped with powdery cubes of feta that looked like miniature marshmallows. Pastas, which are all homemade, are more of a gamble: an understated bigoli (a long noodle similar to bucatini), lightly coated in sausage ragout and strewn with dark shreds of braised radicchio and coarse shavings of Piave, was expertly calculated, but oxtail ravioli in roasted bone-marrow sauce and brown butter fell short of its promise, somehow bland in spite of its ingredients. On a good night, the stuffed-trout entrée—a silver-skinned, palest-pink filet wrapped upright around a rich mix of bread crumbs and prawns and piled with crunchy slivers of almond—is phenomenal. On a bad night, it's slightly mushy and over-sauced.

But who cares? Aita is not a place to have the best meal of your life; it's a place to sit and linger with friends and family, feeling comfortable and taken care of. There are several fine desserts on offer, including a tangy goat cheesecake with a hazelnut crust, but Aita is the type of place where your familiar yet unassuming server will bring you complimentary biscotti with the check. Besides, you might want to save your appetite and come back for the buttermilk blueberry pancakes at brunch tomorrow.

—Hannah Goldfield

Open daily for dinner, Tuesdays through Fridays for lunch, and weekends for brunch. Entrées $14-$26.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KIRKHAM

PHOTOGRAPH BY TRUJILLOPAUMIER

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

Metropolitan Opera

Back in 2006, Julie Taymor's vibrant production of "**The Magic Flute**" was the first opera in the Met's repertory to get the abridged, English-language, family-friendly treatment, and it remains the gold standard for this sort of holiday presentation. Taymor's enchanting menagerie of masks and puppets (including dancing bears, balletic flamingos, and even a Chinese dragon), Jane Glover's supple, graceful conducting, and an energetic cast led by Nathan Gunn's fun-loving Papageno come together for a hundred minutes of easy yet satisfying entertainment. Also with Eric Owens, Heidi Stober, Alek Shrader, and Kathryn Lewek, who steps in for Albina Shagimuratova as the Queen of the Night. (Jan. 2 at 7 and Jan. 4 at 1. These are the final performances.) • The chimes of midnight never sound in Robert Carsen's suave, knowing, and very funny new production of **"Falstaff"**: its richly designed England-in-the-fifties milieu conjures up the ghosts of Kingsley Amis, Benny Hill, Monty Python, and the brothers Kray. The great Ambrogio Maestri—massive, majestic, and a nimble comedian—brings a slightly menacing edge to the title role (this naughty knight does indeed deserve his disgrace), but the hard-won wisdom of age is fizzed away in the back-slapping champagne party that erupts before the curtain falls. Among the other dazzlers in the cast are Stephanie Blythe, Angela Meade, and Lisette Oropesa; James Levine, in the midst of his latest comeback, remains the master of his orchestra, but his control of Verdi's complex vocal ensembles is sometimes tentative. (Jan. 3 and Jan. 6 at 7:30.) • There's hardly a better opera to savor at holiday time than **"Die Fledermaus,"** Johann Strauss II's loving sendup of the manners and mores of late-imperial Vienna, an operetta floated on some of the loveliest tunes ever written north of the Italian border. The new production, by Jeremy Sams, features not only a starry cast (including Susanna Phillips, Jane Archibald, Anthony Roth Costanzo, Christopher Maltman, Michael Fabiano, and Paulo Szot) but also English-language dialogue by the Broadway playwright Douglas Carter Beane; Adam Fischer conducts. (Jan. 4 at 8 and Jan. 7 at 7:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

Gotham Chamber Opera: "La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers"

Neal Goren's intrepid company, last seen whipping up nineteen-twenties modernist froth by the likes of Hindemith and Weill, turns chaste to present an intimate production of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's dignified treatment of the Orpheus myth, from 1686, in an unusual venue—St. Paul's Chapel of Trinity Church Wall Street. Daniel Curran, Jeffrey Beruan, and Jamilyn Manning-White take the featured roles; Andrew Eggert directs, with Goren conducting the Trinity Baroque Orchestra. (Broadway at Fulton St. 212-279-4200. Jan. 1 and Jan. 3 at 7 and Jan. 5 at 5.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic

Alan Gilbert, who has certainly raised the visibility of new music to a higher level than did his predecessor, conducts a program this week that brings together several of his favorite colleagues in the genre. He leads repeat performances of works by Christopher Rouse ("Rapture") and Magnus Lindberg (the Piano Concerto No. 2), the orchestra's current and former composers-in-residence; out front in the Lindberg work is Yefim Bronfman, whose towering authority is as present in contemporary pieces as it is in classic repertory. Tchaikovsky's richly affirmative Fifth Symphony concludes the concerts. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Jan. 2 and Jan. 7 at 7:30 and Jan. 3 at 8.)

RECITALS

Midtown Concerts: Aula Harmoniae

With the rush of the holidays receding, early January might be a pleasant time to sample some of New York's less travelled musical byways. This trio of flute, harpsichord, and viola da gamba offers Baroque chamber music from France and Germany in the long-established lunchtime concert series, offered free of charge at the Chapel of St. Bartholomew's Church. (Park Ave. at 51st St. Jan. 2 at 1:15. No tickets required.)

New York Polyphony

As part of Trinity Wall Street's "Twelfth Night" festival, the stylish young vocal quartet, experts in music from ancient to modern, offer "Wondrous Birth, O Wondrous Child," a survey of Christmas carols, both simple and complex, by Victoria, Tallis, contemporary European and American composers, and forgotten masters of medieval days. (St. Paul's Chapel, Broadway at Fulton St. 212-866-0468. Jan. 2 at 7.)

Nico Muhly and Pekka Kuusisto

The young New York composer, who has long nurtured musical links to the Nordic world, joins his adventurous Finnish violinist friend at (Le) Poisson Rouge for a meditative evening that promises work by Muhly (including "Drones and Violin"), Arvo Pärt, Bach (the Partita No. 2 in D Minor for Solo Violin, with the "Chaconne"), and Philip Glass (from the incidental music to Genet's "The Screens"). (158 Bleecker St. lprnyc.com. Jan. 3 at 7:30.)

Wagner Society of New York

The support of young singers is a natural extension of the Society's work in promoting its namesake composer. A holiday-time recital held under its auspices features two fine emerging artists, the mezzo-soprano Sarah Heltzel and the bass-baritone John Dominick III, who will perform songs by Barber, Britten, and Ravel in addition to excerpts from "Die Walküre"; Miloš Repický, an assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, is at the piano. (DiMenna Center, 450 W. 37th St. Jan. 4 at 3. Tickets at the door.)

Jupiter Symphony Chamber Players

The series, which mixes masterworks with rarities, offers a program rich in transcriptions with three impressive guest artists, the pianist Alon Goldstein, the violinist Itamar Zorman, and the Philharmonic's principal violist, Cynthia Phelps, helping out; the featured works include an arrangement of Mozart's Quintet for Piano and Winds for piano and strings, Liszt's "Paraphrase" for solo piano on themes from Verdi's "Rigoletto," and Brahms's Clarinet Trio in A Minor, Op. 114, in its officially sanctioned version for viola, cello, and piano. (Good Shepherd Church, 152 W. 66th St. 212-799-1259. Jan. 6 at 2 and 7:30.)

FRONT ROW

Richard Brody discusses Charlie Chaplin's talking pictures.

OF NOTE BARGEMUSIC

Several years ago, the barge's director, Mark Peskanov, decided to fill the Labor Day-weekend slowdown with a new-music festival. Now he's doing the same for the post-Christmas lull, with a roster that includes the newcomer Michael Brown, an impressive composer-pianist, but is heavy on major names. The concerts, each with a slightly different program, feature works by such distinguished composers as David Del Tredici, David Rakowski, Michel van der Aa (the American première of "Just Before," for piano and electronics), Charles Wuorinen, and one of this season's birthday boys, John Zorn ("Occam's Razor"). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. bargemusic.org. Jan. 2-4 at 7 and Jan. 5 at 4.)

ART

MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—"Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800." Through Jan. 5.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—"Isa Genzken." Through March 10.

MOMA PS1
22-25 Jackson Ave., Queens (718-784-2084)—"Mike Kelley." Through Feb. 2.

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—"Christopher Wool." Through Jan. 22.

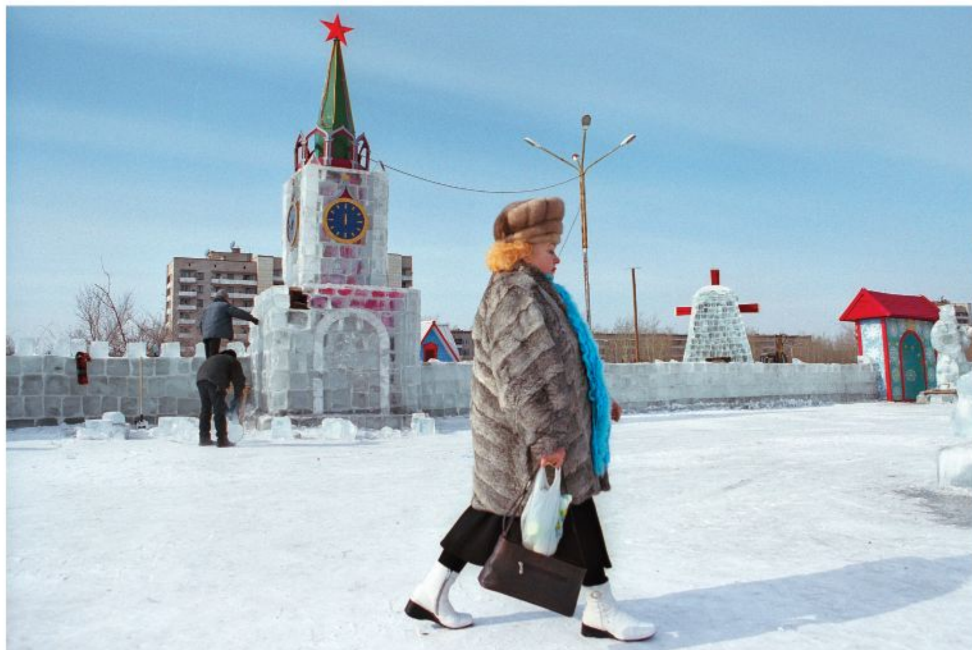
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—"Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama." Through Feb. 2.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—"War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath." Through Jan. 19.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—"The Power of Poison." Through Aug. 10.

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—"Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Hals: Masterpieces of Dutch Painting from the Mauritshuis." Through Jan. 19.

"Krasnokamensk, Chita Region, Russia" (2006), by Sergey Maximishin, at the Nailya Alexander gallery.



MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Museum of Modern Art
"Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New"
The art market has become so all-powerful that MOMA's first show venerating a dealer isn't just uncontroversial—it feels preordained. Sonnabend (seen at the show's entrance, in an Andy Warhol double portrait) was a Romanian émigré who, along with her ex-husband, Leo Castelli, helped shape the postwar art scene in New York. Among the Pop masterpieces on view are Robert Rauschenberg's "Canyon" (1959), which involves a taxidermy bald eagle and was front-page news when the Sonnabend family donated it to the museum in 2012. There are also fine examples of Arte Povera (notably a sculpture by Giovanni Anselmo combining granite, sawdust, and a fresh head of lettuce) and early works by hot shots who emerged in the eighties, including Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons. But Sonnabend's brilliant eye had an intolerable blind spot: with the exception of a rotating video program, the show includes just one solo female artist, the pioneering color photographer Jan Groover, among more than three dozen men. Through April 21.

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Graciela Iturbide
The Mexican photographer, now in her early seventies, shows work made between 1974 and 2011 that includes some of her most familiar images, as well as much that is new. Strong, eccentric women (and a few cross-dressing men) are the subjects of Iturbide's signature pictures, which often allude to Mexican myth and ritual. Recent photographs, made in Italy, focus on landscape—a train station, a dust-blown plateau, a field of dying sunflowers—opening the work up to a different sort of mystery. Whenever a woman strides into the frame, the drama doubles. Through Jan. 11. (Throckmorton, 145 E. 57th St. 212-223-1059.)

David Kapp
Collages created as studies for Kapp's larger paintings hold their own in this charming vest-pocket show. Bright bits of cut and torn paper capture the hectic traffic of lower Manhattan, as seen from the painter's studio window. (Matisse and Diebenkorn employed similar bird's-eye views, and the influence of both artists is strongly felt here.) In several works, the eye is cast up rather than down, capturing the disorientation of walking out of the subway and onto the street, as the sharp edges of rooftops frame jagged chunks of blue sky. Through Jan. 11. (De Nagy, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-262-5050.)

William Wegman
Before his Weimaraners hijacked (and supersized) his career, Wegman was one of New York's cleverest conceptualists. This compact show of black-and-white work from the early seventies puts a few dog pictures in the context of wittier still-lifes and simple studio setups featuring the artist himself. Typically, the photographs are driven by sight gags and one-liners: tiny circles, drawn in ink on a hand, echo the peppercorns in the salami it's holding. Other pictures are as minimal—and as disarmingly elegant—as a Donald Judd sculpture. In the first part of a diptych portraying a plain wall, the overhead light is on; in the second, it's off. Through Jan. 25. (Starr, 5 E. 73rd St. 212-570-1739.)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Michel Boyer
In 1970, before the days of the cubicle farm, Boyer decorated the Paris offices of the Rothschild Bank. (The building's architect was Max Abramovitz, who had recently completed Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall.) Baron Elie de Rothschild's own desk is here, all curved steel and walnut, as are tables and plastic chairs from the company dining room and a pair of sinuous white foam seats that look like they're straight out of Jean-Luc Godard's "Alphaville." The show also includes a partial re-creation of a mural by Guy de Rougemont, whose biomorphic blue and green forms make merchant banking look positively groovy. Through Jan. 18. (Demisch Danant, 542 W. 22nd St. 212-989-5750.)

Tony Feher / Kay Rosen
Crisp and lovely minimalistic caprices suggest an inspired weekend's work by the efficient Feher. There are shelved bottles of water tinted various blues, cheap colored glassware hung on chains or attached to leaning boards, hanging slabs of plywood stained walnut, and steel pipes, high on walls, from which hang loops of neon-yellow plastic twine or ropes beaded with bits of red and yellow PVC pipe. The payoff is happiness. Likewise deft, in the gallery's front window, is an alphabetical sign by the word wrangler Kay Rosen. It begins, in white, "ABCDEFG" and ends, in yellow, "HI." Back at ya, Kay. Through Jan. 18. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Adam Katseff
The Palo Alto-based photographer makes a solid New York solo début with work from several recent series, the most arresting of which are big, broad, nearly impenetrable landscapes made at night. Katseff's subjects are historic (the battlefield at Gettysburg), iconic (Yosemite's Bridalveil Falls), and just plain magnificent (the Susquehanna River), but the viewer has to work at discerning their details in a velvety, enveloping darkness. Inspired by Albert Bierstadt and Carleton Watkins, the work suggests that the eclipse of classicism hasn't diminished its strength. As a balance, images of empty scale-model rooms (including Katseff's childhood bedroom) are exercises in white-on-white minimalism. Through Jan. 12. (Wolf, 70 Orchard St. 212-925-0025.)

DANCE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre
The final week of the annual City Center encampment offers a few more chances to see the company dance new works and works new to the company: Aszure Barton's quirky, neo-primitive romp, "Lift"; Wayne McGregor's hyperextended ultra-modern ballet, "Chroma"; and Bill T. Jones's aerobic late-eighties show of resilience, "D-Man in the Waters." The final night, on the late founder's birthday, combines the season's highlights with the run's last performance of his "Revelations." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Jan. 1-2 at 7:30, Jan. 3 at 8, Jan. 4 at 2 and 8, and Jan. 5 at 3 and 7:30.)

New York City Ballet / "The Nutcracker"
The Christmas mood lingers at Lincoln Center with the final few performances of this well-loved 1954 production, with a tree that grows to magical proportions, scores of adorable—and beautifully trained—children performing roles small and large, and, for dance lovers, marvellous choreography for the snowflakes, flowers, and grande dame of the Kingdom of Sweets, the Sugar Plum Fairy. (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Jan. 2 at 7, Jan. 3 at 8, and Jan. 4 at 2 and 8.)

The Chocolate Factory / "Muazzez"
As part of the COIL festival, the Chocolate Factory presents a work by the experimental playwright and poet Mac Wellman, based on his short-story collection "A Chronicle of the Madness of Small Worlds." The one-man show, performed by Wellman's longtime collaborator Steve Mellor, is set on an actual asteroid called Muazzez. Its protagonist is not a person but a place, an abandoned cigar factory, which, through Wellman's precise, loopy language, muses on its past, its physical form, and its role in the universe. (5-49 49th Ave., Long Island City. 866-811-4111. Jan. 7 at 7:30. Through Jan. 17.)

Focus Dance
This annual festival is aimed at arts presenters, but it also allows audiences to catch remounted works that they might have missed. The opening program is a winner. In Vicky Shick's "Everything You See," ten vibrantly idiosyncratic dancers spin out a bemusing profusion of solos, duets, and trios, overlapping dances of casual, peculiar detail. Doug Elkins's "Scott, Queen of Marys" is a brilliant elucidation of the hidden connections between club dance of the nineties and Scottish folk forms. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 7 at 7:30. Through Jan. 12.)

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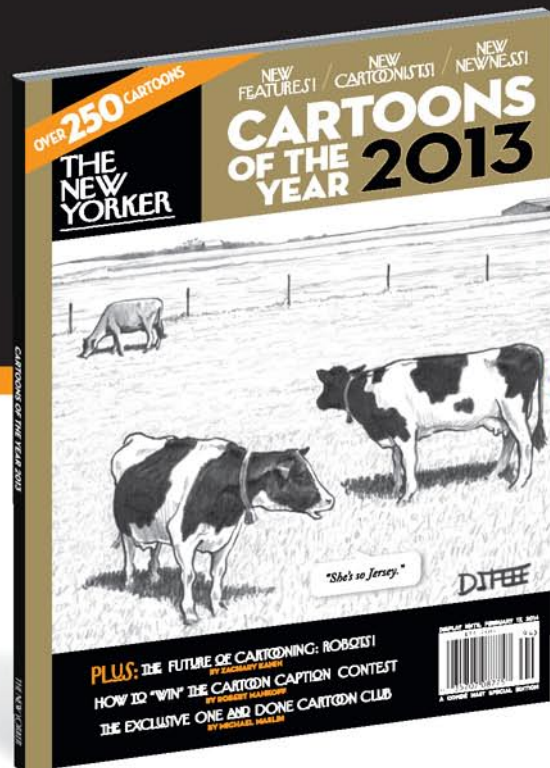

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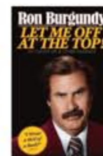

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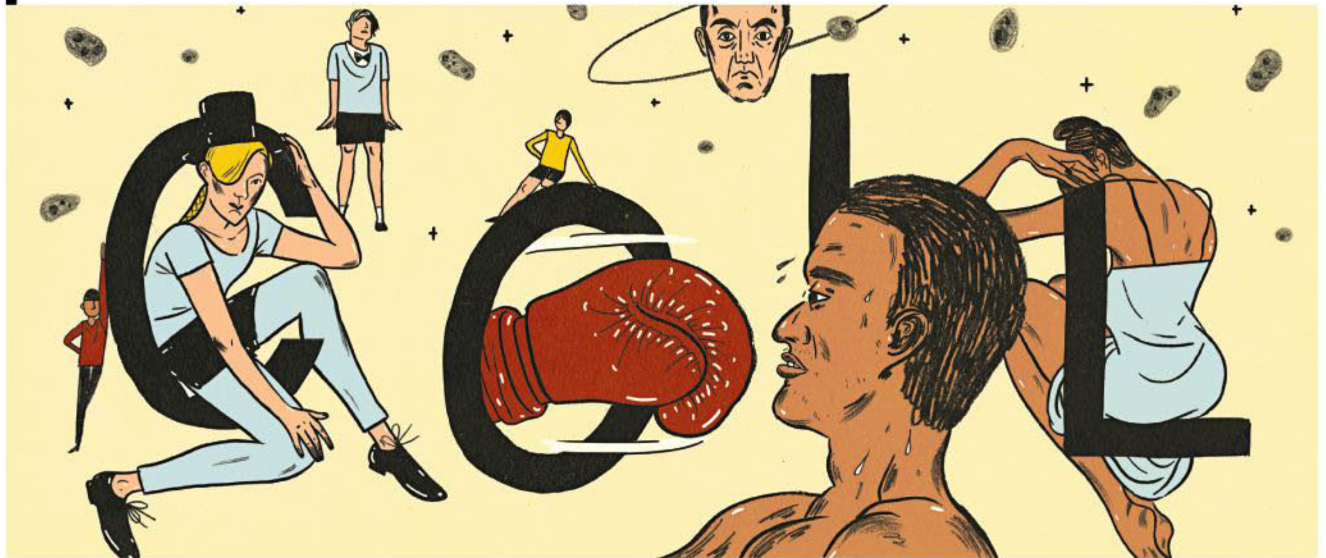

GETTING PERSONAL

Downtown performance art at P.S. 122's COIL festival.

WHEN YOU RUN a not-for-profit space devoted to the performing arts, personal attractiveness helps. But it's a tricky thing to handle. You want to be a star in order to attract other stars—and get them to work for practically nothing—but your charisma can't be so overwhelming that it makes your performers self-conscious about their own capabilities, or allure. Then there's your board. Influential people join boards to be even more influential, and if your job is to excite them about seeing new artists in new ways you have to not only wear a don's robes but also carry a cheerleader's brightly colored pompoms—to be enthusiastic and informed, all at once.

Since 2005, the ebullient, Australian-born Vallejo Gantner has been the Artistic Director of Performance Space 122, in the East Village. (Beforehand, Gantner, whose parents were actors, ran the Dublin Fringe Festival.) The multi-level theatre was founded in 1980, in an abandoned school building, by the activist artists Charles Dennis, Tim Miller, Charles Moulton, and Peter Rose. P.S. 122 has been a significant presence on the downtown theatre scene—a kind of alternative Public Theatre that focusses less on traditional narratives than on all sorts of performance.

A year after Gantner started work at P.S. 122, in 2006, he established the COIL festival, out of a sense of frustration. He noticed that, in January, when international theatre scouts descended on the city to look at new work, dancers were paying for their own venues, down to the lighting. The Public's prominent "Under the Radar" festival, which highlights theatre more than dance, started around then, and Gantner thought he could make a difference, certainly when it came to the dance world. He did, and, over the years, COIL became more interdisciplinary, which, in turn, told more people what P.S. 122 was—a show palace where artists not only described their bodies in the world but displayed a left-of-center imagination.

During COIL—indeed, all year—you may recognize Gantner, who curates the festival, zipping around town on his bike, wild-eyed and beautifully suited. This year is a little different, because P.S. 122 is undergoing major renovations—to improve the floors and the acoustics—so the nine-year-old COIL (Jan. 3-19) is happening in a variety of venues. At the Chocolate Factory, in Queens, we'll be treated to the prolific Mac Wellman's "Muazzez" (Jan. 7-17), which stars Wellman's longtime collaborator Steve Mellor and is set on an asteroid. Other pieces include Tina Satter's "House of Dance" (at Abrons Arts Center, Jan. 9-13) and Reid Farrington's provocative work about black masculinity, iconography, and the myth of the supermacho, "TYSON vs. ALI" (at 3LD Art & Technology Center, Jan. 3-13).

Another show of special interest is "Bronx Gothic," by the striking Okwui Okpokwasili (at Danspace Project, Jan. 14-19), which I saw an early incarnation of at Judson Church last winter. In this solo work, Okpokwasili, who has worked with directors ranging from Young Jean Lee to Julie Taymor, describes a hidden female realm; two eleven-year-old girls, who understand little about their bodies, talk about the romance of sex. Okpokwasili (her parents are Nigerian-born) plays both girls; she also evokes, with the support of her director, Peter Born, a nineteen-eighties scene where the adult world—the turmoil on Orchard Beach, for instance—is part of the noise that fills the realities and fantasies fostered by a kid who longs to connect. It's the kind of work that the front-and-center Gantner—the artistic director as auteur—says he reacts to: deeply personal, real, and out there. "Of course the programming is personal," he says. "My relationship to the artists is personal, and what's more intimate than art?"

—Hilton Als

 ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH K. LEE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Beautiful—The Carole King Musical
This new musical follows the rise of Carole King, from her adolescence in Brooklyn to her career as a writer of hit pop songs to her emergence as a solo artist. With songs by King, Gerry Goffin, Barry Mann, and Cynthia Weil and a book by Douglas McGrath. Jessie Mueller stars; Marc Bruni directs. In previews. (Stephen Sondheim, 124 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.)

COIL 2014
The annual festival presented by P.S. 122 includes "Muazzez," a piece by Mac Wellman; Phil Soltanoff's video theatre piece "An Evening with William Shatner Asterisk"; Tina Satter's "House of Dance"; Brokentalkers' "Have I No Mouth"; and Reid Farrington's "TYSON vs. ALI." Opens Jan. 3. (Various locations. 212-352-3101.)

King Lear
Frank Langella stars in the Shakespeare tragedy, following a run at the Chichester Festival Theatre. Angus Jackson directs. Previews begin Jan. 7. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

Machinal
Rebecca Hall stars in this 1928 drama by Sophie Treadwell, inspired by the 1927 murder trial of Ruth Snyder, a married housewife who began an affair with a corset salesman and who, after taking out several insurance policies, murdered her husband with the help of her lover. Lyndsey Turner directs the Roundabout Theatre Company production. In previews. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

Outside Mullingar
Brían F. O'Byrne and Debra Messing star in this new play by John Patrick Shanley, set in rural Ireland, about a shut-in and the neighbor who loves him. Presented by Manhattan Theatre Club. Doug Hughes directs. Previews begin Jan. 2. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder
A musical entertainment with panache and precision, by Robert L. Freedman and Steven Lutvak. Set in Edwardian England, the story concerns one Monty Navarro (the suave Bryce Pinkham), who discovers that he is a disinherited member of the noble D'Ysquith family and eighth in line to be Earl of Highhurst. Blithely homicidal, he goes about dispatching the intervening D'Ysquiths, who are all played, with buffoonish alacrity, by the masterly Jefferson Mays. (His costume changes alone are Tony-worthy.) Like "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," the musical sets its arch humor to a tuneful score, served up elegantly in Darko Tresnjak's production. With winsome performances by Lisa O'Hare and Lauren Worsham, as Monty's rival love interests, and a plush fun-house set by Alexander Dodge. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players
The repertory company performs "Patience," which pits military men against poets in the game of love. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. Through Jan. 5.)

The Night Alive
In Conor McPherson's new play, directed by the playwright, Tommy (Ciarán Hinds) lives in the garden flat of a new Edwardian house in Dublin that is owned by his stereotypically meddlesome old cousin, Maurice (the amusing Jim Norton). Separated from his wife and children, Tommy survives on odd jobs, some of which he shares with his best mate, Doc (strongly played by Michael McElhatton). Tommy finds the matter-of-fact, depressed Aimee (Caoilfhionn Dunne) bleeding, after she was hit in the nose, and brings her to his home. Hinds brilliantly shows us how Tommy shadowboxes with his own heart, but when things turn melodramatic toward the end of the play—Aimee's boyfriend, Kenneth (the powerful Brian Gleeson), shows up, followed by a betrayal, an attempted theft, and a murder—we are less interested than we should be, because McPherson uses Kenneth not as an organic part of the story but as a symbol of the dark forces that will try to undo any genuine attempt at connection. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/23 & 30/13.) (Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111.)

No Man's Land
"No man's land" is a term that's often connected to the First World War, and it means a place that's being fought over, even though, out of fear and anxiety, nobody lives there. Harold Pinter knew something about those feelings, and he put them into his marvellous 1975 play, which is not so marvellously directed by Sean Mathias (in repertory with "Waiting for Godot"). Hirst (Patrick Stewart) is an upper-class man of letters who's invited Spooner (Ian McKellen), a down-at-the-heels poet, for a drink in his rather cushy quarters. Time is not on either man's side, and things get weird when Hirst's secretary, Foster (Billy Crudup), enters. Briggs (Shuler Hensley) completes the quartet in this examination of time's ability to make our bodies, not to mention our lives, something other than what we had hoped. The mediocrity of the production is emphasized by Crudup, whose Foster is as sharp and menacing as a knife; he's a great actor joyfully working inside Pinter's outrageous humor and perverse sense of tragedy. (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

What's It All About
Burt Bacharach and Hal David's joint style and the metaphysical undercurrent of their songs define this touching ninety-minute chamber musical. Co-conceived by the actor and musician Kyle Riabko and the producer David Lane Seltzer, the show features twenty-six Bacharach-David collaborations, along with eight other Bacharach songs. Working with Riabko's outstanding arrangements, Steven Hoggett, the show's talented director, begins the show with Riabko and the other members of the seven-person cast, all terrific, scattered around a studio. The score is the show's script—there are no spoken lines—and the evening, a series of standards unexpectedly handled, has the slimmest of narratives: the ups and downs of relationships. Nothing is feigned; these young theatre artists are honoring, rather than capitalizing on, their elders. (12/16/13) (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-279-4200.)

ABOVE & BEYOND

New York Boat Show
They say that the two happiest days in a boat owner's life are the day the craft is bought and the day it's sold. This annual gathering at the Javits Center gives would-be buyers a chance to extend that initial pleasure, as it presents hundreds of fibreglass wonders, from motor yachts to sailboats. A number of activities are planned, too, including appearances by Captain Dave Carraro, from National Geographic's series "Wicked Tuna," and by Jeff Quattrocchi, who calls himself the Swampmaster and who will handle an eight-foot, two-hundred-pound alligator armed with nothing more than his hands and a clip-on microphone. There will also be an interactive boating simulator, hands-on workshops about engine repair, rope-tying tutorials, fishing seminars, and presentations about financing and insurance. (655 W. 34th St. nyboatshow.com. Jan. 1-5.)

New Year's Day Swim
The Coney Island Polar Bear Club, whose motto is "Every day is a beach day," takes its New Year's Day dip in the icy North Atlantic. The club was founded more than a hundred years ago by Bernarr Macfadden, who in the first half of the twentieth century was one of the world's leading fitness experts. A successful publisher who started his empire with a magazine called *Physical Culture,* he had many fascinating theories on how to be healthy. He was an early proponent of vegetarianism, raw foods, and fasting—he never ate on Mondays—and he believed that a cold-water swim was good for the body. You can see if you agree, as the event is open to the public. (polarbearclub.org. Jan. 1 at 1.)

READINGS AND TALKS

New Year's Day Marathon Reading
The annual gathering at the Poetry Project celebrates its fortieth anniversary this year. Among those doing the honors are Patti Smith, Philip Glass, Anselm Berrigan, Anne Waldman, Edwin Torres, Eileen Myles, Jonas Mekas, Joseph Keckler, Justin Vivian Bond, and scores of other artists and personalities. More than a hundred and forty participants are expected. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-0910. Jan. 1, starting at 2.)

"Estrellas en el Fuego"
The self-described "Alternative New Year's Day Spoken Word / Performance Extravaganza" is marking its twentieth anniversary, with a show whose title translates as "Stars in the Fire." Some hundred and seventy denizens of the downtown scene are expected to take the stage at the Nuyorican Poets Café, from 2 to midnight. Admission is free, and the organizers are collecting paperbacks for the Books Behind Bars prisoner-literacy program. (236 E. 3rd St. 212-780-9386.)

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JOE JONAS

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
TWO SHIPS

We make the turn toward the new year this January with trepidation. Well, we make the turn toward *every* new year with trepidation, but added to the anticipatory jumps this year are what might be called the retrospective willies. You don't have to have a very enlarged sense of history to remember what happened last time Western Civilization sped around the corner from '13 to '14. Not so good. The year 1913 had been full of rumbling energy and matchless artistic accomplishment—Proust kicking off, the Cubists kicking back, Stravinsky kicking out—and then, within a few months, the Archduke was assassinated in Sarajevo and the troop trains were running and, pretty soon, the whole positive and optimistic and progressive culture was on its way to committing suicide. The Great War left more than ten million Europeans dead and a civilization in ruins (and presaged a still worse war to come). Naturally, a lot of people, staring at this year's tea leaves—at rising new powers and frightened old ones—are searching for parallels between that '14 and this one, and finding them. In the *Times* recently, the historian Margaret MacMillan pointed out a few, clustering around the folly of "toxic nationalisms" that draw big powers into smaller local disputes, with the Russians trying to play a better hand today in Syria than they played in Serbia a century ago.

Lodged somewhere in our collective memory of that catastrophe is an image, a metaphor of hubris, from just a year or so before: a great four-funnelled ocean liner, the biggest and most luxurious ever built, whose passengers, rich and poor, crowd on board, the whole watched over by a bearded man named Edward John Smith, with the chief designer, Thomas Andrews, along for the maiden voyage, too. Then the ship sets off from Southampton, sure of itself, unsinkable, until it comes to the ice fields of the North Atlantic, off the coast of Newfoundland—and speeds right on through them to its anchorage, here in New York. Because this ship isn't the Titanic but its nearly identical twin sister, the Olympic, made at the same time, by the same people, to do the same job in the same way. (A single memorable image exists of the two ships in dock together.) The Olympic not only successfully completed its maiden voyage but became known as Old Reliable, serving as a troop carrier in the First World War, and sailing on for twenty years more. (A third, late-released liner in the same class, the Britannic, hit a mine in the Aegean, in 1916, while serving as a hospital ship, and sank, a true casualty of war.)

The story of the two ships is one to keep in mind as we peer ahead into the new year. It reminds us that our imagination of disaster is dangerously more fertile than our imagination of the ordinary. You have certainly heard of the Titanic; you have probably never heard of the Olympic. We have a fatal attraction to fatality. We don't have one movie called "Titanic," starring Leo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, about a tragic love and a doomed adventure, and another called "Olympic," a musical comedy starring Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway, about a happy voyage over. We have only one movie, and remember only one sad tale. If our history leads us to the First World War, then we imagine that we were always bound on that collision course, and we cannot imagine that, with a bit of luck and another set of contingencies, we might have been on the Olympic, not the Titanic. We search for parallels of disaster, and miss parallels of hope. False positives are the great curse of diagnostics, in historical parallels and prostate screenings alike.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

Is it all chance and contingency, though? Do we not know what boat we're on until the iceberg informs us? Leafing through recent books on the last encounter with '14, you find one thing that does seem to have the chill

of ice about it. Even open societies, sailing, so to speak, on the open seas of history, are not immune to the appeal to honor and the fear of humiliation. The relentless emphasis on shame and face, on position and credibility, on the dread of being perceived as weak sounds an icy note through the rhetoric of 1914—from the moment Franz Ferdinand is shot to the moment the troops are sent to the Western Front. The prospect of being discredited, "reduced to a second-rate power," was what drove the war forward. The German Kaiser kept saying that he would never again allow himself to be embarrassed by the British. Lloyd George, in London, felt that Britain had to go to war or it would never be "taken seriously" in the councils of Europe. Needless wars are rushed along, it seems, by an overcharge of the language of honor and credibility, when the language of common sense and compromise would be a lot more helpful. When someone says, "Ram the iceberg! We can't afford to let it make us look weak," it's time to run for the deck. Sanity lurks in sailing around the ice.

But, then, sanity doesn't necessarily guarantee safe passage. Two boats set sail in those prewar years a century ago: the boat that sailed on and the boat that sank. Olympic or Titanic? Which is ours? It is, perhaps, essential to life to think that we know where we're going when we set out—our politics and plans alike depend on the illusion that *someone* knows where we're going. The cold-water truth that the past provides, though, may be that we can't. To be a passenger in history is to be unsure until we get to port—or the lifeboats—and, looking back at the prow of our ship, discover the name, invisible to our deck-bound eyes, that it possessed all along.

—*Adam Gopnik*

DEPT. OF EDUCATION
FOR THE BIRDS

Avenues, a private school that opened last year in Chelsea, intends to turn out young people who will be "architects of lives that transcend the ordinary," according to its mission statement. Graduates of Avenues are to be "accomplished in the academic skills one would expect; at ease beyond their borders; truly fluent in a second language; good writers and speakers one and all; confident because they excel in a particular passion; artists no matter their field; practical in the ways of the world; emotionally unafraid and physically fit; humble about their gifts and generous of spirit."

Co-founded by Chris Whittle, the serial education entrepreneur, Benno Schmidt, the former president of Yale, and Alan Greenberg, the former publisher of *Esquire*, and charging forty-two thousand dollars a year in tuition, Avenues has yet to graduate any transcendent architects: the school thus far encompasses only nursery schoolers to tenth graders. Among those tenth graders is Wyatt Wren Christianson, the eldest of four siblings at Avenues, who a couple of months ago decided to pursue the school's mandate that students should be "great leaders when they can be" by establishing an alternative to debate club and dance club. Christianson proposed a chicken club, dedicated to raising chickens in a coop on the roof of the Avenues building, a former grocery warehouse on Tenth Avenue, abutting the High Line.

Until last year, Christianson was homeschooled on a farm in Pennsylvania by his parents, who used to be in the fashion industry. He outlined the club's aims in his own mission statement. The club would "harvest chickens who are accomplished in the poultry skills one would expect; at ease beyond their coops and industrial farms; truly fluent in second clucks and crows; good scratchers and peckers one and all; confident because they excel in the tradition of chicken-hood; fowl no matter what field the feed may be found in; practical in the recipes for all tastes of the world; emotionally skittish and physically big-breasted; humble and gratuitous about their gifts of white meat and generous of their eggs." He signed the statement "Wyatt Wren Chickenson." After he enlisted the support of Jordan Mahome, an English teacher, as a faculty adviser, the chicken club went live.

Several members of the Avenues staff were less than thrilled, including Cesar Garcia, a custodian and after-school boxing instructor, who is a vegan, and Erin Blad-Johnson, the lower-school librarian, who is a vegetarian and animal-rights activist. "The part that concerned me was that the mission statement said something about the chickens going to the slaughterhouse of their choosing," Blad-Johnson said recently. In November, she and Garcia attended a meeting of the chicken club to express their concerns: that the club members had no contingency bad-weather plans for a coop above a grade-A FEMA flood zone; and that some lower-school students, whose play yard is also on the school's roof, might be allergic to feathers. "I am concerned about the fecklessness of the chicken-club members," Garcia said afterward.

Christianson issued a revised mission statement, emphasizing the club's goal of using poultry as instruments for children to learn benevolence upon. The resistant staff members reluctantly agreed to coöperate, should the club members gain permission to build in the spring, as they hope. Gardner Dunnan, the head of the upper school, said, "We said, 'You have to check out zoning, health codes, how they are

going to be cared for; and, after you've done your due diligence, maybe you'll have some chickens.'"

At a recent meeting of the club, all of whose members are boys, Christianson reported on his research into hardy chicken breeds, pulling up images of dominiques and bantams on his Avenues-issued MacBook Air, which he had covered with skateboard stickers. "These are all friendly breeds," he said. "In Pennsylvania, we had chickens that jump on your back and push you down." Christianson has chin-length dirty-blond hair and wore a personalized iteration of the school's black-gray-and-white uniform. In desert boots, black pants, and a black Western-style shirt, he evinced the cool of Tim Riggins with the aptitude of Matt Saracen. One club member read a poem aloud, "Last Night I Dreamed of Chickens," by Jack Prelutsky; another showed a video clip, made by a newsreel team, of Flannery O'Connor, captured at age five with a chicken that walked backward. "Do you know who Flannery O'Connor was?" Mahome inquired, to blank looks all around.

After the meeting, while taking a break in the students' lounge, Christianson said that he wasn't worried that care of the chickens would be too demanding. His family left their chickens in Pennsylvania alone all summer, he explained, when they decamped to their house in the Hamptons. "I try to follow the cooler stuff in life; that is what I strive for," he said, before heading off to skate club. He founded that one last year.

—*Rebecca Mead*

DEPT. OF COMMUNICATION
HANDS DOWN

Sign-language interpreters, like air-traffic controllers, usually attract attention only when they screw up. Part of the job is to blend in, even if you're standing in front of eighty thousand people. That is not what happened last month in Johannesburg, when Thamsanqa Jantjie, the interpreter at Nelson Mandela's memorial service, was revealed to be an impostor, having translated the words of President Obama and other dignitaries into the signing equivalent of "Jabberwocky." Although the details surrounding Jantjie grew progressively weirder and darker—he said that he had been having a schizophrenic episode during the service and was hallucinating angels; he has a criminal past—New Yorkers may have been reminded of Lydia Callis, Mayor Bloomberg's interpreter during Hurricane Sandy. Callis's emotive facial expressions during official press conferences made her a local star (Gawker called her "New York City's Hurricane Crush"). This brings up a question: are sign-language interpreters going rogue?

"People should not be entering the field of interpreting to be seen," an interpreter named Lynnette Taylor said the other day. Taylor is among sixty-five interpreters represented by All Hands in Motion, a referral company in New York City. (Because of anti-discrimination laws, the job is essentially recession-proof.) She and some of her colleagues had gathered for happy hour on the Lower East Side, to discuss the occupation's perks (flexible hours) and hazards (carpal-tunnel syndrome). Like Candace Broecker-Penn, who sat to her left, Taylor is a Child of Deaf Adults, or CODA. Both recalled interpreting the coverage of the J.F.K. assassination from the television set when they were small children. "I would venture to say there isn't any human interaction that we haven't done," Broecker-Penn said: bar mitzvahs, corporate retreats, astronomy lectures. "We need to be chameleons." Broecker-Penn specializes in Broadway shows ("Sondheim is hard. Shakespeare is hard"), where she is careful not to upstage the actors: "I don't want to be the star."

But interpreters can't be poker-faced; expression is integral to sign language. "The only way you can do a question is with your eyebrows," another interpreter, Bill Moody, said. "A major way to do an adverb is with mouth movements." He signed the phrase "driving without paying attention": hands on an imaginary wheel, tongue poking out kittenishly. "Even in the high register"—formal speech—"there's often irony, which you show in your face," Moody went on, signing the words "She's really pretty" with evident sarcasm. "That's actually how we could detect that he wasn't using a real language," Taylor said of Jantjie. "There was no grammar on his face." Nevertheless, interpreters take pains to match a speaker's affect. In the case of Bloomberg's interpreter, Taylor explained, "Her register didn't match the register of the speaker. Bloomberg was very specific, dry, informative—and she was not."

Janice Rimler, the company's C.E.O. and an interpreter since 1985, added, "We're not machines. I've done funerals, and I've done weddings. I just happen to cry at weddings." Moody trained as an actor and had to quash his love of the spotlight when he took up interpreting. He learned sign language as a boy in Houston. "There was a magnificent woman who interpreted in church, and, by the time I was fourteen, I was sort of in love with her," he recalled. "She was standing up in front of a congregation of a thousand people, and I said, 'I want to stand in front!' " After giving him lessons for two years, the woman allowed him to do the hymns. "She had the most beautiful signs that I have ever seen."

Besides communicating tone, interpreters learn specialized vocabulary for particular settings, such as computing conferences and hospitals. It's not enough to spell out the word "stent" to a cardiology patient, Moody said: "You better know how to picture the heart." Christopher Tester, who is deaf, often works in the courts, where he interprets legal proceedings. Recently, he interpreted for a deaf couple undergoing a separation. Tester is often called on to translate American Sign Language into foreign variants. (British Sign Language is different from A.S.L., which is closer to French.) Sign language has adapted to political correctness in recent years. The sign for "Mexican" used to be "twirling the mustache like Frito Bandito," Rimler said; limp wrists (for "gay") and slant eyes (for "Chinese") have also been jettisoned. In a few days, Tester, Moody, and Broecker-Penn would be interpreting for a Nelson Mandela tribute

at the United Nations. They had not received the program yet, but they predicted that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon would speak first. Moody insisted that he would put content over style: "I don't care about showing that he has a Korean accent."

—*Michael Schulman*

THE PICTURES
ALLEYMAN

"Bowling during the day is so decadent!" Paul Rudd said, gazing in wonder at Lucky Strike's empty lanes. At night, the Hell's Kitchen bowling alley is the kind of swinging joint where you might find Brian Fantana, the *Oui*-era Casanova whom Rudd reprises in "Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues." Fantana, a mustachioed television correspondent who slathers on Sex Panther cologne and carries condoms for every mood, would surely have a mocha-colored bowling ensemble.

Rudd, not so much. The forty-four-year-old actor wore a flannel shirt, sported two-day stubble, and was scouring the place for a viable ball. "I had incredibly fat thumbs," he explained, "so I always had the embarrassing thing of having to use the sixteen-pound ball. Later, I had thumb-reduction surgery, of course." He finally secured a suitable house ball—helpfully labelled "House Ball"—and raised it in triumph.

At fourteen, in lieu of puberty, Rudd went through a bowling phase. "At my alley, King Louie West Lanes, in Kansas City, there was this glass case with photos of all the pro bowlers who'd been there—and I had never heard of any of them," he said. "One was named Mike Limongello, which gave me endless amounts of pleasure." He used his phone to spell-check the bowler's name, and went, "Ooh . . ."; headlines told of Limongello's being kidnapped, in 1982, by his cousin, a former major-league pitcher who spelled his name "Lemongello." Rudd pocketed his phone with a frown—*that anecdote went in a strange direction*—and squeezed out some sanitizing lotion from a wall-mounted dispenser. "Every bowling ball is filled with human excrement," he explained. "People pick their ass and then bowl. It's very common."

Ready at last, he stepped up and knocked down eight pins, then converted a tricky 2-8 spare. "Classic Limongello!" he cried. He followed that with a ringing strike, but critiqued the anxious way he'd watched the pins scatter, saying, "I should have turned and walked away, like people do in films when they've timed an explosion to go off."

After the strong start, Rudd's game began to wobble. There was even a gutter ball. He explained the technique that had produced it: "I go with the rigidly straight arm, so I can bounce the ball on the lane before I release it, which preserves the randomness. I find it also helps to keep the front leg locked and the back leg really tight to my body, taking any suppleness out of the motion." He actually had some back-leg action, but it wasn't a stylish upkick so much as the scuffle you make to scrape gum off your shoe.

Rudd hosts an annual fund-raiser at Lucky Strike for children who stutter—just because he admires kids who persevere through the issue. That sort of friend-to-the-situation optimism can also be seen in a YouTube video in which a college-age Rudd makes a cameo as an affable bat-mitzvah d.j., representing an outfit called You Should Be Dancing. He said that seeing the old footage—his matted gull wings of hair; his canary-colored dinner jacket, black shorts, and Pittsburgh Steelers cap; his introspective air guitar to "Hound Dog"—"was like watching myself in a porno." The d.j.-ing phase didn't follow inevitably from the bowling phase, he insisted, yet he acknowledged that "it's hard to say which outweighs the other on the nerdiness scale."

Rudd's Everyman appeal—his ability to seem at once engagingly nerdy and unthreateningly handsome—has got him cast as men named Ned, Tim, Danny, Chuck, Pete, and, repeatedly, as John, Paul, and George. (No Ringo.) "Character names are a real art, and I haven't had many snazzy ones," he said, settling on a sofa after a run of open frames. "In 'Anchorman,' because names are a huge part of real anchormen's personas, the fake anchor names have to be just right. 'Ron Burgundy' "—Will Ferrell's character—"is perfect: the 'Burgundy' suggesting a

"Someday, God willing, they'll bring the stars down to our eye level so we don't have to strain our necks."

rich, professional, Naugahyde feel, and 'Ron' having just the right amount of machismo. And, for me, playing a Brian is pretty standard, but the 'Fantana' has something nicely cocksure about it. You sense that he imagines himself as rather exotic, as having the authentic Latin-American flair of a Tony Orlando. You picture small colored briefs."

Still, Rudd said he'd love to play characters with even sexier, more dangerous names. Such as? "Enzo. Daze. Daze with two 'a' s—D-a-a-z-e. Flarn. If they wanted me to play him, his name would probably be George Flarn, but he might go by Flarn." He propped his rented shoes on the table. "And Limongello, of course."

Paul Rudd

—*Tad Friend*

DEPT. OF PINUPS
SAY CHEESE

Nathan Myhrvold, the technologist and the author of "The Photography of Modernist Cuisine," a twelve-pound volume that sells for a hundred and twenty dollars, was scrunched in a chair in the dimly lit lobby of the Ace Hotel. He was trying to capture the perfect shot of a pumpkin muffin with his Nokia phone.

"It's all about the inverse-square law," Myhrvold, who has twinkly eyes and a beard flecked with white, said. "The amount of light that hits the subject is inversely proportional to the square of the distance. So here's the muffin, it's one unit away from me. And the edge of the table is"—he paused to measure it roughly—"six units away. So the ratio of light hitting the edge versus the muffin is smaller by a factor of thirty-six." He rotated the muffin plate, then paused. He'd taken a few bites out of it, and he wasn't sure whether to hide them. "I've made the muffin less attractive. But this brings up an interesting question: should you show food half eaten or not?" Finally, he pulled a small flashlight out of a pocket of his rumpled suit—"auxiliary light"—and lit the muffin from below, then snapped a photo.

Most people know Myhrvold as the original chief technology officer of Microsoft, but he is now the C.E.O. of Intellectual Ventures, a patent company, and he also dabbles in antiterrorism strategy and in paleontology. (He just published a scientific paper pointing out "serious errors and irregularities" in the research of some of the world's leading paleontologists.) But in the food world he is known as the author of "Modernist Cuisine," a six-volume work that uses science and technology to explain various culinary phenomena, from why searing a steak doesn't seal in the meat's juices, as many believe, to what a bullet looks like as it is shot through jello at eighteen hundred miles per hour. The books are packed with jaw-dropping photography—a pan sliced in half, with vegetables in mid-flip, so you can see the torque of the morel mushrooms—which spawned Myhrvold's photo project.

His primary photographic strategy is simple: get really, really close to the food. Armed with an ant's perspective and a technology titan's resources, Myhrvold captures the swirling magma of a blueberry's interior and the translucent reptilian juice sacs of a grapefruit. One spread shows four roasted guinea hens standing upright, their burnished, crackled skin and stance calling to mind Rockettes after an afternoon at the tanning salon.

At the back of the book, he includes tips on food photography for those without a few million dollars to spend on camera equipment. No. 1: Sit where there is good light. This proved a problem in the hotel lobby, a cavelike space lit to attract young patrons pecking away at laptops. Flashlight in hand, Myhrvold was still focussed on lighting the muffin. (He'd taken about a dozen unsatisfactory shots so far.) On the table sat a small card that read, "Love your neighbor but keep an eye on your stuff." He shoved it closer to his coffee. "It's telling more of a story now."

He fiddled with his phone, which is armed with a 41-megapixel sensor and a Windows operating system—"It was my idea to make a Windows phone fifteen years ago, so it's a sentimental favorite at some level"—then grabbed a napkin, covered the flashlight, and held it as far away from the muffin as he could. "The light will diffuse now," he said. A warm glow settled into the crannies of the half-eaten muffin. He clicked, then assessed his work. "This is a hell of a shot," he said. "See how the white outer rim of the coffee cup really stands out?"

The problem is that not many people carry flashlights in their pockets or are handy enough to turn a menu into a makeshift reflector, a trick Myhrvold recommends in his book. Later that day, he was going to meet his friend Martha Stewart, whose food photos on Twitter—a wedge of iceberg lettuce covered in pinkish Russian dressing—had recently gone viral because they look so unappetizing. (Myhrvold chuckled when asked about these shots, but said he planned to refrain from correcting her technique.) René Redzepi, though—the chef of Copenhagen's Noma restaurant, rated No. 2 in the world—has a real eye for photography. "These are nicely composed, and quite reasonable shots," Myhrvold said, scrolling through Redzepi's Instagram feed. "Well lit." He was transfixed by one dish, which the chef had labelled "thin shavings of silky squid soaked in a light vinegar of fennel tops." "Now, that's really something," he said.

Farther down the feed was a pile of apples, one with some bites taken out of it. "So this is where a half-eaten subject is good," Myhrvold said. "Except I'd probably have done one bite at most, not five. The single bite out of the apple is the most iconic image." But his professional rival, Steve Jobs, knew that years ago.

—*Sophie Brickman*

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

THE IMPOSSIBLE BODY

Storyboard P, the Basquiat of street dancing.

BY JONAH WEINER

Storyboard P, a Brooklyn dancer, comes from the 1300 block of Eastern Parkway, on the border between Crown Heights and Brownsville. When he was five or so, his grandmother tugged him onto the dance floor at a family gathering and, as reggae played, got him moving for the first time. "I hated it," Storyboard said recently. A shy child, he felt intensely exposed: "When you're dancing, you're revealing yourself—all these temptations, vulnerabilities, things you can't see otherwise." But he came to find the sensation addicting. Today, at twenty-three, he is a star of flex, a form of street dance characterized by jarring feats of contortion, pantomime, and footwork that simulates levitation. Much in the way that Savion Glover infused tap dancing with visceral aggression, Storyboard has pushed street dancing in a darker, more mature direction. His choreography, most of it improvised, has a wide range of influences: Jerome Robbins, especially his work in "West Side Story"; the Nicholas Brothers, whose acrobatic tap-dancing routines amazed Fred Astaire in the nineteen-forties; and, above all, Michael Jackson, whose otherworldly movements frightened Storyboard when he was little. "I would cry when I saw Michael," Storyboard said. "His energy would scramble your frequency." Storyboard has some formal training—when he was about ten, his parents enrolled him in ballet classes at the Harlem School of the Arts—but he says that his technique comes mainly from "motherfuckers I'd see on the block."

A decade ago, Storyboard began competing in Brooklyn dance battles: face-offs in parks, at all-ages clubs, and at house parties. In 2007, at the inaugural installment of BattleFest, a flex tournament that has attracted corporate sponsorship, the judges named him King of the Streets. The last time he danced at BattleFest, in 2012, he again took top honors. Deidre Schoo, the co-director of "Flex Is Kings," a new documentary about flex, told me that Storyboard's art is "polarizing." Unlike many flexers, he appropriates other forms of street dance—the furious gestures of Los Angeles krumpers, the *en pointe* wizardry of Memphis jookers—and mixes in classical moves, going from a sashaying vogue strut to a balletic flourish. Some people, hollering epithets from the sidelines at battles, consider Storyboard's style florid and effeminate. But, Schoo said, "no one will contest that he's one of the best street dancers, if not the best, in Brooklyn. Maybe in the country."

Storyboard has danced mostly at unheralded venues around Brooklyn: the Levels Barbershop, on Fulton Street; the Walt Whitman housing projects, in Fort Greene. But he has also performed at the Pace gallery and in the Beaux-Arts Court of the Brooklyn Museum. Judy Hussie-Taylor, the executive director of Danspace, an avant-garde venue downtown, says that Storyboard's moves are "extraordinary" and bear "the mark of a master improviser—he takes you somewhere you don't expect to go." James Bartlett, the executive director of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art, in Brooklyn, which has helped organize outdoor performances by Storyboard and exhibited videos of his work in its galleries, likens him to Jean-Michel Basquiat: "He embodies that same sort of connection between the street and the soul, on one side, and quote-unquote 'high art,' on the other."

On an overcast afternoon in September, Storyboard was at MetroTech Commons, a park wedged among office buildings in downtown Brooklyn, performing

Many of Storyboard's moves are inspired by stop-motion animation.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACH GROSS

in a festival called Brooklyn Emerging Artists in Theatre, or BEAT. He'd been booked to dance on a temporary stage that faced metal benches and a few dozen plastic tables; the crowd seemed to consist mainly of employees from nearby businesses having lunch. It was easy to spot him: Storyboard has a broad smile, high-set cheekbones, and large, imploring eyes that he sometimes frames within thick-rimmed glasses or, if the mood strikes him, plastic 3-D shades pilfered from a movie theatre. He likes colorful, fitted clothes that accentuate his ropy build, and he was wearing skin-tight jeans, shiny black ankle boots, a cutoff denim vest, and a tie-dyed hoodie with an image of Marilyn Monroe cradling two blue handguns. The hoodie, Storyboard explained later, was meant to prompt a second look from passersby inclined to dismiss a young black street dancer out of hand. "Marilyn Monroe isn't a reference people are expecting from someone who looks like me," he said.

Storyboard, whose real name is Saalim Muslim, was BEAT's marquee act: his image decorated promotional materials, and he was scheduled to give four performances, culminating with the début of "Magna Carta Story"—a forty-five-minute piece set to Jay Z songs—on the plaza outside the Barclays Center. Storyboard's goal with "Magna Carta Story," he said, was to "translate Jay's music into slang gesture and into formal gesture." For the MetroTech Commons program, which was advertised as a "Lunchtime MashUp," Nicholas Tamagna, a countertenor, was to sing selections from Vivaldi and Handel, perform briefly alongside Storyboard, then leave the stage, allowing Storyboard to perform a short preview of the Jay Z piece.

After Tamagna finished his solos, Storyboard joined him and began feeling his way through Tamagna's high, fluttering notes. Although Storyboard can twist, curve, and crumple his body with a calligrapher's control, he likes to disrupt fluid motion with tremors and twitches, so that he appears to flicker, like a figure in a zoetrope. One of Storyboard's biggest inspirations is stop-motion animation. To simulate the spasmodic movement seen in films like "The Nightmare Before Christmas," Storyboard employs a style called "animation," in which muscle contractions occur, in rhythmic bursts, to an accelerated extreme. Although he did not invent the style, he has come as close as anybody has to mastering it. Reggie (Regg Roc) Gray, a flex veteran who was one of Storyboard's early mentors, explained to me, "A lot of our creativity comes from movies, like 'Terminator 2,' 'The Matrix,' 'Crouching Tiger.' We wanted to be like those characters but without the strings or the special effects." The name Storyboard signals this desire to evoke filmmaking in dance. "You need thousands of pictures for one song," Storyboard told me. (The "P" in Storyboard P stands for Professoar, an earlier moniker.)

When Tamagna sang a long, anguished Baroque aria, Storyboard contorted his face, by stuttering degrees, into a grimace, rolling his eyes skyward until he resembled a penitent in an El Greco. Later, he lowered himself, jerk by jerk, into a modified split, then sprang back into a standing position, using nothing, it seemed, but his bent left ankle. As he danced, the crowd kept getting larger and louder.

Flex is a more narrative form than break dancing, and the narratives are frequently bleak and violent, bordering on masochistic. Dancers pop their arms from the sockets, leaving them to sway like hanging meat; they convulse their bodies, as if from electrocution; they simulate acts of suicide. The style originated in the nineties, in Jamaica, where a young dancer who called himself Bruck Up—patois for, roughly, "broken"—became famous despite, or perhaps because of, having suffered a bone infection in his right leg as a child. Bruck Up's style, heavy on rubbery contortions, spread through Brooklyn reggae clubs around the turn of the century, giving rise to flex.

Storyboard builds on the tension between virtuosity and handicap in Bruck Up's dancing; he creates a feeling of grace only to hobble it. He performs languorous twirls and glides, but fits of trembling motion give the impression that he moves under painful constraint. Regg Roc said, "He does this thing where it looks like he's glitching," in the manner of a YouTube video marred by a bad Internet connection. For Storyboard, dance is cathartic. "It comes from hurt," he told me. "It's not ever gonna come from a good feeling." During dance battles, he said, crowds "get into it, like, 'Why's he moving like something I saw in my dream?' And that's what slaughters your opponent. In order to slaughter me, you have to turn into a creature scarier than my creature."

In constructing a performance around Jay Z songs, Storyboard was honoring music he loves. But he was also trying to force a comparison between his skills and those of hip-hop's reigning champ—and capitalize on his recent association with him. Earlier this year, the filmmaker Mark Romanek invited Storyboard to dance in the music video for Jay Z's "Picasso Baby," which Romanek directed, and which had its première, on HBO, in August. Storyboard had danced in videos for other musicians, but none of the projects had been this high-profile. Romanek first heard of Storyboard in 2008, while directing a series of iPod commercials that featured dancers shot in silhouette. "I started hearing about this guy through the grapevine of people who know about dance," Romanek said, adding that, when he finally looked up clips of Storyboard performing, "my jaw hit the floor." Romanek directed the video for Michael Jackson's "Scream," in 1995. "That's the last time I got those kinds of goose bumps just from seeing someone move," he said.

The "Picasso Baby" video documents a performance that Jay Z gave at the Pace gallery, in July, during which he rapped the song repeatedly for six hours, addressing his rhymes to members of a crowd stocked, by design, with luminaries of Hollywood (Judd Apatow, Adam Driver), fashion (Jenna Lyons, Cynthia Rowley), and the art world (Laurie Simmons, Lawrence Weiner). These invitees were encouraged to interact with Jay Z however they wished. "We wanted to get as many people in as we could, so we'd rotate someone else in every forty-five seconds or so," Romanek explained. Before Storyboard's turn, Romanek told Jay Z: "This amazing dancer is coming out. I think we should give him the whole song." The only other guest to receive this distinction was Marina Abramović.

Storyboard hadn't heard "Picasso Baby" before he arrived at the gallery. "They e-mailed it to me, but I didn't listen," he said. "I like hearing a song and sifting through it right there." His

objective was to "mirror Jay's energy." Jay Z began the encounter on a raised platform, but before long he'd ceded it to Storyboard. In the video's eight-minute edit, Storyboard gets about twelve seconds of screen time. In one fragment, he slithers menacingly toward Jay Z, his arms raised, looking like a cobra poised to strike.

Like many rappers, Storyboard thinks of himself primarily as a storyteller. "Every dance of mine can be transcribed," he said. His semaphores can be so legible that they risk hokiness, as when he transforms a beating heart into a bird, or simulates raindrops with his fingertips. But such imagery usually dissolves quickly into something more idiosyncratic. "When someone is working within narrative and character in dance, it can be one-dimensional," Hussie-Taylor, of Danspace, said. "But while Storyboard might begin there—'Oh, he's playing a crackhead now'—it always ends up somewhere else. There's a stunning combination of 'He's a beautiful dancer, I can't take my eyes off him' and 'How did we end up *here*?' "

Storyboard once told an interviewer that, for a time, he developed choreography by sitting alone and staring at a wall until it came to resemble a projecting screen for strange, imagined shapes; he would then attempt to replicate what he was seeing with his body. One afternoon, I asked him to describe the kind of thinking that goes into his moves. He said, "I may be watching a commercial for skin lotion, and it gives me something of"—he began to caress his scalp and face—" 'so *smooooth*.' You know, seeing the model looking beautiful"—he spread imaginary lotion over his face, smiling rapturously—"but then I'm also thinking about someone who's, like, 'I'm coming out of my skin!' " The caresses grew staccato, and soon he was scraping at his face with his fingernails and shuddering horribly. "It may trigger 'What about *my* skin?' " he continued. "If your face is dirty, or sticky, or ashy, you might walk down the street with your head down. You might take a back route to where you're going. Thoughts like that: I'm curious how I can animate them and put them in the context of a performance."

The Jay Z album featuring "Picasso Baby" is titled "Magna Carta . . . Holy Grail," and its songs feature prominently in "Magna Carta Story." On the album, Jay Z celebrates his accumulation of social, financial, and cultural capital, but with a sour subtext that appealed to Storyboard. "It's about always feeling like you're underclass, no matter how high you get," he said. Storyboard conceives of his own work, in politically pointed terms, as outsider art. He has called street dance "an extension of slave dancing," in that it offers members of an oppressed class a coded language for communicating with one another.

Nevertheless, Storyboard is ambitious, and, to his deep frustration, he has not yet found an outlet that he deems equal to his talent. A conventional dance career—migrating through companies, perhaps forming one of his own—doesn't interest him. A few years ago, he auditioned for an installment of the hit dance-movie franchise "Step Up," but he was not hired; he accuses the filmmakers of using his moves anyway. (Jon M. Chu, the film's director, says that four choreographers worked on the movie, and that Storyboard's ideas were not used.) Called to another audition, for Cirque du Soleil's "Michael Jackson: The Immortal" show, Storyboard stormed out upon discovering that, if hired, he was expected to learn official choreography.

Schoo, the flex documentarian, who met Storyboard in 2008, said that his unbudging vision of himself as a sui-generis soloist often works against him. "He can be hard to deal with, very high-maintenance, very demanding," she said. "He can have a hard time working with others. He'll want to collaborate on something, then he won't." Tracking him down can be tough. In 2012, the filmmaker Kahlil Joseph hired Storyboard to dance in a video for the outré electronic-music producer Flying Lotus. "Storyboard didn't even have a cell phone," Joseph recalled. "Just a Facebook page and a number of a woman in Florida who he called his manager." Joseph paid Storyboard's airfare to Los Angeles, where the video was set, and picked him up at the airport. "He was standing on the curb with nothing: no change of clothes, no toothbrush," Joseph said. "He told me, 'I like to travel handheld.' That's when I knew, this guy's not just unique. He's from Mars."

Storyboard's best chance for a breakthrough may lie online. On YouTube and Worldstar Hip Hop, footage of him dancing—on his own, in music videos, and in battles—has been viewed more than ten million times. (This doesn't factor in "Picasso Baby.") Online video "makes so much possible," Storyboard told me. It is his hope that some forward-thinking label will sign him to a contract as a "visual recording artist." He will then go on tour, on the strength of what he calls "singles": dances set to original tracks and recorded on video.

In the era of "Gangnam Style" and "Harlem Shake," this plan is not preposterous, although it is difficult to imagine your aunt flex-dancing at a wedding reception. Storyboard, when discussing his career, sometimes adopts the pose that sheer will power and positive thinking can topple all obstacles. When he was a novice just starting to attend flex parties, he'd return to school and tell his classmates that top dance crews had invited him into their ranks. "I'd be, like, 'Oh, I'm down with this group,' before I was there," he said. "That was part of my process of how I lived. I'd say, 'I'm going to be in this movie.' " When Storyboard first told me about his ambition to become a visual recording artist, he said that he was planning "to meet with Roc Nation," Jay Z's management company, and pitch the idea. Several days later, I asked him which executives he knew there. Storyboard paused, then admitted, "I'm gonna be honest—no one."

It is clearly hard for him to accept that he does not enjoy the same level of regard as a comparably gifted rapper. "If Kendrick Lamar drops a new verse, you pay attention—you listen to everything he says," Storyboard said at one point. "Why don't people want to pay attention when you dance?"

Storyboard's father, Adib Muslim, was a member of the Nation of Islam. "That's how I was raised," Storyboard said. "He always gave me quotes and lessons—mathematics, degrees, different analogies—so my mind was

always working like a riddle. It was entendres, breaking down words into symbols, trying to understand what's around you."

His mother, Rosita Barker, emigrated from Panama, in 1979. She saved enough money to buy a co-op apartment, on Eastern Parkway, but the family struggled financially. "Both of my parents were artists," Storyboard said. His father, who is from Goldsboro, North Carolina, had tap-danced in his youth, and served for a time in the Navy. "My dad drew," Storyboard said. "My mom did, too. They made collages. Not for a living, but as a passion. My mom didn't work, my dad didn't work." For a stretch, the family collected welfare checks. Storyboard's clothes, many of them hand-me-downs from cousins and his older brother, Eli, fit him oddly. "We were penny-rollers," he recalled. "We'd collect pennies, roll them, bring them to the bank. My dad would have me knocking on doors, asking neighbors for pennies. There was this guy Ashton from downstairs. We'd go down to Ashton to get money all the time—my dad would send me with a little envelope and a note."

I visited Barker at the co-op, in December. Along the living-room walls, painted powder blue, were cardboard boxes, some chairs, and a cluttered shelving unit. Barker, a slight woman with a ready smile, showed me a full-size mattress that had been pushed into a corner of the apartment's sole bedroom and covered with a black sheet. The entire family used to share the bed. "We had an extra little bed," she noted, which came in handy as the boys grew. "Me and their father slept in the little bed, and Saalim and his brother slept in the big bed." She recalled the cozy sleeping arrangement with fondness—"It was fun, it was happiness," she said—but Storyboard came to find the situation stifling. "As I got bigger, I was out of the house more," he told me. "From early on, I'd be out all night, or in the hallways sleeping. Most of my nights were that, because I was extremely lonely, so I would always be around friends or a girlfriend or something."

Growing up, Storyboard's best friend was a kid named Nelson Adolphus, who wanted to be a scientist. Shawn Graham, a cousin of Adolphus's who lived in Brownsville, recalls, "Both of them were very into school. Saalim had, like, the big glasses—now he has contacts and stuff, but, before, he was a skinny kid, big glasses, not very into the streets. He used to get clowned on." Barker recalls, "He was honor roll in everything, from kindergarten to high school." When Storyboard and Adolphus weren't studying, they played video games and watched professional wrestling at Adolphus's place.

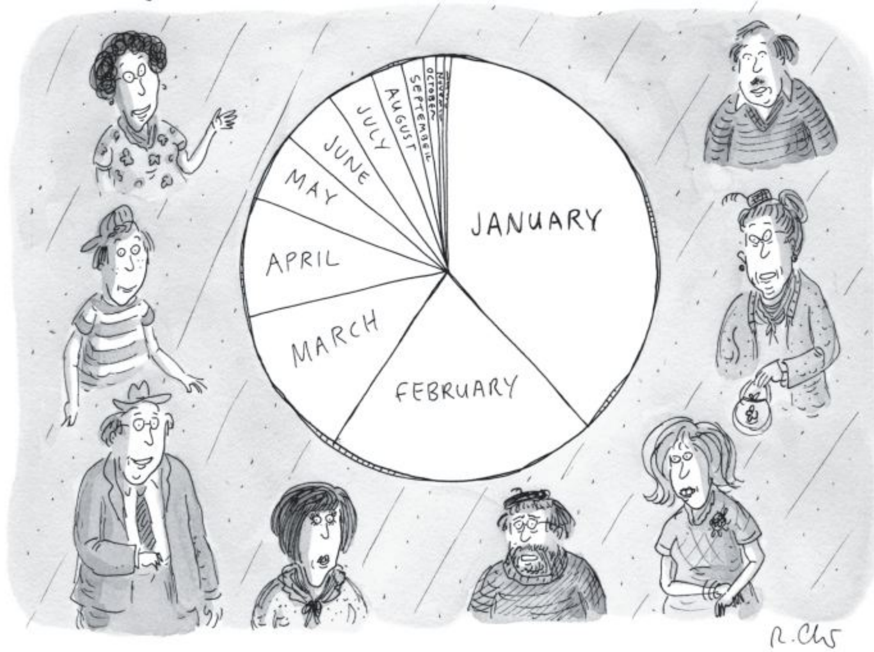
Storyboard wasn't close to his brother. They'd fight in the apartment over food and territory. "Eli never wanted to hang out with me," Storyboard said. He spent some time with older kids who, he says, were "millionaires in the drug trade"; their wealth and their condescending attitude angered him. "I was in Mercedes CLs and SLs when I was eleven, twelve, riding with them," Storyboard said. "They were living so luxurious. Seeing that, and then going home to see my mom struggle, I had a hatred toward them, and it fuelled my artistic ambitions. When I was with them, they ridiculed me: 'How come you don't take showers, how come you don't do this?' "

His father, meanwhile, was "this dictator, disciplinarian," Storyboard said. "I didn't feel like I controlled anything." He recalled his mother, by contrast, as "absent, very withdrawn." Barker told me that she suffers from bipolar disorder, and that she was frequently hospitalized during Storyboard's youth. She and Adib Muslim split up in the late aughts. Adib moved to Canada, where he lives with another woman.

Storyboard says that he was hospitalized several times, in high school, after suffering nervous breakdowns. "I'd just sit and not talk for a whole two days, three days," he said. "I'd come out of it and I'd be somewhat normal, but restrained, in a way. I think that was the adverse effects of my circumstances, and just dealing with a household where everyone's isolated. Over time, I just can't cope anymore. And you shut down." During these episodes, Storyboard says, his father would take him to the hospital; sometimes, he was kept there overnight. Storyboard has told interviewers that he is schizophrenic and bipolar, although when I asked him if a doctor had given him an official diagnosis he shook his head. He took lithium briefly, but otherwise, he said, "they'd give me meds, I'd take two and go off it." (Barker said of her son, "I think he has a lot of stress. I don't think he is bipolar.")

At home, deprivation forced him to be crafty. "Not having a lot, you're going to create," Storyboard said. "When I got a toy, I always broke it apart, put a new arm on it, reinventing it. I'd get one toy, get tired of it, and I'd want to make a new toy." He went on, "When my brother left me for his friends, it was

"Do you know you've had your caps lock on for the last ten miles?"



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back to not having a new toy, but knowing I can create one for myself. That's where the storytelling came from, that fantasy. Like people who play house and shit—you're creating alternative realms to cope with where you are."

Barker loves to dance—in her living room, she demonstrated a rapid shuffle step she called "the train." She and Adib encouraged Storyboard to take dance classes, first in the neighborhood, then at the Harlem School of the Arts. Dancing inspired yet more bullying from peers, Storyboard said: " 'Look at him! He's gay!' Gay, faggot, whatever they thought. I hated it. But then what I started to feel was this sense that I had an advantage over people. Because I was going to a place they were scared to go. Once I got there, I was able to say, 'Oh, I see why he cracks the joke. He sees me like I'm in his way.' " Mockery eventually fed his confidence. "Kids can't deal with someone on some other shit," he said.

Shawn Graham had an older sister in a dance crew, and in 2003 he started taking Storyboard to East New York, where the sister hung out with other dancers. "You get beat up, put into it, inducted," Storyboard said of his initiation into the flex scene. Dancers started battles by slamming a clawed palm into an opponent's chest, right above the heart, as if trying to tear it loose. "It's not 'Let's dance,' " Storyboard said. "It's '*Gimme* that!' He needs my energy to survive." Graham says that Storyboard was immediately hooked: "It turned from 'Hey, bring that PlayStation to my house' to 'Come to my house and we're dancing.' "

Early on, Storyboard said, he would "black out" during competitions, entering a trance state that dissipated only after his performance was over. "I'd go toward the darker sides of me," he said. "There are moves where you're just dancing. Then there's a point when you hear music and you snap. A moment that brings anger or rage out of you and turns it into possession." During one of our conversations in Brooklyn, he put his palm to his forehead. "I was feeling stress up here," he said. "It becomes this energy." He extended his hand, curled and vibrating, toward me. "Now the stress is out here, and I can do something with it."

In the nineties, a couple named Sandra and Rocky Cummings created a teen talent show called Flex N Brooklyn, which became a program on Brooklyn public-access television. Airing on Friday nights, the show consisted mainly of footage taken at local party spots, such as Elks Plaza, in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Flex played well on television: its theatrical streak extends beyond pantomime, with many dancers performing tricks while wearing masks, or incorporating props. The series helped make local celebrities of such dancers as Regg Roc—who has performed in videos by Sean Paul and Nicki Minaj—and Flizzo, a former gang member who performed at one BattleFest with a live zebra finch in his mouth, sending it soaring for his finale.

Sandra and Rocky had a home, nicknamed the Flex House, at the corner of St. Marks and Nostrand. It was always full of dancers. Storyboard visited for the first time when he was a young teen-ager, and made a rookie mistake. "There was a rug on the floor, and I'm, like, 'How am I supposed to glide on the rug with my shoes on?' " he recalled. "I took off my shoes." He said that the dancers present teased him for making such an ungainly concession to reality. "I didn't understand what gliding was," he said. "I thought it was a dance move. It's not—it's an illusion. When they glided in the Flex House, they had shoes on, but it seems they're not on the ground. Me not having that skill set to do it on a rug, they laughed me out. I left there crying, angry."

Regg Roc, who was present, says that no one laughed at Storyboard, but he concedes that dancers initially regarded him with puzzlement. "People would say, 'Yo, he has great skills . . . but he's a funny guy, he's not acting like us.' " He and the other dancers had "a similar aggressive personality," but Storyboard "didn't approach it like that": "he would throw his leg up a certain way, or he would do a plié." Storyboard took to calling himself Professoar, pairing his oversized glasses with a white lab coat. It was a strategy for getting opponents to lower their guard: "I was a geek, playing a character, so people would sleep on me."

When Storyboard was about sixteen, he joined one of the premier flex crews, Main Eventt. During battles, rather than dazzle with a pyrotechnic assault, he settled into off-kilter tempos, making competitors' showboating seem sweaty and mannered. Deidre Schoo said, "He has this innate sense of taking his time and commanding the crowd to watch him." Storyboard starting calling his style "mutant." He said,"I realized I'm more rounded than other

people. I'm tapping, I'm lofting, I'm locking, I'm doing ballet. I'm just a dancer now."

Ten days after the Barclays performance of "Magna Carta Story," Storyboard emerged from his cousin Vooda's apartment, on Rogers Avenue, in Prospect Lefferts Gardens. Some nights, he crashed there; other times, he stayed in Bedford-Stuyvesant, at the apartment of a dancer friend, Albert Esquilin, who performs as Ghost. "I'm in a transition period," Storyboard said.

His clothes were a glammy hodgepodge: retro Nikes with hot-pink trim, a black leather jacket, and jeans tricked out with straps and buckles, the cuffs high enough to flash his ankles. Onstage, Storyboard's theatrical outfits help him assume different identities. In 2011, in a piece set to Kanye West's "Crack Music," Storyboard wore a Karl Kani skullcap and a huge black sweatshirt dusted with white powder, portraying both a nineteen-nineties dope dealer and his customer.

"Let's go down to the Barclays," he said, leading me toward the Parkside Avenue Q station. "I like the energy there." Storyboard said that he felt good about his BEAT gigs, which had attracted a diverse crowd and had paid decently: thirty-five hundred dollars, parcelled out in installments. The *Times* gave his third appearance, at the Brooklyn Museum, a rave, praising his "spooky power" and calling him "a fantasy in the flesh." As we waited for a light to change, Storyboard showed me a new set of moves he'd been working on, inspired by a handheld electronic baseball game that he'd played as a kid. Standing on the corner, he pretended to catch a fly ball, then squatted by an imaginary base, switching rapidly between each move, as though jump-cutting through footage.

Storyboard told me that when he isn't performing he follows a punishing training regimen, sometimes jogging from Brooklyn into Manhattan, then up to the Bronx. "I like seeing the city fall away behind me, that feeling of leaving that you get, when you go into the Bronx—it feels like success," he said. He also works on developing his core strength and deepening his tolerance for pain. "I'll sit somewhere for hours, cutting off and restoring oxygen to different muscles in my body, to the point where I'm actually giving myself charley horses," he said. He sent a string of tiny, violent pulsations down his arm, and explained, "Doing animation, you're just cramping and uncramping."

At Parkside, the Q train wasn't running in our direction. We paused at the turnstiles. "This is why I don't take the subway," Storyboard said. He left the station and, at the corner of Flatbush and Winthrop, stepped from the curb and gestured to an approaching "dollar van." Unmarked, with tinted windows, it stopped at the intersection and we climbed aboard, squeezing past half a dozen other riders until we reached the backmost bench. Dollar vans occupy a quasi-legal position in New York, quietly servicing commuter routes throughout the outer boroughs. (These days, a ride costs two dollars.)

The driver closed the sliding door by tugging on a rope tied to the handle, then merged back into traffic on Flatbush. The van's interior was outfitted with three drop-down flat-screen televisions, from which a music video by the Atlanta rapper and singer Future was blaring. "They're branding dollar vans now," Storyboard said, pointing at the screens. As our van neared Atlantic Avenue, Storyboard called out, "Barclays!" We got off outside the arena, where Storyboard asked me to settle up with the driver.

We found a table outside a Starbucks, facing the plaza where Storyboard had recently performed. Drinking an apple juice, he described the care that he puts

into refining even the tiniest gesture. "*This* is a move," he said, tilting his head one precise tick rightward, then another, then another. He smiled. Unsophisticated spectators, he said, "don't see the beauty in what I just did, because they're looking for something grandiose."

Everyday movement is an abiding preoccupation in postmodern dance. In 1965, Yvonne Rainer, a co-founder of the Judson Dance Theatre, wrote an influential tract in rejection of Martha Graham-style expressivity, titled "No Manifesto." It called for the elimination of, among other things, "transformations and magic and make-believe." In street dancing, however, transformations, magic, and make-believe are prized, whereas lapses into mundane motion can be as deflating as fumbles in a card trick. Although Storyboard incorporates ordinary movements into his work, his goal is to present himself as an impossible body. When he and his peers are especially impressed by a move, they cry out, "That's mad fake!" Storyboard said, "We want it to be like Disney could put us up on the screen."

Storyboard tends to speak in mystical terms about his craft. "We can all communicate without words, but we're asleep," he said at one point. "We've dumbed down our clairvoyance." At the Starbucks, I asked him about the centrality of illusion in his dancing. He pointed toward a young woman standing about twenty feet away; she held a large handbag, and was apparently waiting for someone. "So that girl there is standing," Storyboard said. "But the world is spinning, so what's really happening to her? She's not really standing, she's *hovering*. It's something we don't see." He went on, "I'm just revealing what's really there. Revealing unseen forces—that's what illusion is. Utilizing them unseen forces to manipulate a moment."

A few minutes later, the woman came up to Storyboard. She asked to borrow his phone to call her mother, who was late for a rendezvous. Storyboard gave it to her and added, slyly, "Leave your number in there for me, too."

One afternoon this fall, Storyboard was at Ghost's place, on Jefferson Avenue, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, helping him edit footage from "Magna Carta Story" into a video that could be shared online. Ghost, who wore a wispy mustache, was perched cross-legged on his bed, in baggy jeans and athletic socks. He dragged a wireless mouse across his comforter, controlling a beat-up Mac Mini stationed nearby. A Jamaican-born flex dancer called Limpie reclined in a swivel chair next to a battered armoire with doors held shut by a knotted black cable. Storyboard sat beside Ghost's mattress, perfectly upright, in a dining-room chair. He'd dressed as a suburban

skate rat: a billowing plaid shirt buttoned to the neck, fitted jeans, chubby-soled suède sneakers. "These are my favorite shoes to dance in—Airwalks," he said.

The only decoration in Ghost's bedroom was a large drawing of scowling figures huddled ominously on a street corner. He'd inked it directly onto the wall, pressing so hard with a ballpoint pen that he'd carved the plaster. "That goes back to my love for comic books," he said. A brown curtain covered the window, which looked out on the brick wall of an adjacent building. The apartment belonged to Ghost's mother, a fiftyish woman in elegant dreadlocks; Storyboard addressed her as Miss Ruthie when she peeked in to say hello.

Ghost performs with Storyboard in "Magna Carta Story." On the computer, Ghost called up footage of them preening in three-piece mobster suits to the smoky seventies horns of Jay Z's "Can I Live." Many of Storyboard's routines evoke bygone ways of moving—he says that they act as "séances." Limpie clapped with delight as he watched Storyboard flap the hem of his jacket and scissor his legs jauntily. "That's how them light-skinned niggas moved back in the day!" Limpie said.

After a while, Storyboard announced that he was hungry, and he left in search of food. "There's an organic place, but it's a little far," he said. "There's a Chinese place right here." Storyboard's control over his body extends beyond exercise and nutrition. He once forswore sex for two years, he said, in order to harness his creative energy, like Ali prepping for a title bout. He has not used toothpaste since he was sixteen, relying on a homemade concoction of baking soda and peroxide. "Fluoride slows you down and clogs up your breathing," he explained.

Chinese takeout wasn't that healthy, he acknowledged, "but I got that itch." Inside a restaurant called China King, on Marcus Garvey Boulevard, Storyboard gave his order through holes drilled into a thick sheet of bulletproof glass. "How much is the garlic wings with fried rice and shrimp?" he asked. While we waited for the food, he began dancing, sending a wave from one arm to the other, bending his knees, sticking out his backside, and elongating his spine. The effect was birdlike and odd. Most of the other patrons—two middle-aged guys, a twenty-something in headphones—glanced at this spectacle only furtively, but a kid of about three drew close, staring at Storyboard and smiling. Storyboard studied his own reflection in the bulletproof glass. "I'm trying to get everything symmetrical," he said.

Back at Ghost's, Limpie had cleared out. Ghost, still cross-legged on the bed, ate from a pint of Häagen-Dazs and checked his Facebook page. When he and Storyboard finished editing the video, Storyboard said, "I'm gonna get elevated," and asked Ghost to roll a joint. Around seven-thirty, a young dancer named Samuel (Sam I Am) Estavien showed up. He was a junior member of the Warriorz, a dance crew that Storyboard and Ghost had recently formed. He held a notebook and a pen. "These two are legends," he told me, in a hushed voice. "I'm here to learn."

Storyboard put on "D'Evils," by Jay Z, and told Sam to freestyle. Ghost said that Storyboard was "sometimes harsh" when teaching other dancers. But Storyboard was encouraging with Sam. While Sam performed a tricky piece of footwork, Storyboard pointed at the bedroom's linoleum flooring, which had a faux-wood-grain pattern. "It's not a glide," he said. "Your feet are like brushes, creating the texture of the floor."

Soon, Storyboard began dancing, and Sam sat down and opened his notebook. Storyboard asked Ghost to cue up some songs on YouTube, and he freestyled to one after the other—Meek Mill, Lil Wayne, a churning piece of Syrian wedding music. The music was played at a low volume, and I could hear Storyboard exhaling sharply, at irregular intervals, with tremendous force. Conspicuous breathing undercuts the illusion of effortlessness, and when you watch Storyboard dance at a distance, or online, there is no indication that he is aggressively taking in oxygen. "A lot of what you're doing when you dance is hiding your breathing," Ghost noted.

After Storyboard finished a freestyle, he paused for a bit, his chest heaving. "I'm in the pocket—I might as well stay here," he said, looking up another song. "Yesterday, I put on, like, forty songs in a row, and I illustrated each one. If I wanna perform at Wembley, that's a three-hour show. I have to be way better than I am."

Ghost and Sam sat on the mattress, spurring Storyboard on with mock gibes: "Easy!"; "Don't do that!" For the next hour or so, three square feet of linoleum made for all the stage Storyboard needed. "There are pictures in my head," he said. "And they gotta come out." ♦

"We need either bigger needles or smaller camels."

SHOUTS & MURMURS

HOW MANY?

BY PAUL RUDNICK

What percent of American men are gay? The question is notoriously difficult to answer. . . . More than one quarter of gay men hide their sexuality from anonymous surveys. The evidence also suggests that a large number of gay men are married to women.
—*The Times*.

In order to achieve a more accurate accounting of America's gay population, male and female, the next national census will include the following, more sensitively phrased questions:

1. If you suddenly realized that you were making love to a person of your own gender, you would think:

(a) That you'd fallen out of a plane and accidentally landed atop another naked heterosexual.

(b) That you were attempting a nude Heimlich maneuver.

(c) That you were merely celebrating Backward Day.

2. What do you believe causes homosexuality?

(a) Poor nutrition.

(b) Recruitment by older, predatory homosexuals.

(c) Common sense.

3. Essay question: Why are you wearing two scarves?

4. When you study nude photos of people of your own gender, you:

(a) Wonder if the photos come with a stick of gum.

(b) Become sexually excited, but explain that such arousal is often caused by scrapbooking.

(c) Criticize the people in the photos relentlessly, especially their abs, haircuts, and earning potential, but then go out with them anyway.

5. If you are currently residing with a person of your own gender, how would you characterize your relationship?

(a) Roommates.

(b) Roommates who sometimes do crazy things while sleepwalking, like raid the refrigerator, go hiking, or get married at City Hall.

(c) Well, it used to be heaven until someone enrolled in junior college for six weeks and then decided that all of a sudden they were the smart one.

TIM LAHAN

6. You consider yourself to be (check all that apply):

___ Caucasian.

___ African-American.

___ Latino.

___ Inuit.

___ Homolicious.

___ More of a lesbian than any member of the Cheney family.

___ Bisexual. Shut up.

7. While in the past you've enjoyed intimate relationships with members of your own sex, how would you now characterize yourself ?

(a) Totally straight, so stop texting me, Ethan, I mean it.

(b) Totally straight. I mean, look at me, Ethan, I'm with a girl. O.K., fine, so she's a cardboard display from a Sandra Bullock movie, but don't we look hot together?

(c) Totally straight-acting. I mean, straight men can wear cowl-neck sweaters!

8. What is your current income?

(a) $5,000 a year, until Ellen breaks up with Portia and marries me.

(b) $28,000 a year, so I can be gay only in a really small town.

(c) $85,000 a year, and can I claim a personal stylist as a dependent?

(d) $200 million a year, and, yeah, I'm gay, and, no, I don't want to go out with a census taker.

9. If someone told you, "I'm not into labels," what would you assume?

(a) That he was wearing a J. C. Penney warmup suit without irony.

(b) That his mother was listening.

(c) That the next thing that person might say would be "I'm attracted to a person, not a gender. A person with a huge penis."

10. If you live in a red state, how would you characterize your sexuality?

(a) I'm so straight I could cry.

(b) I'm practicing abstinence. That's when you do it all the time but you lie about it, right?

(c) Parts of me are constantly in a blue state.

11. Which bumper stickers currently appear on your car?

(a) "Vote No on Gay Marriage."

(b) "Vote No on Gay Marriage to Ethan."

(c) "Vote No on Gays Adopting."

(d) "Vote No on Gays Adopting That Bushy-Beard Look."

(e) "My Daughter Is an Honor Student."

(f) "My Daughter Is an Honor Student Who Is Dating Your Daughter."

(g) "I'd Rather Be Fishing."

(h) "I'd Rather Be Fishing for Compliments!"

12. What is your level of education?

(a) High school.

(b) Some college.

(c) Some college, where I experimented because I was drunk.

(d) Divinity school.

13. How would you prefer to be listed in the census results?

(a) As a Proud Gay American.

(b) As a Lesbian Who Means It.

(c) As Just a Person. No, as Just a Person Who Never Really Loved You, Because You Don't Know What Love Is, Ethan. ♦

U.S. JOURNAL

TAMALES ON THE DELTA

A culinary festival in a world capital.

BY CALVIN TRILLIN

The Greenville event was created by local women known as the hot tamammas.

I doubt if many people think that the hot tamale alone can bring Greenville, Mississippi, back to its glory days, but every little bit helps. Last year, before the first annual Delta Hot Tamale Festival, Greenville declared itself the Hot Tamale Capital of the World and later registered that title with the United States Patent and Trademark Office. The registration may have been an unnecessary precaution. It's true that for more than a century the hot tamale, which might be described as a third cousin once removed of the Mexican tamale, has been eaten throughout the Delta—the alluvial plain along the Mississippi River which, according to its best-known description, "starts in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg." But Greenville, the largest city in the Delta, boasts by far the most tamale purveyors, not to mention having the best-known dispenser of hot tamales in the state, Doe's Eat Place. Among other cities in the Delta, there is presumably no threat from Belzoni, which calls itself the Farm-Raised Catfish Capital of the World, or from Clarksdale, which has a hot-tamale purveyor sufficiently renowned to have attracted a visit from Bill Clinton but is already World Capital of the Blues. (A city can have more than one motto—Greenville still calls itself "The Heart and Soul of the Delta"—but it would be awkward to be more than one capital.) Corinth, in the northeastern part of the state, is home to a somewhat different variety of tamale, but it has long been focussed on a local specialty called the slugburger. A slugburger, visitors to the annual Slugburger Festival are presumably relieved to hear, is a hamburger bun containing a patty made of meat and filler and no slugs at all.

Rosedale, thirty-five miles upriver from Greenville, might have a claim. Outside the tiny building that holds a noted Rosedale hot-tamale vender called the White Front Café, a plaque from the Mississippi Blues Commission commemorates "They're Red Hot," a song recorded in 1936 by the great Delta bluesman Robert Johnson. ("Hot tamales, and they're red hot, yes she got 'em for sale/I got a girl, say she long and tall/She sleeps in the kitchen with her feets in the hall.") According to some versions of the legend about how Johnson acquired his guitar wizardry, the pact he made with the Devil was signed in Rosedale, where Highway 1 crosses Highway 8. (Although there are other towns claiming to be the place where the pact was signed, none of them have the precise intersection down.) But Rosedale, whose deserted main street I passed through recently on my way to Greenville for the second annual Delta Hot Tamale Festival, doesn't appear to have the size or the energy to be the capital of anything.

The old maxim of better safe than sorry may apply. One of the people I met at the tamale festival was John Craig, whose business card identifies him as the Biscuit Boss of the International Biscuit Festival, in Knoxville. When I asked Craig if it would be appropriate to refer to Knoxville as the Biscuit Capital of the World, he demurred. It wasn't modesty or the fact that by the time of the first festival the biscuit ingredient that Knoxville was known for—White Lily flour, a favorite of Southern biscuit-makers since it was first milled, in Knoxville, in 1883—had been bought by the J. M. Smucker Company and was being milled in the Midwest. Craig knew very well that Natchez, Mississippi, was already the Biscuit Capital of the World. He didn't strike me as the sort of person who might try to swipe that title from Natchez, the way St. Louis swiped Gateway to the West from my home town, Kansas City, after having arranged for the government to build it a Gateway Arch. But if he does have such thievery in mind he'd better hurry: I read that Natchez has looked into having its title trademarked.

John Craig is a developer, and his purpose in founding the International Biscuit Festival was partly to bring people to downtown Knoxville. I would guess that any number of cities have tried celebrat-

LEFT: AP; MIDDLE: AMY C. EVANS; RIGHT: CORBIS

ing a local food specialty as a tonic for a lagging downtown, just after it became obvious that doing some prettying up on a block or two that's been closed to traffic—what I've always thought of as the hanging-basket approach to downtown revitalization—didn't work. Greenville had already tried the hanging-basket approach. Its downtown has problems that go beyond the presence of a shopping mall on the southern outskirts of the city. Greenville is still surrounded by what Big Daddy in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" called "the richest land this side of the valley Nile"—much of it planted in corn or soybeans these days rather than in cotton—but, starting in the years after the Second World War, mechanization drastically reduced the number of people working on the land, and consolidation meant that the landowners might conduct their business from another county, or even another country. In the sixties or seventies, Greenville could have staked a credible claim to being the Towboat Capital of the World. It had almost thirty companies in the business—some of them building towboats or barges, some of them operating towboats that pushed barges full of grain or chemicals up and down the Mississippi River. There are a variety of theories about what virtually wiped out the towboat business in Greenville—the grain embargo during Jimmy Carter's Administration, a glut caused by an investment-credit tax law that encouraged doctors and lawyers to buy what became known as "investment barges," a diversion of freight traffic from the river, more consolidation.

Whatever happened, it happened a good thirty years ago. Some of what has happened since was captured in "The Mississippi Flatland Blues," by the late Carole Brent: "I went out to Boeing / I thought I'd be flying high / But they closed down and sold the parts/And left me high and dry/I got a job at Vlasic/Puttin' pickles in a jar/But they shut down and GMAC/Came and took my car." A lot of people couldn't find work and left; a lot of people couldn't find work and stayed. Since 1980, the population of Greenville has shrunk by nearly twenty per cent, but the unemployment rate remains twice the national rate.

As the seat of Washington County, Greenville still has courthouse jobs and legal business. There is still some manufacturing. Mars Food just celebrated thirty-five years of making Uncle Ben's rice in Greenville. There are two casinos on the waterfront now, but they are not the sort of casinos that attract high rollers likely to spread money around town: almost all the gambling is in slot machines, including nickel and penny slot machines, and an overwhelming percentage of the customers are local. Given that breakdown, you could argue that the presence of casinos simply makes poor people poorer.

The glory days of Greenville are not a figment of civic nostalgia. There was indeed a time when Greenville's main drag was lined with cotton factors and the Greenville waterfront was bustling and planter families were prosperous enough to spin off remittance men devoted to the pleasures of the New Orleans French Quarter. Although the Mississippi Delta was once known for a form of racial segregation harsh enough to enforce the domination of a small white minority—even now, decades after the Great Migration of African-Americans to northern cities, Washington County is less than thirty per cent white—Greenville, without being a candidate for civic sainthood, is one Delta city that has some reason to look back on its civil-rights-era history without a pronounced shudder. That is partly due to the moderating influence exerted by the *Delta Democrat-Times* and its late editor Hodding Carter II, who, in the words of a plaque in downtown Greenville, was a man "who stood for racial justice and religious tolerance."

Although the Delta's antebellum history is skimpy—until the middle of the nineteenth century, it was a virtual wilderness—Greenville takes pride in some cultured planter families, such as that of the novelist Walker Percy, whose great-uncle became nationally known in the twenties for denouncing a resurgent Ku Klux Klan. Two of the early mayors of Greenville were members of a Jewish congregation that was founded in the eighteen-seventies. A lot of this history is in photographs lining the wall of Jim's Café, about the only lively spot left on the main drag of Greenville. Jim's, one of those cafés which draw the local businessmen for breakfast and ribbing, is, it almost goes without saying, run by a man named Gus. Its display of Greenville memorabilia is brought up to date by a

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computer-generated sign near the door that says, "Notice: Effective immediately there will be a $5.00 fine for Whining."

Yes, people in Greenville are aware that tamales are widely associated with Mexico and Central America. In fact, the most persuasive theory regarding the Delta hot tamale's origin is that Mexican migrant workers brought tamales to the fields at the turn of the twentieth century and black field-workers adapted them, perhaps with a bit of seasoning help from Delta Italians. (The other substantial ethnic group in the Delta, the Chinese, apparently kept hands off; nobody has ever bitten into a Delta hot tamale and said, "You know, this tastes almost Chinese.") There are plenty of other theories, including ones that trace the origins back to an African dish called *cush* or to the Choctaws or to soldiers returning from the Mexican-American War with a taste for tamales. A family of Sicilian origin runs Doe's Eat Place, a tamale-and-steak joint that began as a honky-tonk and looks it—one family member has said that the building is held together by grease—but Delta hot tamales have traditionally been sold mainly by African-Americans from small shacks or even from their own kitchens. Scott's, the second-best-known purveyor of hot tamales in Greenville, operates out of a white hut that is the size of a double-wide phone booth.

Delta hot tamales are smaller than Mexican tamales, and the dough covering the filling is usually cornmeal rather than masa. In flavor, as opposed to temperature, they're not particularly hot. They're simmered rather than steamed, then wrapped in shucks (dried corn husks) and often tied together in packs of three. The filling can be beef or pork or turkey or chicken or a combination. Since the meat is chopped up, it has long been customary to frighten children and put off outside visitors by mentioning that, for all one knows, a hot tamale might include some meats that are not available at your friendly neighborhood butcher shop—in particular, house cat. Hot-tamale venders like to mention that they have a secret formula for their seasoning. Part of the secret tends to be chili powder and cumin. In a 2005 interview with Amy C. Evans, an oral historian with the Southern Foodways Alliance, who compiled an interactive Tamale Trail map of the state, Frank Carlton, a lawyer and sometime district attorney who used to stage something called the World Championship Hot Tamale Contest in Greenville, said, "I hate to divulge this secret, but it's the truth: if you can make good chili, you can make good hot tamales."

As someone who has not had the opportunity to develop a nuanced hot-tamale connoisseurship, I got the impression that Delta hot tamales vary less in taste than in what is done with them. For reasons lost to history, some people like to spread them on crackers. There is something called a fried hot tamale—if no medical practitioner is within earshot, I might confess to having rather enjoyed a couple of those in a place called Hot Tamale Heaven—and there is also something called tamale pie, which, at the same establishment, consists of tamales, chili, cheese, nacho chips, jalapeño peppers, sour cream, and chives. When I was partway through an order of tamale pie, it occurred to me that an exacting gourmet might be tempted to criticize it as de trop.

Frank Carlton, who died in 2009, had faith that the hot tamale, properly promoted, could be a great economic boon to Greenville. The mayor of Greenville, John H. Cox III, agrees. When I had a chat with him—at Jim's Café, of course—he had recently returned from a conference of officials from cities on the Mississippi. It was made clear at the conference, he said, that the second-biggest economic impact of the river was from tourism. As the Mayor sees it, people who come to Greenville—for the Delta Hot Tamale Festival, say, or for one of two music festivals it holds annually—not only put some money into the economy but may also get the impression that Greenville is a good place to live and therefore a good place to move the factory. They might discover fishing for crappie or bass or catfish in Lake Ferguson, the old channel of the Mississippi that runs right along the edge of downtown Greenville, just behind the levees. They might be captivated, as I was, by taking a motorboat packed with fried chicken and the appropriate beverages out on the river itself for a picnic on a vast sandbar that offers the sort of unspoiled view Huck Finn would have enjoyed. Partly because a couple of guitars had been brought along, the picnic I attended was a particularly jolly affair, although late in the day someone did perform "The Mississippi Flatland Blues"—"I got the Washington County/ My factory done shut down blues/There ain't no good news."

Although the official organizer was Main Street Greenville, a downtown development group, the Delta Hot Tamale Festival was created by three local women who enjoy cooking together. They became known as the hot tamammas. Julia Reed, a writer who now lives in New Orleans, was in town on the Saturday of the first festival, visiting her family and acting as a cook-off judge. For the second festival, she became what I think could be fairly described as a Pizzazz Consultant to the hot tamammas. She lured to Greenville some well-known Southern writers and some chefs from restaurants like City Grocery, in Oxford, and Herbsaint, in New Orleans. On Thursday night, there was a sort of gala at what people in Greenville call the "Baby Doll" house, a restored plantation house where, pre-restoration, the then scandalous 1956 movie was filmed. The chefs and writers signed books at the "Baby Doll" house and took part in Friday panel discussions and competed in or judged a celebrity-chef tamale cook-off. The Pizzazz Consultant had another motivation for organizing events in the days leading up to the Saturday street celebration: "to give people a reason to stay in Greenville overnight."

One Friday panel was on regional food specialties. Susan Puckett, the author of "Eat Drink Delta," mentioned another favorite of the region we were in—Kool-Aid pickles. John Shelton Reed, a distinguished sociologist of the South, who is writing a book that deals with local specialties, acknowledged that the only dish in the book he hadn't actually tasted for himself was the pig-snoot sandwich; he took the word of another cookbook writer that the texture is "something like that of a rawhide dog toy." Since this delicacy is sometimes thought of as a specialty of the St. Louis area, it occurred to me that St. Louis might want to drop that Gateway to the West title in favor of Pig-Snoot-Sandwich Capital of the World.

This having been only the second Delta Hot Tamale Festival, of course, there were aspects of the Saturday festivities that

ROADKILL

I want to see things as they are
without me. Why, I don't know.
As a kid I always looked
at roadkill close up, and poked
a stick into it. I want to look at death
with eyes like my own baby eyes,
not yet blinded by knowledge.
I told this to my friend the monk,
and he said, *Want, want, want*.

—*Chase Twichell*

didn't seem quite up to full strength. The parade, which featured the hot tamammas and the Queen of the festival, an African-American retired schoolteacher, age ninety-four, who has been a fixture of community organizations for decades, could have done with a high-school marching band. There were only two contestants for Miss Hot Tamale. (The winner wore a dress made of sewn-together shucks.) But the eating contest was exciting. It was won for the second consecutive year by a young man who downed twenty-eight tamales in five minutes using a technique that I thought worth remembering for anyone considering entering such contests in the future: put two tamales in your mouth at once. (This technique should not be attempted at the Slugburger Festival eating contest.) The tone of some of the tamale venders would have pleased Frank Carlton, whose sideline was a tamale-catering operation called the Big River Goat Ranch Kick Ass Cooking Team. A booth run by a group of antic amateurs was called Lost Cat Hot Tamale Co., and the people who manned it wore T-shirts that said on the back, "Here, kitty, kitty . . ." (When I asked one of them if he thought that there truly ever was cat meat in a hot tamale, he said, with a straight face, "You need a binder.") The casual racial integration of the street celebration would have pleased Hodding Carter II. Apparently, the strategy of lengthening the festival to three days had proved successful. The Greenville Inn and the Rodeway Inn and the Hampton Inn had all been fully booked. Jim's Café enjoyed one of its best days of business ever—and, given the cheerfulness of the occasion, that was probably without having to collect any fines for whining.

The center of the street celebration was Stein Mart Square—named for a large discount-clothing chain that was founded in Greenville and eventually moved its headquarters elsewhere. There was plenty to eat besides hot tamales. The largest line seemed to be at a truck selling funnel cakes. I had no difficulty finding a Kool-Aid-pickle vender. Pressed for an opinion after my first bite or two, I took refuge in the initialism I.C.P., Interesting Cultural Phenomenon. I did enjoy imagining the kitchen conversation that might have resulted in the invention of Kool-Aid pickles:

"I thought maybe I'd just pour the pickle juice out of this gallon jar of kosher garlic dills, replace it with red Kool-Aid, and let it sit around for five or six days."

"That ought to do the trick."

The tamale cooking contest at the festival is named for Frank Carlton, whose World Championship Hot Tamale Contest could be considered a precursor to the Delta Hot Tamale Festival. Carlton never entered his own contest. In that oral-history interview, he explained, "I don't feel it's fair for me to enter the contest because I'd blow them all away"—a statement at the level of braggadocio appropriate for a cook discussing his rendition of a local specialty. (In Louisiana, it is common to hear a cook say, "You taste my étouffée you'll wanna go home and slap yo' mama.") Neither Doe's Eat Place nor Scott's entered the festival cook-off—perhaps out of a Carltonesque sense of fair play or perhaps from considering how embarrassing it would be if, through the vagaries of a contest with many volunteer judges, they did not win. That still left thirty-three contestants.

The over-all winner was Jodie's Hot Tamales, a home-town operation that, in the Delta tradition, is run by an African-American family out of its own kitchen. What struck me as I strolled past the booths along Stein Mart Square, though, was that their offerings seemed to stretch the definition of a Delta hot tamale considerably beyond what is traditional. When it comes to local specialties, connoisseurs are usually strict about sticking to the script. According to Amy Evans, the Southern Foodway Alliance's hot-tamale specialist, Frank Carlton's final World Championship, held in 2005, had only one contestant who deviated seriously from the classic Delta hot tamale, and he became the object of some derision. Traditionalists have been dismayed any time Doe's made a change—wrapping its tamales in parchment paper instead of shucks, no longer packing take-out tamales in reused No. 10 cans—although not dismayed enough, I suspect, to skip the tamales and go straight to the steak.

The hot tamamma who announced the cook-off winners said that there had been forty-three varieties of tamales offered by contestants from four different states. Strolling down the line of tamale purveyors, I came across one booth selling a seafood-gumbo tamale. Another booth offered vegetarian tamales—artichoke and roasted garlic. With all due respect, I had to wonder whether a vegetarian tamale could still be considered a Delta hot tamale. For a start, where would you hide the cat? The tamales that the celebrity chefs created in their cook-off—say, a smoked-lamb tamale with crème fraîche and lamb cracklin'—didn't taste anything like Delta hot tamales, although I was glad that I'd insinuated myself into the preparation area in order to do some sampling. I had to wonder if the influence of the celebrity chefs' tamales, plus the desire to stand out in the competition, would inspire local artisans to stray further from the tried-and-true Delta recipes. If the festival continued to expand, could the tamale you bought in Greenville increasingly resemble the sort of tamale you might get from, say, a cart in the San Antonio barrio or from a vender at an upscale farmers' market in San Francisco or from a café in Corinth that also served slugburgers? In other words, might Greenville bring back its glory days at the cost of losing the distinctive Delta hot tamale? If so, trademark or no trademark, would it still be the Hot Tamale Capital of the World? ♦

LETTER FROM SHENZHEN

THE GENE FACTORY

A Chinese firm's bid to crack hunger, illness, evolution—and the genetics of human intelligence.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

The twenty-mile drive from Hong Kong International Airport to the center of Shenzhen, in southern China, can take hours. There is customs to negotiate and a border to cross, but they aren't the problem; the problem is the furious pace of commerce between the former British colony and one of the fastest-growing cities in the world. Trucks, cars, vans, and buses cram the roadways, ferrying laborers of all kinds at all times. Until the nineteen-eighties, when Deng Xiaoping designated the area as China's first special economic zone, Shenzhen had been a tiny fishing village. Suddenly, eleven million people appeared, seemingly out of nowhere; factories sprang up, often housed in hastily constructed tower blocks.

Thirty years ago, there were a few guesthouses and little else. Today, a visitor can stay at the Four Seasons or the Ritz, shop for ten-thousand-dollar handbags at Hermès, and move around town in a chauffeured Bentley. Yet Shenzhen has remained a factory town. At various times, the city has served as China's Detroit, its garment district, and its Silicon Valley. Now, as the world's scientists focus with increasing intensity on transforming the genetic codes of every living creature into information that can be used to treat and ultimately prevent disease, Shenzhen is home to a different kind of factory: B.G.I., formerly called Beijing Genomics Institute, the world's largest genetic-research center. With a hundred and seventy-eight machines to sequence the precise order of the billions of chemicals within a molecule of DNA, B.G.I. produces at least a quarter of the world's genomic data—more than Harvard University, the National Institutes of Health, or any other scientific institution.

Much of modern molecular biology and microbiology has been based on the effort to decipher the basic code of life, which is made up of four nucleotides: adenine, thymine, cytosine, and guanine. Specific strings of those molecules—there are three billion pairs in the human genome—are arranged together to make genes; genes, in turn, produce the proteins that we need to survive. Since 1995, when Craig Venter sequenced the first bacterium, biologists have been on a crusade to catalogue the DNA of nearly every species on earth. No group has been more aggressive in its attempt to produce those maps than B.G.I.: the company has already processed the genomes of fifty-seven thousand people. B.G.I. also has sequenced many strains of rice, the cucumber, the chickpea, the giant panda, the Arabian camel, the yak, a chicken, and forty types of silkworm. None of those endeavors are quite as odd as they may seem. Genomic research has shown that the human activity responsible for climate change has also caused a serious decline in the panda population. Silkworms have played a central role in the Chinese economy for thousands of years. B.G.I. has also sequenced the Tibetan antelope, the coronavirus responsible for SARS, and the DNA of a four-thousand-year-old man, known as Inuk, obtained from a tuft of his hair that was discovered in Greenland's permafrost.

The company's four thousand employees operate out of an eight-story former shoe factory on the eastern edge of Shenzhen, not far from the inlet to the South China Sea. Sequencing facilities are sterile places, and the B.G.I. operation looks more like a call center or the back office of a bank than like the home of China's most important biotechnology company. There are no test tubes or vials of blood on display, no mice or rats, or even much traditional laboratory space. Instead, there are a series of advanced sequencing arrays, taller than refrigerators and stacked with hard drives, churning through the carefully packaged DNA samples that arrive every day from every part of the world. To preserve the chemicals needed to process that DNA, the machines are kept in frigid rooms that few people are permitted to enter. Racks of parkas line the corridors, where hundreds of determined young men and women—the average age of B.G.I. employees is twenty-six—occupy identical powder-blue cubicles, each bathed in the eerie glow of their computer monitors.

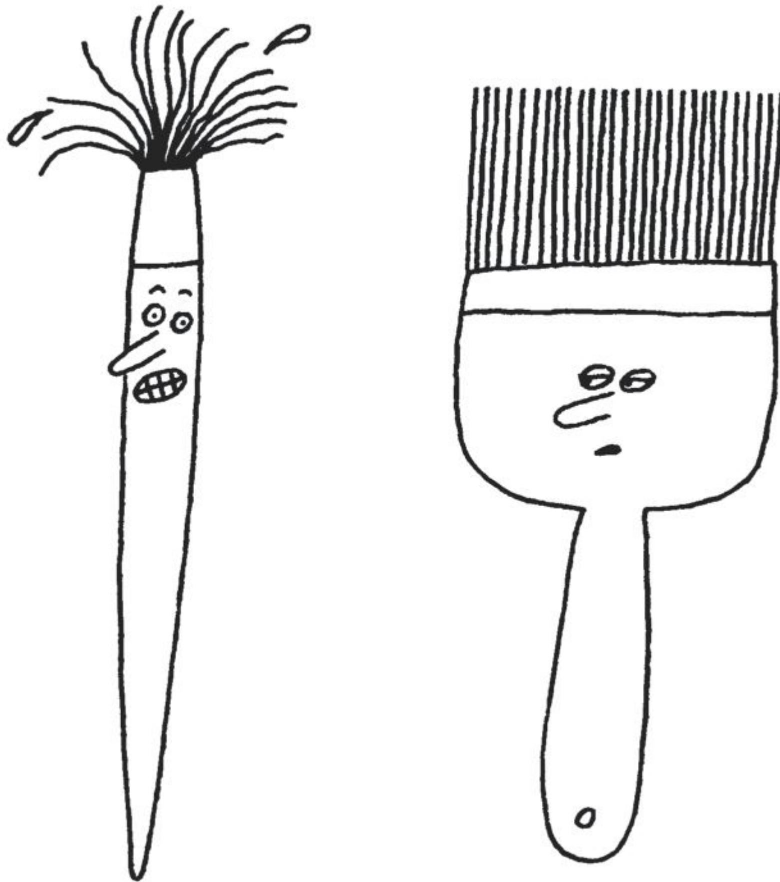
B.G.I., much like Shenzhen itself, seems to have been formed in a single instant: September 9, 1999, at nine seconds after 9:19 A.M. (In China, even dispassionate scientists crave auspicious beginnings.) The group got its start in Beijing, first as a nonprofit organization and then as an affiliate of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. But as Jian Wang, the company's president, and one of its founders, told me recently, "We were too crazy for them"—too independent. "We were kicked out." At fifty-nine, Wang, with gently graying hair on a perfectly round head, and dressed in an olive-drab B.G.I. camping shirt and matching pants, looks like an avuncular Zhou Enlai. He considers B.G.I.'s expulsion from the academy to have been an essential component of the company's success. The founders, Wang and sixty-one-year-old Huanming Yang, who is now the chairman, had both received advanced training in the West. They were eager for China to play a role in the Human Genome Project, the effort to create the blueprint needed to decode all our genes. They tried, and failed, to persuade the Chinese government to establish a sequencing center. So they created a company of their own, raising enough capital to hire nearly fifty researchers and buy a few basic machines. At first, the scientists worked out of a crowded apartment in Beijing. Their furniture

B.G.I. is sifting through the DNA in a hunt for biological clues to what makes intellectually gifted people so smart.

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL ROGERS

consisted of the cardboard shipping boxes that had contained their new equipment. The group was responsible for only about one per cent of the research that went into the genome project. In 2000, however, when Bill Clinton announced that a rough draft of the genome had been completed, he made a point of thanking China. B.G.I. may well have been the first organization in the country's history to participate in an international scientific collaboration.

"It wasn't a big role, but it got us started," Wang told me when we met in Shenzhen, where the company established its headquarters in 2007. (It now operates sequencing centers throughout the world. It opened a facility in Shanghai on November 11, 2011: 11/11/11, at eleven seconds after 11:11 A.M.) Despite the company's limited involvement, the Human Genome Project provided the two men access to the world's most accomplished geneticists. Today, the list of scientists whom B.G.I. counts as advisers reads like a Double Helix Hall of Fame: James Watson, who, with Francis Crick, discovered the structure of DNA; Eric Lander, one of the genome project's leaders, and the director of the Broad Institute, of M.I.T. and Harvard; and John Sulston, a Nobel Prize winner (as is Watson) and the founder of one of the world's largest genomic-research centers, Britain's Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute. It took more than a decade, and three billion dollars, for a team of international experts to map the first human genome. Since then, the costs have decreased so rapidly that B.G.I., with its relatively cheap and plentiful labor force, can do that same work in a few days for about four thousand dollars. By the end of next year, Wang told me, the price of sequencing a genome will fall below a thousand dollars. Driven largely by those plummeting costs, B.G.I. intends to transform DNA into a common resource, a kind of universal reference library—freely accessible, wary scientists hope, to anyone who wants to use it.


"You creative types—it's always something."

The order of the four chemicals in each molecule of DNA determines the physical characteristics of every living organism, and sequencing those molecules has made it possible for scientists to begin to identify causal connections between diseases and genes. But a sequencing machine without software is about as useful as a laptop with no operating system. It works essentially like a molecular version of a paper shredder, cutting up immense strings of genetic information, then spitting them out in fragmented piles. Each string produced by a sequencing machine is referred to as a "read," and thousands of overlapping reads are created for every genome. Researchers, relying on software that analyzes patterns, stitch those reads into comprehensible units. At B.G.I., when DNA samples arrive—usually on FedEx trucks—workers check to make sure they are packed properly in dry ice. Then they are taken to a quality-control area, where they are prepared for analysis. Most DNA samples sent to B.G.I. from labs around the world are processed in Hong Kong; Shenzhen focusses on submissions and research projects from within China.

The company has bet its future on laying out the genetic codes of as many life-forms as possible. While I was in Shenzhen, I saw a display that described B.G.I.'s plans, which include the Million Human Genomes Project, the Million Plant and Animal Genomes Project, and the Million Microecosystem Genomes Project. "It's like fishing," Wang said, explaining the philosophy behind it all. "You can stick a pole in the water and try to find the fish one at a time. But what we are doing is drying out the ocean. Then we can count all the fish at once."

The company says that the data will help explain the origins and the evolution of humanity, improve our average life span by five years, increase global food production by ten per cent, decode half of all genetic diseases, understand the origins of autism, and cut birth defects by fifty per cent. It's an audacious

list, but sequencing has become an industrial process, and, as an assembly line, B.G.I. has no peer. "In Chinese, we have a saying: Reach for the top of the sky," Ming Qi, the health division's chief scientist, told me when we met in a small café on the top floor of the headquarters. Qi, the founding director of the Center for Genetic and Genomic Medicine, at Zhejiang University, was a protégé of Tan Jiazhen, who is widely regarded as "the father of Chinese genetics." Qi acknowledged the company's outsized ambitions, but said, "We want to translate all these scientific findings into our daily lives, including our economy, industry, health, and environment."

B.G.I.'s finances are murky, but it makes its money in several ways. The company provides data analysis to pharmaceutical firms, sequences genomes of individuals for researchers, and has been hired by the American advocacy group Autism Speaks to sequence the DNA of ten thousand people from families with children who have some form of autism-spectrum disorder. For scientists in Denmark who are studying the genetics of obesity and diabetes, B.G.I. has decoded the genomes of a thousand obese people and a thousand healthy people. The company also had a central part in the duck-genome consortium, along with colleagues from Britain and from other Chinese institutes. (Ducks are a common host of influenza viruses, and a better understanding of their genetics could greatly increase the pace of vaccine development.) B.G.I. offers a popular, noninvasive test for Down syndrome that analyzes fetal DNA circulating in the mother's blood. The test can be performed in the tenth week of pregnancy. (Amniocentesis, the standard diagnostic, is an invasive procedure that cannot be carried out until at least the fifteenth week; in rare cases, the needle required to remove DNA for examination causes infection or miscarriage.)

The goals of such projects have not been challenged. But the company has also embarked upon studies that Western scientists have trouble even discussing. Foremost among them is the Cognitive Genomics project, an attempt to explore, in more complex ways than ever before, the genetic basis for human intelligence. Wang understands the ethical concerns raised by this kind of research and knows that discussing the subject makes many people uncomfortable. But he believes the worries are misguided. "Some words are too sensitive to say, but there has to be at least some genetic component behind the differences people show," he told me. Wang is a mountain climber and a serious amateur photographer, and large prints of his Himalayan landscapes are scattered throughout B.G.I.'s offices. "In the United States and in the West, you have a certain way," he continued, smiling and waving his arms merrily. "You feel you are advanced and you are the best. Blah, blah, blah. You follow all these rules and have all these protocols and laws and regulations. You need somebody to change it. To blow it up. For the last five hundred years, you have been leading the way with innovation. We are no longer interested in following."

"Well, I'll be—we just spent all weekend planning to rob a façade."

I arrived in Shenzhen the day after Typhoon Usagi had shut down much of Southeast Asia. Shops were closed, and cars inched along the sodden roads, but B.G.I. never missed a moment's activity, in part because many of its staff live in dormitories not far from the main building. The company is arranged like a campus, though not one on which people seem to roam freely. Unlike Western research facilities, such as the National Institutes of Health, B.G.I.'s headquarters has no easily identified guards, no place to sign in, and no noticeable security cameras. While I was there, trying to find my way through the maze of identical cubicles that fill the cavernous first floor, I met Gengyun Zhang, an agricultural expert who is in charge of the company's growing life-sciences division; he was dressed casually in a zippered yellow sport shirt. In 2011, Zhang led a team that sequenced foxtail millet, and B.G.I. has big plans for the esoteric grain. "You know what Chairman Mao said about millet," Zhang said. I didn't. " 'With millet plus rifles we will emerge victorious.' " (I learned later that he was referring to a speech that Mao delivered in 1955, aimed at the U.S., called "The Chinese People Cannot Be Cowed by the Atom Bomb.")

Like many of the company's leaders, Zhang, a reserved man with thin hair and deep black eyes, was educated in the United States, earning his doctorate from the department of plant biology

JEN FINALLY EMBRACES "THAT STUBBORN BELLY FAT."

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and pathology at Rutgers University. He invited me to lunch, and we ate in a small room adjacent to the main dining area. It might have been the cafeteria at Stuyvesant High School, given the age of the workers. Except for the sounds of hundreds of people eating, however, the room was nearly silent. At B.G.I., there are none of the frills so common to technology firms in the West; I saw no lava lamps, nobody wore headphones or Crocs or moved through the building on a skateboard, a pogo stick, or a unicycle. When the workday ends, the employees stand up and, many hand in hand, walk out toward the giant dormitory next door. "It's like 'Friends,' for thousands of people," Wang Aizhu, a B.G.I. press official, said. She explained that "Friends" is popular in China. (While the living conditions are hardly extravagant, they are nowhere near as austere as those which have been found at Foxconn, the company nearby that makes iPhones for Apple—where, owing to many recent suicides, management has installed protective netting around several of the buildings.)

At lunch, Zhang pushed a small pot of yogurt toward me. Until recently, the Chinese seemed to show little interest in yogurt, or in dairy foods in general. As the middle class grows, that situation is changing. "It's specially developed here," he said, explaining that the millions of strains of beneficial bacteria contained in yogurt included a combination of new probiotics. B.G.I. has several teams trying to sequence the human microbiome, as well as those of other animals. Understanding bacterial genomes may be as valuable to maintaining good health as learning about the DNA we inherit from our parents.

During lunch, Zhang talked about millet. China's one-child policy has prevented the rapid population growth that has threatened the economic future of many of the world's developing countries. But cultivated land is in short supply, and in the coming decades feeding the nation will require sophisticated agricultural techniques. Archeologists believe that people began cultivating foxtail millet more than seven thousand years ago, and that for millennia it was more common than rice in China's arid north. But rice, with its high yield of grain, gradually won out. Millet is actually a grass, with thin, leafy stems that can reach six feet, higher than a stalk of wheat. Zhang is convinced that a properly bred crop could provide an additional source of food for humans and for livestock.

Researchers at B.G.I. recently planted a test crop not far from their headquarters. "It's very drought-tolerant," Zhang told me. "This plant could be valuable in Africa, where it will be needed even more than in China, especially with conditions of global climate change." The B.G.I. team mapped the location of DNA responsible for specific traits in the plant; then the researchers bred the plants to create seeds with the exact mixture of traits they sought. Technically, this millet is not genetically engineered; no genes were moved around in a laboratory to breed it. Although the company does work with engineered crops, Zhang says that B.G.I. has attempted to avoid the controversy that comes with producing G.M.O.s. "Yes, even in China they are out there," he said, shaking his head mournfully. "It doesn't make sense, but there are other ways to breed crops, too."

Another of Zhang's projects focusses on cassava, a starchy root that is grown principally in Asia and Africa. Five hundred million people rely on cassava as a source of carbohydrates, but it contains few essential micronutrients. Climate change will make cassava harder to grow, but where it does flourish it will become more important than ever. B.G.I. has undertaken an effort to engineer nutrients into the vegetable; that would make it an edible, healthy source of protein that can be eaten throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The company is also working with the Gates Foundation and the International Rice Research Institute to sequence thousands of strains of rice. Farmers could then create crops that might withstand local

challenges, like flooding, drought, or particular pests. The United Nations predicts that, by 2100, there will be as many as ten billion people living on the planet, and half of them will rely on rice as a central source of nourishment. There are twenty-four species and up to a hundred thousand varieties within those species—enough to find plenty of useful traits. Until recently, "this research would have been impossible," Zhang said. "But with today's technology I have no doubt that we can feed the world."

In November of 2002, a mysterious disease sickened thousands of people and killed scores in Guangdong, China's largest province, which includes Shenzhen and has a population of more than a hundred million. Pandemics often originate in the crowded provinces of southern China, pass through Hong Kong, and then spread to the rest of the world. For weeks, the Chinese government, preoccupied with its image abroad, its agricultural exports, and its tourist industry, said nothing. By the time the disease—severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS—was widely recognized, it had infected thousands of people, from Shanghai to San Francisco, and hundreds had died. SARS was an international public-relations disaster for China; if the virus had been more contagious, it would have created the new millennium's first grave public-health crisis. The Chinese government was humiliated; both the health minister and the mayor of Beijing were dismissed for mishandling the epidemic.

Nearly a decade later, in May, 2011, a rare and deadly strain of *E. coli* bacteria appeared in Germany. It quickly spread to Sweden, Denmark, and other European countries, and eventually to the United States. More than fifty people died, and thousands got sick. China's reaction—B.G.I.'s, really—could not have differed more sharply from the country's response to SARS. The company deployed its genomic technology to determine the infectious strain and reveal the mechanisms of infection. Once a sample of the bacteria had been deposited at a B.G.I. research laboratory in Hong Kong, it took just three days for the team there to sequence the bacterial genome; as the work progressed, company researchers posted details on Twitter. The data were made public under an open license, which meant that any research team could use the information at no cost. Many did. The episode underscored the weaknesses of hewing to the usual scientific approach to such medical issues: produce data, analyze it, publish it in a scientific journal, then eventually release the information to the public. In a 2012 report on the future of scientific collaboration, the Royal Society of Britain credited B.G.I. with an openness that saved lives. "Within a week, two dozen reports had been filed on an open-source site dedicated to the analysis of the strain," the society wrote. "These analyses provided crucial information about the strain's virulence and resistance genes—how it spreads and which antibiotics are effective against it. They produced results in time to help contain the outbreak."

In public appearances, B.G.I.'s chairman, Huanming Yang, never fails to stress the collaborative nature of genetics, and American researchers praise the company for its willingness to work with them. Indeed, many of B.G.I.'s projects are led by Western scientists. The company routinely offers to sequence data at reduced prices, or even for free, if researchers share the results of their work. That has helped B.G.I. churn out many

articles for prestigious journals, an important measure of success for a relatively new company. (As sequencing becomes cheaper, however, the top scientific publications have begun to regard such research as less worthy of special recognition.) Nationalism, at least in a rapidly advancing field like genomics, is increasingly regarded as a vestige of an era before Twitter and the Internet. "If by nationalism you mean hoarding data, that just isn't happening," George Church told me. Church, a professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School, is an adviser to B.G.I. and one of the company's most visible proponents. "I am just glad that there is somebody in the world who has the priorities and the money to do this—to hold this in place while the rest of us are getting our act together."

B.G.I.'s sequencing data have already produced unexpected insights into human evolution. In 2010, the company, along with a team of evolutionary biologists at the University of California at Berkeley, compared the genomes of fifty Tibetans, all of whom lived in villages at elevations of fourteen thousand feet or higher, with those of forty Han Chinese who lived in Beijing. Each subject had ancestors who had lived in the same region for at least three generations. Researchers found significant genetic differences between the two groups. Ethnic Tibetans appear to have split off from the Han people about three thousand years ago—an instant, in evolutionary terms. The Tibetans' rapid adaptation enabled them to thrive with low oxygen levels at high altitudes. The research team discovered at least thirty genes with mutations that had become more prevalent in Tibetans than in Han Chinese. Nearly half of those genes turned out to be related to the ways in which the body metabolizes oxygen. One particular variant was discovered in fewer than ten per cent of the Han but in nearly ninety per cent of the Tibetans. "This is the fastest genetic change ever observed in humans," Rasmus Nielsen, a professor of integrative biology at U.C. Berkeley, said at the time. Nielsen led the statistical analysis. "For such a very strong change, a lot of people would have had to die simply due to the fact that they had the wrong version of a gene."

The influence of heredity on intelligence is complex, involving thousands of genes interacting in such intricate ways that researchers have not yet managed to draw genetic patterns. It's possible that they never will. But B.G.I. has begun to try, and while scientists at the company take exceptional pains to say there is nothing secretive or threatening about its

Cognitive Genomics project, the work has already raised questions in the West. "In twenty to forty years, at least in the developed world, most babies could be conceived through in-vitro fertilization, so that their parents can choose among embryos," Hank Greely, a professor at Stanford Law School and the director of the university's Center for Law and the Biosciences, told me. Greely's book on the ethical implications of genomics and human reproduction, "The End of Sex," will be published next year. "That way, the parents or someone else can select among a limited number of embryos with the combination of genes they most want to see in their offspring. It's going to happen. And China will have fewer cultural and legal barriers to it than we will see in the United States."

Genetic screening for some conditions, such as Tay-Sachs disease and Huntington's disease, has become routine. Both conditions are caused by a single DNA mutation, which makes them relatively easy to detect. Soon, much more will be possible. Already, the entire genome of an embryo can be sequenced; although that information has limited value today, it raises the prospect of a real-world Gattaca, where potential fetuses could be selected through genetic diagnosis and implanted with traits that are considered desirable. "My guess is that we will at some point be able to say that this embryo has a sixty-five-per-cent chance of scoring in the top half on S.A.T.s, or is likely to have unusual musical or creative ability," Greely said. He emphasized that that day is still far off, and that he was talking not about creating "monsters under the bed" but about selecting the most attractive embryos based on the characteristics of their DNA. "In the United States, parents will make those choices, but in China there is more acceptance of government intervention in personal and family decisions."

Nearly every person I spoke with at B.G.I. assured me, whether I asked or not, that cognitive genomics is simply one small project, an arrow in the company's mammoth quiver. They described the research mostly as an effort to tease out the genetic architecture of how the brain works. But it's a touchy subject; a company press representative, who sat in on one of my interviews, interrupted several times. At each point, she repeated that B.G.I. would never engage in eugenics—a term I had not introduced, but one so freighted with unpleasant connotations that it would be hard to imagine any company embracing it. Yet complete access to DNA means complete access to the genetic building blocks of life. Eventually, that information will almost certainly be free; and the more of it that is gathered and analyzed the closer we come to a day when it might be possible to select a variety of specific traits in embryos. What might a company connected even tenuously to the Chinese government do with this information? B.G.I. has often said that all such data will be shared. There is no reason to believe that anyone there has any other goal. It is possible, though, that the government won't leave the choice in the company's hands.

Eugenics, the idea that one can breed humans for characteristics like intelligence the way a farmer would breed chickens for tastier meat or more nutritious eggs, is widely reviled today, but it was once endorsed not only by totalitarian leaders but by American liberals. China's recent history of controlling reproduction provides the clearest example of where such programs can lead. After three decades, the country has begun to ease its one-child rule. While the policy succeeded in limiting population growth, it also encouraged families to abort girls. By 2020, thirty million more Chinese men than women will have reached adulthood; for many young men, in a society where marriage still matters greatly, the odds of finding a wife have become prohibitive. Chinese leaders now worry that such a disparity could lead to instability and political unrest.

Many Western scientists are concerned that in China, where the needs of the state come before those of the individual, genomic data could play a central role in reproductive policy. "Who is the emperor?" Jian Wang, B.G.I.'s president, said when I asked him to describe his attitudes toward privacy. "I don't care. George Bush? Bill Clinton? Or the Communist Party of China? It isn't my business. Emperors have been ruling us for thousands of years. I know the government is watching us at all times. So what? I don't care about my personal privacy. It just doesn't matter."

B.G.I.'s Cognitive Genomics project has been designed like a typical medical study. The group will sequence and compare the DNA of two thousand people and hopes to recruit up to twenty thousand new subjects. Most of the samples came from people with I.Q.s higher than a hundred and fifty, few of whom are Chinese. So far, the data have been provided predominantly by Robert Plomin, a professor of behavioral genetics at King's College London, who for years has conducted research on the genetic similarities of twins. Because identical twins share so much of their DNA, differences between them are more likely to be environmental than inherited. Through a project called the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, Plomin collected DNA samples from two thousand individuals with high I.Q.s.

When the study began, in the nineteen-seventies, researchers simply hoped to understand the lives of intellectually gifted people. Now B.G.I. is sifting through the DNA in a hunt for biological clues to what makes them so smart. The team has travelled to places like Google and Harvard, seeking subjects who score far above the norm on standard tests. Most genetic studies require tens of thousands of participants to carry enough statistical power to be considered meaningful. The B.G.I. team argues that in some cases so many subjects may not be necessary.

"We are getting to the point where we are going to be able to make statistical predictions based on the genomic information about complex traits," Stephen Hsu told me. Hsu, a theoretical physicist and mathematician, is a vice-president for research and graduate studies at Michigan State University.

He is also one of the project's principal scientists. "Those minute differences in our genetic makeup are probably what determines the difference between whether you are Albert Einstein or not getting into college," he said. "Everyone is coming around to believe that things are controlled by many genes, and there has been a tendency in the field to just throw up your hands and say, Well, this is going to lead nowhere, or this is all a boondoggle. But I actually think that, at this point, it's in the hands of people who are mathematically inclined."

Hsu points to predictions about height. More than one study has demonstrated a genetic correlation between I.Q. and height, though the research is controversial and constantly disputed. Scientists can now examine a person's genome, and, assuming that he or she has been fed reasonably well, determine height within a couple of inches. (In most cases, though, the best way to predict a person's height is to look at the height of his or her parents.) Hsu suggested that one only has to consider the revolution in breeding cattle to understand how this approach to heredity might eventually be deployed with humans. Traditionally, breeders who wanted to buy a bull to inseminate their herds would study the animal's pedigree. Now they are likely to receive a genomic chart that shows whether an animal is genetically predisposed to produce milk, or live long, or gain weight more quickly (and therefore require less food) than other cattle. In the past forty years, according to a study carried out by a group of scientists from the United States Department of Agriculture and the University of Minnesota, nearly a quarter of the DNA of America's Holstein cattle had been altered through human selection.

Cattle genetics is not human genetics. Cows are heavily inbred, which has made their genomes easier to decipher. But the implications are not hard to envisage, and neither are the possible consequences. Will it become possible to build a child, as some critics of this research have contended? Not soon, and maybe never.

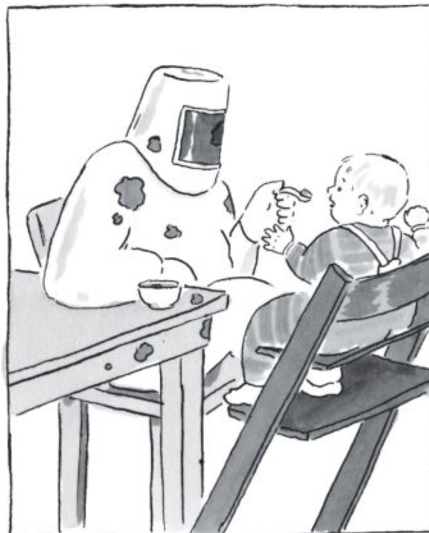
After all, genes play only a partial role in the prevalence of most diseases. Women with the BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation, for example, have a greatly increased risk of developing breast cancer and ovarian cancer. But no more than ten per cent of women with breast cancer have a mutated BRCA gene. Nonetheless, Hsu believes that altering certain genomic characteristics of an unborn child will become highly desired, and eventually common. "Wouldn't it be amazing if there were certain tweaks you could make in utero that would enhance the performance of our brain?" he said. "Probably by tweaking a certain number of variants in a positive way, you could rev up human intelligence quite a bit. Or you can explain the difference between Stephen Hawking and the average person.' "

In 2009, CNN reported on a summer camp in Chongqing where children were given DNA tests to try to identify their natural talents so that they could be steered toward suitable careers. Most scientists in the field, including those at B.G.I., dismiss the notion that such predictive tests have any credibility. Hsu and many others believe, however, that genomics will eventually do for humans what it already does for animals, and then those choices will become political as well as medical.

"We will at some point get there with humans," Hsu said. "Then some countries will make it legal or will regulate it loosely, if at all. And other countries will go nuts and make it illegal. And rich people will still be able to do it. If it turns out Singapore is the place where it is legal, rich people can have their babies in Singapore. The idea that only rich people would be able to access this technology is terrible." But, he continued, "who will make those decisions? There are going to be countries that say this is part of our national health-care service and everyone is doing it. And

TODDLER FEEDING SOLUTIONS

EXTRA-LONG SPOON


HAZMAT SUIT

BABY FUNNEL (BONUS: BABY FOIE GRAS)

eventually it would become unstoppable, because the countries that initially outlawed it would have to come around. How could they not?"

Late in October, during the frigid first week of the World Series, seven thousand members of the American Society of Human Genetics gathered in Boston to present papers, look for jobs, and attend workshops on the latest developments in their rapidly evolving field. The ground floor of the city's Convention and Exhibition Center, on the waterfront near the Inner Harbor, was filled with booths from what seemed like every genomics company in the world; it was a carnival of high-tech medical paraphernalia. The B.G.I. booth was among the busiest. Visitors crowded around to see what jobs were available and what projects were under way. Chinese was not the official language, but more than one American researcher pointed out, a bit defensively, how often it was spoken in hallways and lunchrooms throughout the meeting.

Many scientists in America have become anxious at the prospect of losing prominence in a discipline that the West has dominated since Watson and Crick discovered the helical structure of DNA. Those fears were made palpable late last year when B.G.I. became more than simply the world's biggest consumer of sequencing technology; it also became one of the principal providers. Two major companies offer that service to places like the Broad Institute and B.G.I. The leader is Illumina, which is based in San Diego, and has sold some hundred and thirty of its machines to B.G.I., for more than half a million dollars each. (Until recently, B.G.I. was Illumina's biggest customer, and the company maintains a contract to supply the chemical reagents needed to make the machines work properly.) Last year, to the outrage of many in the United States, B.G.I. bought Illumina's main competitor, Complete Genomics, for a hundred and eighteen million dollars. Jay Flatley, Illumina's chief executive, attempted to prevent the merger, appealing to the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), which monitors the sale of technology that might pose a threat to national security. Flatley argued that selling such equipment would put powerful industrial secrets into Chinese hands. In December, the CFIUS board rejected Flatley's argument and approved B.G.I.'s purchase. It has been easy to read too much into the decision; at a time when the N.I.H. is cutting back on funding scientific research, China is not. Recently, the Chinese government published an ambitious fifty-year plan to advance its technical and scientific position in the world. Few scientists would claim that they can predict that far into the future. But the fact that China would even try demonstrates how serious the country is about its technological place in the world.

While I was in Boston, I met with Flatley, a trim, cheerful man, who had just announced that a new version of Illumina's sequencing technology would enable customers to double the speed with which they can decode genomes. Illumina led the industry, even before the announcement, so I asked why B.G.I.'s acquisition of a rival should cause particular concern in the United States. In a field where coming in second will never be good enough, Complete Genomics poses no great competitive threat. Flatley said that, with enough help from the Chinese leadership, the situation could change. "They have direct reaches into the government," he told me, referring to B.G.I. "We think they are working hard to establish Chinese dominance in this market, which for the United States would be bad news." For Flatley and his company, of course, it would be even worse news.

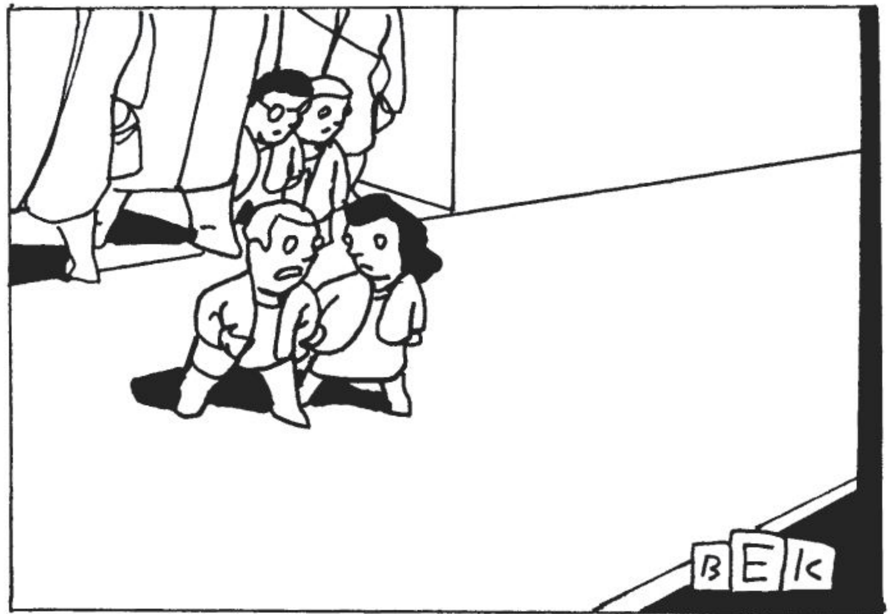
I asked why, if he was so worried about the threat of Chinese scientific dominance, he had sold millions of dollars' worth of technology to B.G.I. "It's one thing to sell Coke and another to sell the formula for Coke," he said. "And when they bought Complete Genomics what they were allowed to do is buy the formula." We were sitting at the open bar in the atrium of the Waterfront Westin—a sort of grand concourse for people attending the genetics meeting. As Flatley spoke, Jun Wang, B.G.I.'s chief executive officer, strolled by. Wang, who is thirty-seven, was wearing a black trench coat that was cinched at the waist, and he looked like a movie star. He started the company's bioinformatics department more than a decade ago, and *Fortune* recently named him one of the world's most influential people under the age of forty. Several years ago, in an interview with *Nature*, he described B.G.I.

as the "muscle" in the world of genomic research and was quoted as saying, "We have no brain." The first thing he said to me when we met was that he hoped I understood the remark was meant as a joke.

The two men nodded but maintained a physical distance, like rival gang leaders running into each other at a night club. Flatley told me that he regards B.G.I.'s emergence as a sign of America's waning investment in science. "We think it is critically important, as does B.G.I., to get a million genomes into a database as fast as we can," he said. "But that database needs to be open and universally accessible to researchers around the world. B.G.I.'s goal, I believe, is to have a million people in a database that they control." While nothing I saw at B.G.I. or heard from either company officials or any American scientist suggested that that was true, B.G.I. does have a $1.58-billion loan from the China Development Bank. Jian Wang says that the company has no official ties to the government, but it is not always easy to know what constitutes such a tie. As one prominent American scientist told me after he visited Shenzhen, "I asked, Are you a nonprofit, are you a government entity, or are you a private company? The answer was yes. In China, these are not meaningful distinctions."

While B.G.I.'s ambitions are as great as those of any Western institution, it is not yet clear where they will lead. Many scientists in the field consider the company little more than a high-end version of the nearby Foxconn factory, often referred to as "iPod City," where three hundred and fifty thousand employees turn out millions of Apple products each year. No sequencing project seems too small for B.G.I. to bother with or too big to handle. But sequencing is merely a first step. It leaves the company with a list of the chemicals found in a given stretch of DNA; those lists have often been compared to the letters of a book. Letters alone don't produce "Hamlet" or "War and Peace." Shakespeare and Tolstoy had to put that "code" together in meaningful ways. That has not been B.G.I.'s primary goal, and it is uncertain whether the company can turn the data from billions of DNA sequences into the kind of scientific insight more frequently associated with places like the Broad Institute and the National Institutes of Health.

B.G.I.'s leaders are aware of the perception that the company is little more than a biological data mill. The next afternoon, before leaving Boston, I attended a luncheon hosted by the company. Three hundred people filled a lecture hall that usually holds far fewer. Most had come to hear Huanming Yang, the B.G.I. chairman, deliver a long, emotional presentation that included a PowerPoint display with ninety-one slides. Yang is warm and self-effacing, and he thanked a roster of American biologists for their help and "collaboration." In talking about the promise of genomics, he invoked Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s "I Have a Dream" speech and the Declaration of Independence. It was a "Kumbaya" moment in a field where the soul is rarely mentioned. Yang referred to his company as "an unruly adolescent," and ended his talk by saying, "Please do me a favor: Take the young B.G.I.'ers as your friends, as your students. To treat them as you treated me, to teach them as you taught me. I assure you it is very rewarding. It is not only for a successful project; it is also for the brilliant future of mankind."



"I thought they introduced the witch a little late."

Two weeks earlier, in Hong Kong, I had met with Chris Chang, a visiting scholar at B.G.I., who expressed similar sentiments, saying that these were early days for Chinese biotechnology. Chang, an American with a Chinese heritage, works on the Cognitive Genomics project. He is eager to see B.G.I. grow beyond its genetic-assembly-line phase, and he thinks the intelligence research can help the company to do it. "There are ethical concerns about this research in China, too," he told me. "But it's just not the career-killing type of project that it would be in the United States."

We were sitting in a noisy café in Wan Chai. He shook his head and smiled. "I do get bewildered," he said. "Embryo selection is one aspect of this kind of research, but there are so many others. Do you want to figure out Alzheimer's disease, or schizophrenia? Because to do that we need to understand the brain, but right now we are taking little stabs in the dark. That won't stop until we map the brain. We will have to make difficult ethical choices. But don't ignore the enormous potential of this research. At some point, though I don't know when, people will look back and wonder what all the fuss was about." ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

A MISSION GONE WRONG

Why are we still fighting the drug war?

BY MATTATHIAS SCHWARTZ

One night in May of 2012, a Honduran police inspector received a phone call from an agent of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, a man he knew as Tony. Tony told him to get his men ready. They were about to intercept a large cocaine shipment, one of many such missions that U.S. and Honduran forces collaborate on each year. At 8 P.M., four helicopters flew east from a base near the city of La Ceiba to a smaller refuelling base deep in the wet lowlands of La Moskitia, on the Honduran side of the Mosquito Coast. Along with the inspector, the helicopters carried ten D.E.A. agents, eighteen other members of the Honduran security forces, and eight Guatemalan pilots. Around 11 P.M., they lifted off again. Their target was a small plane heading for a Honduran village called Ahuas.

The U.S. military monitors what it can of the hundreds of tons of cocaine that enter the U.S. by plane, boat, automobile, submarine, tunnel, backpack, and catapult. Its maps show red lines veining South America and North America with such tangled complexity that they are known as "spaghetti slides." Most of the air routes, however, follow a predictable path. They begin in Venezuela and head north, avoiding Colombian airspace, where authorities can shoot down suspicious aircraft. Then they turn west, toward La Moskitia.

Around 1 A.M., the plane touched down in a field near Ahuas, where a large receiving party had gathered. Some, carrying rifles, secured the perimeter. Others brought the plane's cargo to a nearby truck.

A surveillance plane from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security relayed news of the landing to the D.E.A. agents aboard the helicopters. Their Honduran colleagues did not know exactly where they were going. Though the D.E.A. agents had vetted the Hondurans with polygraph tests and background checks, they were careful about sharing information, lest word of the mission get back to the cartels. Officially, the Hondurans were running the operation, with the D.E.A. agents present as "advisers." But the D.E.A. agents had microphones and earpieces built into their helmets; the Hondurans had strips of reflective tape to help the agents find them if they got lost. (A D.E.A. agent told me that the Hondurans could have issued commands with arm squeezes and hand signals.)

From the helicopters' gun bays, the Hondurans could see the truck below, driving toward a river landing. Michael Braun, a former D.E.A. chief of operations, compared this kind of moment to "a state trooper walking up on a midnight traffic stop on a lonely stretch of highway." The uncertainty would have been especially great for the Honduran members of the force. In addition to the lack of timely information, they complained about inferior night-vision equipment. "If you use it to see something that's near, it doesn't work very well," the Honduran inspector said later, during an interview with Honduran investigators. "The goggles that the Americans use are better."

As the helicopters approached the riverbank, a group of men quickly transferred the cargo from the truck to a motorized canoe. One pushed the canoe out into the river, where it began to drift downstream. The men fled, just before six members of the anti-drug team reached the ground: the inspector, three Hondurans, and two D.E.A. agents.

At around 2 A.M., a helicopter swooped low and used the wind from its blades to push the canoe toward the bank. A D.E.A. agent, the Honduran inspector, and another Honduran policeman climbed in. They found waterproof bundles containing more than four hundred kilos of cocaine. The D.E.A. agent managed to start the canoe's motor, but moments later it stalled. The agent struggled with the engine while the Hondurans scanned the area for threats. The boat drifted on the moonlit water, a high bank on one side and forest on the other. The men were exposed, but they did not want to abandon the drugs.

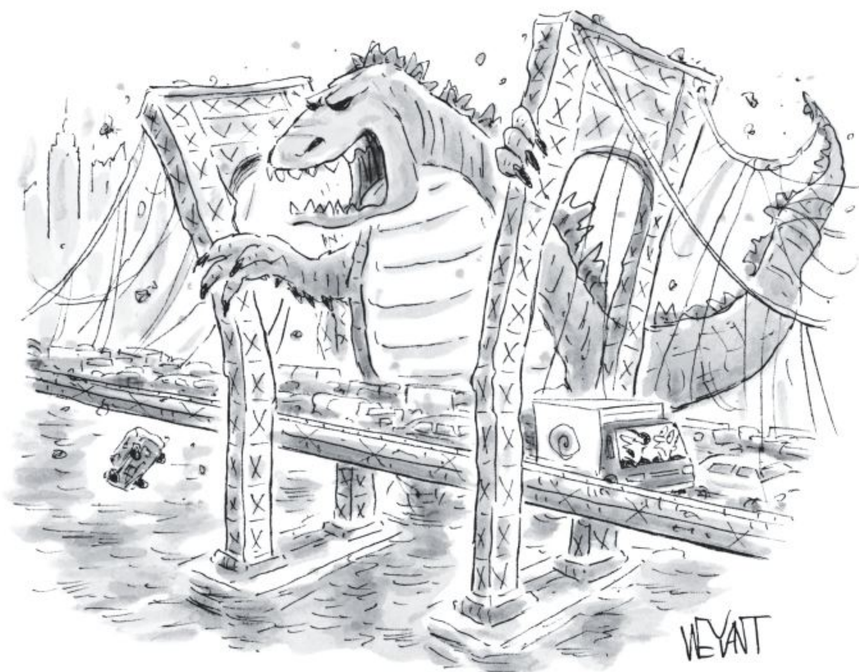
"I observed with my night goggles that something was approaching," the Honduran policeman said later. It was another boat. He thought it might be his team members. A man stood at the bow with his shirt unbuttoned. There were shouts, then gunshots—rifle fire mixed with a machine-gun burst from one of the helicopters. "I saw sparks from the boat coming to us," the policeman said. "Then I knew nothing."

The Americans who touched down in Honduras that night were part of a unit called a Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team. Braun, who oversaw the creation of the FAST program, in 2004, told me that Special Operations Command had asked the D.E.A. for help building criminal cases against Afghan drug traffickers with ties to the Taliban. "They were running into heroin refineries and large caches of drugs," Braun said. "They needed seasoned agents with the criminal investigator's mind-set."

Part special-forces manhunters, part detectives, FAST operators were trained to kick down doors, work informants, and collect evidence. In 2009, a FAST squad assisted in the arrest of Haji Bagcho, a prominent Afghan drug lord. In one of Bagcho's compounds, they found a ledger recording more than two hundred and fifty million dollars in heroin transactions. Bagcho is now serving a life sentence in a U.S. prison. That year, the D.E.A. asked Congress to fund two additional FAST squads, for the Western Hemisphere. Braun said that "ungoverned spaces," described as "possible terrorist havens" by the 9/11 Commission Report, deserved special attention, likening these regions to the "Star Wars"

In the drug war, Honduras is referred to as "downrange"; drug traffickers are "the enemy"; the Mosquito Coast is a "battlespace."

ILLUSTRATION BY SHOUT



"I heard he used to work for Christie."

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cantina scene. Terrorists and narco-traffickers "are frequenting the same shady bars, the same seedy hotels and the same sweaty brothels," he told a congressional subcommittee, in 2012. "They are most assuredly talking business and sharing lessons learned."

The Honduras mission was part of a larger program called Operation Anvil. Honduras was not a war zone, so FAST worked under the State Department, using Huey helicopters instead of swifter Black Hawks. In Honduras, FAST could not call in U.S. military forces to fight alongside it, as in Afghanistan. But in some ways Anvil was familiar, the latest in a long line of overseas counter-narcotics operations with names like Blast Furnace, Ghost Zone, Snowcap, and Zorro. In addition to using helicopters to spirit agents to remote locations and seize drugs in transit, the U.S. has tried paying coca farmers to switch crops, spraying herbicides out of helicopters, raiding jungle laboratories, stopping and searching small fishing boats, forcing down aircraft, tapping phones, hiring informants, and extraditing drug lords. Anvil, like many of its predecessors, combined the legal framework of a police action with the hardware and the rhetoric of war. Honduras is often referred to as "downrange"; drug traffickers are "the enemy"; the Mosquito Coast is a "battlespace." In a broad sense, FAST was nothing new. What is remarkable is how many times the U.S. has tried such militarized counter-narcotics programs and how long it has been apparent how little they amount to.

In 1971, in a message to Congress, President Richard Nixon called drug abuse "a national emergency." "We have faced great difficulties again and again," he said. "Wars and depressions and divisions among our people." If Congress furnished "the authority and the funds to match our moral resources," the question was "not whether we will conquer drug abuse, but how soon." Two years later, with a budget of less than seventy-five million dollars, he created the Drug Enforcement Administration, to wage an "all-out global war on the drug menace."

In the early days of the drug war, cocaine was seen as less a threat to national security and more a "jet-setter and rocker drug," according to Mathea Falco, who ran the State Department's anti-drug program under President Jimmy Carter. Nixon's main priorities were heroin, a problem aggravated by returning Vietnam veterans, and marijuana. Under Nixon, the U.S. succeeded in persuading Turkey's government first to outlaw poppy farming and then to enforce a regimen of licensing and strict regulation. But heroin production in Southeast Asia and Mexico accelerated. Although the Mexican government was initially slow to accept interference with its domestic affairs, in 1976 it gave the U.S. broad authority to assist with Operation Condor, an ambitious eradication program. Thousands of Mexican soldiers were sent into poppy- and marijuana-growing areas, along with the federal police force and D.E.A. agents. Drug-producing fields were mapped with imagery from U.S. surveillance planes and satellites and then destroyed by flyover sprayings of chemical defoliants. Ground forces arrived by helicopter to secure the area, destroy any surviving plants, and pacify the farmers, many of whom left their barren fields for the city. In Mexico, the program was known as La Campaña Permanente.

After three years, Condor looked like a success. In the U.S., heroin overdoses and heroin purity fell, and prices nearly doubled. But, in the early eighties, poppy farmers from Iran to Burma and Afghanistan picked up the slack. The tendency of a crackdown in one area to stimulate production in another is now known as the "balloon effect."

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan framed drugs as a national-security threat, to be confronted with Churchillian determination. "We're running up a battle flag," he said. "We can fight the drug problem, and we can win." But the Reagan-era drug war did not get fully under way until 1985, the beginning of the crack epidemic and the Iran-Contra affair, when he appointed Edwin Meese Attorney General. Meese chaired quarterly meetings of a powerful drug-policy board, which included eleven other Cabinet members and the director of the C.I.A. In 1986, Reagan signed a law giving the Pentagon a permanent role in the drug war; Meese's board asked for airplanes, ships, helicopters, and radar. Two years later, Meese donned a D.E.A. cap and a khaki suit for a weeklong, five-country tour of operations in Latin America. (At a D.E.A. training camp in Bolivia, he used a gasoline-soaked

pole to set fire to two tons of cocaine paste.)

In 1988, Reagan signed his second Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which made it official U.S. policy "to create a Drug-Free America by 1995." The same year, a RAND Corporation study concluded that interdiction—seizing drugs in transit—was unlikely ever to make much difference in U.S. cocaine consumption. It cited six previous studies that had reached the same conclusion. Later that year, Admiral Carlisle A. H. Trost, the highest-ranking officer in the Navy, said, "The economic incentives are so potent and the network of communications from farm to market via thousands of boats and small planes is so extensive. . . . The only way we are going to stop this immense flow of illegal narcotics into this country is to shut off the demand for it."

The next year, President George H. W. Bush appointed William Bennett the director of the newly created Office of National Drug Control Policy. Bennett, who was known as the "drug czar," coördinated anti-drug activities and published, each year, a book-length National Drug Control Strategy. Bennett initially called drugs "a crisis of national character" and asserted that casual drug users were more dangerous than hard-core addicts. They were "willing and able to proselytize," which made them "*highly* contagious."

Congress required Bennett to set quantifiable goals. He promised a ten-per-cent reduction in the population of illicit drug users by 1991, and a fifty-per-cent reduction by 1999. His targets were naïve at best. Since 1990, the number of users has almost doubled. Between 1990 and 2007, the street prices of cocaine and heroin, which Bennett sought to drive up in order to price out new users, declined by as much as eighty per cent, according to one recent study. Falling drug prices weren't due to a lack of enforcement. During the same period, the D.E.A.'s budget tripled.

In 1989, Congress approved $2.2 billion for Bush's five-year Andean Strategy, to pursue coca eradication with foreign militaries, who sought training and arms to assist with their own struggles against the leftist FARC and right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia and the Shining Path in Peru. The insurgents drew their strength from the remote mountainous areas that are hospitable to growing coca. U.S. aid paid for armaments, training, and a few alternative crop schemes, but these had little effect on drug cultivation. When the D.E.A. established a remote outpost, coca growers moved beyond the range of its helicopters.

During the third year of the Andean Strategy, counter-drug forces seized less than two per cent of Peru's cocaine base. "The Peruvian-American anti-drug policy has failed," Alberto Fujimori, the country's President, told the Washington *Post*, in 1993. In Colombia, D.E.A. assistance helped bring about the killing of Pablo Escobar and the dismantling of the Cali and Medellín cartels, but new traffickers emerged to take their place. The rise of each subsequent organization seemed to occur with greater speed and violence than the one before. The guerrillas took over a large share of the Colombian drug trade. By the late nineties, the area under coca cultivation had quadrupled.

In 1997, Bill Clinton's second drug czar, General Barry McCaffrey, attempted to retire the language of a "war on drugs." "If you want to fight a war on drugs, sit down at your own kitchen table and talk to your own children," he said. Nevertheless, Clinton allocated roughly two-thirds of the federal anti-drug budget to interdiction and law enforcement. During his final year in office, he approved Plan Colombia, which poured another round of aid into Colombian military and intelligence efforts. Planes accompanied by U.S.-funded helicopters sprayed chemicals over hundreds of thousands of hectares. Meanwhile, the Colombian military carried out a vicious counter-insurgency campaign against the FARC. Sometimes soldiers inflated body counts by dressing the bodies of dead civilians in camouflage. More than three thousand innocent people died, according to human-rights groups. Displaced coca farmers razed as much as a million hectares of native forest. After six years and nearly five billion dollars in U.S. assistance, the Colombian government had weakened the guerrillas and the paramilitaries. The country's murder rate fell sharply. Coca cultivation rose for a few years and then declined as production shifted back toward Peru. Today, Colombia is the U.S.'s staunchest ally in South America.

The drug war has split in two, and there are increasing differences in how it is fought. In August, the Department of Justice advised federal prosecutors that while possessing a small amount of marijuana remains a federal crime, it is not an "enforcement priority." A majority of U.S. citizens support decriminalizing the possession of marijuana, and Colorado and Washington have passed ballot measures legalizing it. "People see a war as a war on them," Gil Kerlikowske, the current drug czar, told the *Wall Street Journal*, in 2009. "We're not at war with people in this country." The Obama Administration has managed to briefly lift a ban on the use of federal funds for needle-exchange programs and reduced sentencing disparities between crack and powder cocaine. Recently, the President commuted the sentences of eight inmates who had been convicted of crack-cocaine offenses, perhaps signalling a new approach; more than three hundred and twenty thousand people remain incarcerated on drug charges.

Overseas, however, the U.S. approach to drugs still looks a lot like war. The D.E.A., assisted by the U.S. military, acts as an international police force, coördinating with foreign militaries through a network of offshore bases. Of the twenty-five billion dollars that the federal government spent fighting drugs last year, forty per cent went to treatment and prevention programs. The rest went to "supply reduction." In Mexico, the $1.9 billion Mérida Initiative has relied on an enforcement-driven strategy somewhat similar to Plan Colombia's. In 2006, President Felipe Calderón decided to deploy the Mexican military to fight drug cartels; since then, more than seventy thousand people have been killed in drug-related violence. Another twenty-six thousand people were reported missing. At least ninety per cent of U.S.-bound cocaine continues to move through the country. In Washington, one of Mérida's most prominent faces is Assistant Secretary of State William Brownfield, formerly Ambassador to Colombia and Venezuela, who was also instrumental in organizing Operation Anvil. In June, Brownfield told a Senate subcommittee that the criteria for judging Mérida's

success should shift from "inputs" (aircraft, equipment, and training) to "outputs" (homicide rate, conviction rate, interdictions). "If the endgame is perfection, we'll never get there," Brownfield said. "At least, not in this world."

In Congress, some are losing patience. "There is great fatigue surrounding our drug programs in the Western Hemisphere," a staff member told me. "We don't have good ideas. We don't have good answers. We don't have good anything. But we also know that doing nothing is a problem. So the whole thing is on autopilot. When you're in the machine, it's very difficult to say anything other than 'Keep shooting. Keep decapitating the cartels.' "

"The war on drugs has simply not worked," George P. Shultz, who served as Secretary of State under Reagan, told me. "It hasn't kept drugs out of this country." In 2011, Shultz, along with a committee of former heads of state, businessmen, and retired U.S. officials, called for an overhaul of U.S. drug-enforcement policy. The effects of interdiction programs like Anvil, they wrote, "are negated almost instantly," wasting money that would be better spent on treatment and harm reduction. I asked Shultz why ineffectual policies have persisted. "We haven't felt the full effects of it ourselves," he said. "It took us twelve years to learn that Prohibition wasn't working. There was Al Capone, there was the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. The violence was here. Now we have outsourced the violence, in effect, to Mexico and Guatemala and Honduras."

The origin of the name of the Miskitu people is unclear. The number of theories about it seems roughly equal to the number of note-taking visitors. Some natives say that Miskitu comes from Miskut, a warrior who led their indigenous ancestors on the coast, where they mixed with pirates and shipwrecked slaves. Others say it refers to an old phrase meaning "they who cannot be dislodged." Still others say that the Miskitu got their name from "musket." The word and the gun arrived in the seventeenth century, carried by European traders to what is now Honduras and Nicaragua. For centuries, the Miskitu maintained control of their territory, assisted by an alliance with England. They used their muskets against Spanish colonists and chased runaway slaves in Jamaica, at the governor's behest. The British rewarded them with a treaty of protection and recognized a line of Miskitu kings. The king's "suit and cap, gifts of the English, glowed like hot coals," one Miskitu elder told an anthropologist. But, by the nineteenth century, the idea of an independent Miskitu nation struck the United States as preposterous. In 1856, the U.S. Secretary of State wrote, "The President himself cannot admit as true . . . that the Mosquito Indians are a state or a Government any more than a band of Maroons in the island of Jamaica are a state or Government."

Today, there are as many as two hundred thousand Miskitu living in La

THE FUTURE

The past is no more past
than the future, or so said
Moradian, the unlikely seer
of my senior shop class.

I'll call him John, although
he was never a John or
even a Juan or a Jack,
although his surname—

Moradian—ended with "i-a-n,"
which is Ian in Scotland,
the Gaelic version of John.
Our John, John Moradian,

gone sixty-seven years ago
from our schoolboy class
into the wider world
of war where his one-way

ticket got punched.
I would start this again
if I could, start quietly
with a Dougie or an Alan,

both of whom made it into
their thirties, though neither
ever spoke of the past being
anything but over with.

What they actually thought
I'll never know. One spring day
the whole class went by bus
to the foundry at Ford Rouge

to see earth melted and poured
like syrup into fire. "Look up,"
someone said, maybe Dougie
or Alan, so I did, and saw

way up above the collisions
of metal and men a family
of sparrows in the trapped light,
trapped themselves, or perhaps

out to reclaim their lost space.
Speaking of perhaps, perhaps
I'm dawdling because I haven't
seen John or Alan or Dougie

in over fifty years. Perhaps
I just like repeating their names
as though that could help them
or perhaps help me, and it does,

it helps me. They're beyond
my help. Later the class
picnicked on egg salad
beside a wide stream that fed

our filthy river. Alan,
or maybe it was Dougie,
managed to cross the water
leaping from rock to rock

and then back again,
his balance was that good.
Alan, or maybe Dougie,
whoever had crossed, dared me

to try, but I knew enough
even then not to. I remember
the sky darkening in the east,
the bus arriving with the rain,

the windows steaming up
to hide the flooded streets.
I remember I sat next to Alan
who lied a blue streak

about an older girl who owned
her own car. The bus driver
lost the way and had to stop
at a filling station in Delray

to get directions, so the trip
was endless. I got back before
nightfall, but the day kept going
on and on into the future.

—*Philip Levine*

Moskitia, a nearly five-hundred-mile stretch of Caribbean coastline. The only steady employment is lobster-diving. In season, experienced divers can earn fifty dollars a day, descending a hundred feet or more to retrieve lobster from the ocean floor with hooks made of rebar and wire. For years, many lobstermen worked *a pulmón*, by lung. In almost every village, there are former lobster divers with their legs frozen in place, pulling themselves along on hand-cranked tricycles. "There's nothing special that makes Miskitu suited for this work," one diver told me. "We are the ones who are willing, that's all."

There are no paved roads connecting La Moskitia to the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, and the Miskitu maintain their claim to independence. The Miskitu people "have not relinquished their sovereignty . . . by defeat, treaty or vote," Bernard Nietschmann, the region's foremost scholar, wrote, in "The Unknown War." Nietschmann advised the Miskitu in negotiations toward the end of the Contra war, after the C.I.A. used at least a thousand Miskitu in a guerrilla campaign against the leftist government of Nicaragua.

In the spring of last year, Clara Wood, a fifty-year-old Miskitu woman, decided to return to Ahuas, the village where she was born. For the past seven years, she had lived in Roatán, a resort island off the north coast of Honduras, in a small apartment that she shared with her husband and three of her children; a cousin, Vera González, her husband, and their two daughters; and one other couple. Clara and Vera handled the housework, their children attended public school, and the men brought in money. "Any job they can get, they do it," Clara said. "If you don't have money, you don't eat."

Clara had not seen her mother for about a year. She missed the fine wooden house that her husband had built for her, near the end of a dirt road, raised high on stilts to let the breeze in. On clear nights, she slept in a hammock on her front porch. In Ahuas, she told me, people "don't steal and kill like Tegucigalpa and other places. The way you see them is the way they are."

The cousins decided that they would travel to Ahuas after the school year. Their husbands would join them later. On May 9th, they and three of their children, with their household possessions, boarded the Captain Gabo, a lobster boat bound for the Honduran mainland.

The Captain Gabo's overnight trip passed through coastal waters that cocaine-laden speedboats have used since the nineties, when the U.S. pushed trafficking routes out of the Caribbean's deeper waters. It was around this time that fishermen found the first twenty-four-kilo *fardos* of cocaine, jettisoned during high-speed chases, washed up on the shore. Some women were said to have mistaken the substance for flour at first and used it to make tortillas, but it soon came to be known as "white lobster." Some lobster divers began smoking crack to steel themselves against the

cold depths. They paid for the cocaine with lobsters, which were carried back to the coast of Colombia and sold at seaside restaurants. In 1999, fishermen were selling found cocaine for three hundred dollars per kilo. Today, the price is roughly twenty times as high.

The Captain Gabo laid anchor within sight of Barra Patuca, a village at the mouth of the Río Patuca. Clara could see the Miskitu stilt houses, and the cattle standing in the shallows of the silty water. Onshore, she sought out Hilda Lezama, a stout middle-aged woman who, for many years, had been ferrying Miskitu divers down the Río Patuca to the sea, returning upriver to Ahuas with passengers.

Clara and Vera had brought a stove, chairs, canned food, and sacks of used clothing that they planned to sell. Hilda's husband, Melaño, loaded the cargo into the boat, assisted by his son-in-law, Emerson Martínez, who had recently served in the Honduran Army and had built a house beside the Lezamas' house in Ahuas. The boat was a rented *pipante*, a long riverboat, painted turquoise with two red stripes. At 8 P.M. on May 10th, as the helicopters were leaving La Ceiba, the boat set off for Ahuas with thirteen passengers. The sky was clear and the moon was nearly full. Emerson stood at the bow, using the beam of a flashlight to point out pieces of floating debris. Clara sat in the middle, between two piles of her cargo. Her youngest son, Hasked, sat near the bow and watched the banks scroll by. Fourteen years old, he loved soccer and pop music. Clara still called him "my baby."

As the turquoise boat made its way up the Patuca, Hilda received a phone call from its owner, one of the leading merchants in Ahuas. He said that he needed the boat for a trip upriver to the town of Palacio, where he was working on cell-phone antennas, Hilda recalls. She told him that she expected to arrive just after 2 A.M.

Clara wrapped herself in a blanket and rested against a sack of clothing. She awoke some time later to a loud noise. Helicopters and a plane circled above.

The helicopters seemed to panic Melaño. His steering became erratic, and the boat swerved from side to side. Some passengers shouted at Emerson not to turn on his flashlight. "Then they starting shooting at us," Clara says. "*Buh buh buh buh bum! Buh buh buh buh bum!*" She shouted for them to stop. She called out her son's name. He did not answer. Then she was in the water. Near the riverbank, she came upon two other passengers, both young men, one with bullet wounds. Clara pulled herself out of the river. She ran to the landing, where the D.E.A. agents and the Honduran forces met her with guns drawn. "Don't kill me!" she said. The men searched Clara, found nothing, and let her go. She ran to a house near the water and telephoned Hilda's son, Hilder. The security forces intercepted him and demanded that he take them to a house that had gasoline. Hilder brought a can of gas down to the water and piloted two members of the counter-narcotics force downriver, where they met up with the stranded boat carrying the drugs. The turquoise boat was nowhere to be seen. Hilder pleaded with the men to help him look for his mother. He says that the men refused. (A spokesperson for the D.E.A. says that the security forces were never asked for such help.)

Around 5 A.M., the State Department helicopters set off for the refuelling base with the cocaine on board. They left behind the Lezamas' passengers. A crowd of villagers, mostly family members of the missing, had gathered near the landing. Two boats set off to search for the injured and the dead. They found Hilda Lezama unconscious, tangled in the branches at the water's edge. Bullets had cut two deep channels across her thighs. Soon, the bodies of three passengers were pulled out of the water and laid on the landing—Candelaria Trapp, Juana Jackson, and Hilda's son-in-law Emerson Martínez. The crowd grew. Somebody slapped the justice of the peace, and three houses said to be owned by men connected to the drug trade were burned down. The mob marched to the center of town, where they surrounded the police station, waving sticks and machetes, until soldiers arrived by helicopter and ordered them to go home.

Clara resumed searching for Hasked the following day. That night, in the port town of Brus Laguna, she received a phone call. They had pulled Hasked's body from the river and carried him to her home. "When I found him, he was in a plastic bag," she said. "I could not take him out of the bag, because he was rotting. I buried him that way."

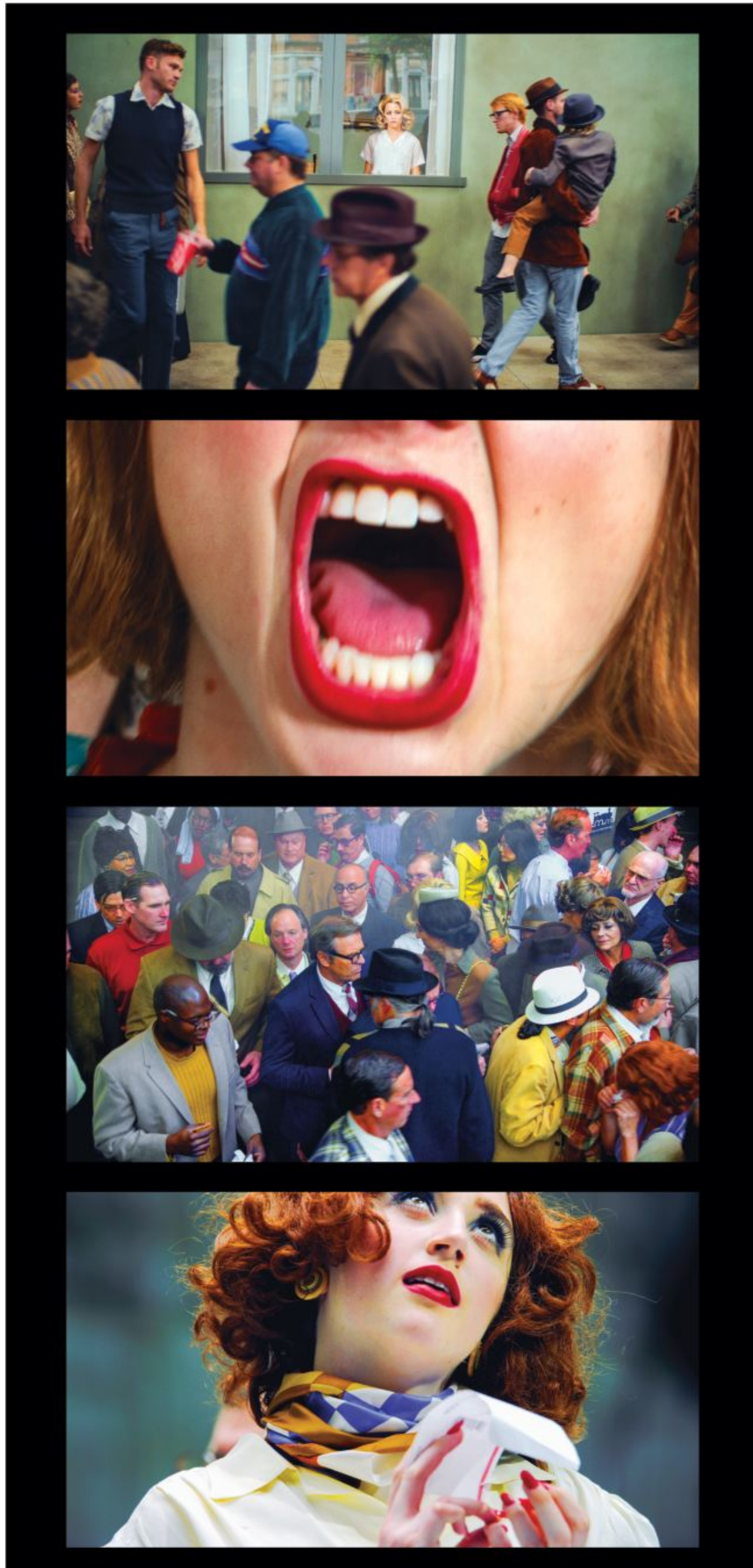
About a mile from the river landing, within sight of a pair of cold-water mosquito-net hotels, is Ahuas's *palacio municipal*, a single-story building of painted concrete. The mayor, Lucio Baquedano, is middle-aged, with a long mustache and wary sun-pinched eyes. One of the few Ahuas residents who is not Miskitu, he came to the area as a soldier, more than thirty years ago. Taped to the wall of his narrow paper-strewn office is a quote from Plato: "The man without laws resembles the wildest animal."

Early on the morning of May 11th, Baquedano looked out from the veranda of his two-story house and saw the helicopters. "I assumed they were chasing them," he said, referring to the traffickers with pronouns, as do most people in Ahuas. "They don't use people from here. You see them—they come in groups. They stay for a short time, maybe two or three nights in a hotel. For this operation they bought a house."

A few hours later, the families of the injured passengers asked him to arrange for a plane to take them to a hospital. He received a report from his son, who lives in Tegucigalpa: the Honduran border police had said there was a successful counter-narcotics operation in the department of Gracias a Dios. There was no mention of U.S. involvement. By late morning, Baquedano was on national radio. He said that innocent people had been killed, and demanded an investigation. On Tuesday, May 15th, the front page of the *Diario Tiempo*, one of Honduras's national newspapers, carried the headline "THE DEAD IN LA MOSKITIA WERE NOT NARCOS, AUTHORITIES SAY."

In Ahuas, the villagers' anger flowed in every direction—toward the local authorities, the Army, the drug traffickers, the Americans. Two days after the mob set fire to the houses, the Mayor held an emergency meeting for the entire village. Only a few dozen showed up, but they agreed that the traffickers' construction of illegal landing strips had to stop. Downriver, in Brus Laguna, a group of Miskitu tribal councils issued a statement demanding that U.S. and Honduran forces leave their land. They accused the

COURTESY LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG



SHOWCASE BY ALEX PRAGER *Stills from "Face in the Crowd," a three-channel video installation by the Los Angeles-based artist, which accompanies an exhibition of her photographs, opening on January 9th at the Lehmann Maupin gallery. Most of the works will be concurrently on view at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C.*

U.S. of "invasion" and "the slaughter of innocent people." The government deployed soldiers throughout the department to inspect cargo at river landings and maintain order in the streets.

A week after the incident, a report by a Honduran deputy police commissioner said that the shootings were caused by "confusion." The security forces had mistaken household cargo for drugs. The U.S. Embassy maintained that the Lezamas' boat had opened fire on the security forces, and that the Honduran members of the anti-drug team—not the D.E.A. agents—had fired back. That account prevailed in stories filed by foreign reporters, who described the incident as a "shoot-out" or a "firefight."

By June, the controversy had reached Capitol Hill. In response to questions from the press and Congress, the D.E.A. screened video taken by the surveillance plane of the incident's most crucial moments. The briefings were led by Richard Dobrich, a decorated Afghanistan veteran and former Navy SEAL, who heads the FAST program. Dobrich told the congressional staffers that the Lezamas' boat was working with the drug traffickers. There had been an exchange of gunfire, he said, and the Honduran security forces responded to shots coming from the Lezamas' boat.

A Senate aide who was at the briefing told me, "It was not obvious to me that what they described was what was in the video. It was very difficult to make out details." A congressional staff member agreed. "Very few questions were taken," he said. "The story that was out there at the time was entirely different from what we saw." Later, having become more familiar with the shooting, the Senate aide said, "I am not aware of anyone in the Honduran government or the State Department who, after reviewing the case, believes that the evidence establishes that the people in the boat fired at the agents."

In January, fifty-eight members of Congress sent a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder and others, requesting more information about the incident in Ahuas. Six months later, Eric Akers, deputy chief of the D.E.A.'s congressional-affairs office, responded, writing that there had been "an exchange of gunfire." Evidence that I saw in Tegucigalpa, including official case files containing interviews with Honduran members of the anti-drug team who were at the scene, raises serious questions about the accuracy of Akers's letter to Congress. Not only did the alleged cross fire miss all three members of the anti-drug team, according to a report by the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights, but their boat "showed no signs of gunshots." The Lezamas' boat had nineteen bullet holes. "We don't have any evidence that the people in the boat had weapons on them," an attorney in the Honduran prosecutor's office said. The five surviving passengers with whom I spoke all said that there were no firearms on board.

I was not able to speak with three key witnesses who were on the boat with the drugs—the D.E.A. agent, the Honduran police inspector, and the lower-ranking policeman. But a bullet recovered from the body of one of the Lezamas' passengers was "an exact match" for the policeman's rifle, according to the Honduran prosecutor's report. A second bullet did not match any of the Hondurans' weapons. "I don't know who shot, but I did hear shooting," the policeman said. "I don't know," the inspector said, when investigators asked the source of the shots. "No one from my team that I know of." Despite repeated requests, none of the D.E.A. agents have given statements to the Honduran government, nor have Honduran investigators been allowed to conduct ballistics tests on the FAST squad's weapons. (The D.E.A. has

honored the terms of its bilateral agreements relating to Operation Anvil, a spokesperson said.) In a letter to Michele Leonhart, the Administrator of the D.E.A., Senator Patrick Leahy, of Vermont, wrote, "I remain troubled by what appears to be a failure to thoroughly and critically assess the role that the D.E.A. played in the operation and its aftermath."

Forensic analysis of the video that depicts the fatal shootings could possibly determine whether the "flashes of light," as the Honduran prosecutor's report called them, are consistent with gunfire, and whether they came from one boat or both. The D.E.A. has declined to release the video, and a spokesperson also refused to give an on-the-record account of what happened at Ahuas or respond to a list of twenty-two written questions. In August, 2012, I filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the video and related documents. A year later, having received no response from the D.E.A., I filed a federal lawsuit, which is now pending.

The Ahuas controversy came at a sensitive moment for the United States. In June, 2009, the Honduran President, Manuel Zelaya, was deposed in a military coup. The U.S. said initially that it would not recognize elections the repressive interim government held six months later, but it eventually decided to support the winner, Porfirio Lobo. (Lobo's conservative National Party prevailed against Zelaya's wife in the 2013 Presidential election.) During weeks of street protests, the new government fought to consolidate its control of the cities, a campaign that aggravated the already volatile security climate in Honduras. Mexican and Colombian traffickers took advantage of the chaos by strengthening their ties to Honduran élites and increasing shipments. Among the underpaid police, some resorted to friendly extortion; others hired themselves out or formed death squads. In 2012, there were more than seven thousand killings in Honduras—the highest murder rate in the world. The workers in the morgues of the larger cities learned where to collect the bodies each morning. "If you have a problem with the groups in power, the state will not respond," Julieta Castellanos, the rector of Honduras's National University, said. Her son was killed by police at a checkpoint in 2011. "Then you know what the real state is like."

By late 2012, the Ahuas case was one of several problems dogging U.S. efforts in Honduras. In July, 2012, the Honduran Air Force shot down two suspected drug planes without following warning protocols. The U.S. stopped sharing radar intelligence. Then Alberto Arce, of the Associated Press, began to publish a series of reports, cataloguing abuses by the Honduran National Police and allegations that the chief, Juan Carlos Bonilla, once had ties to death squads. Senator Leahy placed a hold on foreign aid for Honduras; ten million dollars has still not been released. In October, the head of the U.S. Southern Command met with the leaders of the Honduran military, and U.S. radar sharing resumed the following month. Also in October, Lisa Kubiske, the U.S. Ambassador to Honduras, flew to Puerto Lempira, the provincial capital of Gracias a Dios, where she announced a new U.S.-funded educational program for La Moskitia's children, to be conducted in their native language. In November, Arce reported on a killing that occurred two weeks after the ones in Ahuas. An unarmed fifteen-year-old boy was shot and killed by Honduran soldiers after he failed to stop at a military checkpoint in Tegucigalpa. The U.S. had vetted the soldiers, trained the leader of the squad in Fort Benning, Georgia, and paid for the Ford truck that chased the boy down. "Everyone who does not stop at a military checkpoint is involved in something," the head of the Army told the local press.

Washington's behavior in Honduras appears to be undermining the lessons it wishes to teach. A Honduran police officer told me that the anti-drug teams did not preserve evidence at the scene of another fatal Anvil interdiction, in June, 2012, where a FAST member reportedly shot and killed a drug trafficker who was reaching for his gun. "When we got to the scene, they have the weapons ready for us," he said, showing me an image from his cell phone of rifles laid out on the ground. "But why are the weapons together? Why can't we determine if these weapons were actually carried there? This is an alteration of the scene." He shook his head. "All they care about is the drugs. Not who dies, not the evidence, not the legal procedures. Just the drugs."

United States drug policy was built on the premise that drugs are inherently evil. Even occasional users, Edwin Meese said, in 1985, are "supporting those who deal in terror, torture, and death." He continued, "There are no neutrals in this country's war on drugs." In La Moskitia, the infrastructure for moving cocaine overlaps with civilian life in ways that make it hard to draw such clear moral lines. Bishop Sam Gray, a Moravian missionary who lived in Ahuas for six years, told me about a woman in a nearby village who was offered two hundred dollars to cut down a tree on her property so that traffickers could lengthen a landing strip. When the woman refused, they made a similar deal with a landowner at the strip's other end. "There were no repercussions," Gray said. "In Ahuas, you go about your business. Everybody knows who the folks involved are, and you don't avoid them in public life."

In the Nicaraguan part of La Moskitia, some village elders assigned profits from found cocaine to churches and public works. For a time, cocaine was called the "blessing of God." Gray told me that the men who transported cocaine by boat sometimes asked local pastors to pray for their safety. "When they come back, it's expected that they're going to show their appreciation for that," he said. "Do you refuse to pray for someone?" In the late nineties, the influence of money from cocaine led the Moravian Church to discipline twenty-seven Honduran pastors and contributed to a split within the church in Ahuas. "Drug trafficking was a Trojan-horse kind of thing," Gray said. "It was seen as a blessing that's dropped on us from the outside. And then you suddenly realize it's not all that it's supposed to be."

In Ahuas, cocaine traffic was controlled by an outsider known as El Renco—"the lame one"—or simply as El Padrón. A Honduran police report gives his name as Danilo Peña. He is said to be a short man who walks with a limp. Though Peña has seldom been seen in

Ahuas since the shootings, the few people who are willing to talk about him do so quietly. Even the policemen are afraid. "People get killed for making statements," one of them told me. "All the information I give you can go on the Internet."

One afternoon in August of 2012, along with a translator, I visited the river landing, half an hour's walk from the center of Ahuas. More than thirty boats were floating in the river. Villagers carried away loads of timber, soda, gasoline, propane, and livestock. There were five houses in the vicinity, but no one could recall any contact with the traffickers on the night of May 10th, except for a teenage boy wearing flip-flops and a baseball cap. He said that some of the village's Miskitu leaders spoke with the drug traffickers that night and told them to take the product out of the village. As the helicopters hovered overhead, the traffickers "took cover under a house," he said. "They asked us to hide them. We said no, because we would get in trouble if we did."

Mayor Baquedano had told me that we were welcome to visit the airstrips, or *pistas*. "Just ask around," he said. "Everyone knows where they are." We hired a man to drive us into town. He had just moved to Ahuas from the city of San Pedro Sula, he said, and seemed eager to make new acquaintances. I said we wanted to see a *pista*, and he agreed to show us one. We turned off the main road and onto a dirt track. After a few kilometres, we reached a creek spanned by a rotten wooden bridge, where we parked. Our driver led us to a long stretch of meadow. The narrow *pista* was all but invisible. Two rows of knee-high branches sharpened into stakes lined the runway. Walking back to the car, we saw the charred skeleton of a small airplane poking out from the edge of the forest. Returning to Ahuas, our driver pointed out the house of a prosperous merchant. "He's the one who used to lend the boats so they could take the drugs," he said. "He's the only one left who used to work with them. They wanted to burn his house, too, but he managed to calm them down somehow."

Some *pistas* are as smooth as soccer fields, with centerlines of packed dirt. Last year, the Honduran Army began Operation Armadillo, identifying the *pistas* from the air and returning with ground crews and dynamite to blow them open. Between February and July of 2012, Armadillo disabled fifty airstrips, according to Colonel Ronald Rivera Amador, of the Honduran Army, who ran the program from the provincial capital. But the traffickers patched up the holes with truckloads of sand and constructed new *pistas* that are invisible from the air—nothing more than a stretch of ground, cleared of rocks and levelled with a tractor. When the drugs are due to arrive, the receiving party lights up the *pista* with two rows of headlights or torches. The drugs continue their journey by boat, or overland, through Guatemala and Mexico. "There are so many routes that it becomes a maze," Amador, who used to command the Army base in Puerto Lempira, told me. The traffickers "use Miskitu to load and unload the drugs, but not for security," Amador said. "For that they use people from the interior."

We saw the driver again the next day. "El Padrón knows that you visited the airstrip," he said. We asked if it was safe to stay in Ahuas. "Ehh . . . ," he replied. "That man there"—he pointed out the window—"he is in direct contact with El Padrón. I told him you were prospectors looking at oil deposits."

"Where is El Padrón now?" we asked.

"In hiding," the driver said. "He has houses all over the country."

That night, we told an officer from a Miskitu council about our trespass. "Don't worry," he said. "I will explain who you are and what you are trying to do here." The tribal council, he said, was the real power in La Moskitia. He compared it to a hawk, moving hundreds of miles when necessary, quickly responding to threats, always returning to the same spot. "We protect the Mayor," he said.

Despite the burning of the houses and the resolution against *pistas*, the official position of the tribal councils on drug trafficking is a work in progress. "We have a policy of not getting involved," the officer said. "Each person chooses to participate or not, according to his own conscience." A senior leader of the Miskitu organization Masta, in Gracias a Dios, was more emphatic. "Masta says they don't want it," he told me. "They reject it." Nonetheless, he believed that cocaine would continue moving through Miskitu territory. "Not even the Americans can stop it," he said. "Because of business. Money is the strongest thing in the world. The only one who can stop these things is God."

A few days later, Melaño Lezama took a boatload of passengers from Barr Patuca to Ahuas. We went along with him. Hilda, whose legs were still healing, handled the arrangements with the divers from Ahuas. Her nephew took Emerson's place at the bow. At sunset, the birds and the insects along the Patuca's banks sounded like an orchestra tuning up. Soon, all that was visible of Melaño was the orange glow from the tip of his cigarette. We reached the landing at Ahuas, and he busied himself with unloading his passengers' cargo—dry beans, fruit, sacks of clothes. The next morning, we spoke in his living room. The Miskitu officer translated his account into Spanish and helped him sketch a diagram. Melaño said that the helicopters had made him panic. He was trying to steer his boat out of trouble, toward the bank, when the other boat suddenly appeared. Then the helicopter started shooting. "I've worked for thirty years travelling the river," he said. "Nothing like this has ever happened. When I pass the spot, I start remembering. I feel scared, but there is no other way for me. I have to keep working."

Clara Wood buried her son in Ahuas. Soon afterward, her husband joined her at their stilt house. Clara has a few things from Roatán that were fished out of the water—a table, a bowl, a five-gallon bucket—all made of plastic and punctured by what look to be bullet holes. In her photographs, Hasked flashes a bright grin. Clara told me that she wants to open a small café in the school he would have attended. "I'm going to do it in order to keep myself busy," she said. "Not to be sad all the time."

In November of 2012, I visited the base where the helicopters refuelled on their way back from Ahuas. Just beyond the fence around the base's perimeter was the shifting map of La Moskitia—"the battlespace," a U.S. Army officer had called it. "The local communities see the helicopters landing, the ongoing operations," a U.S. soldier on the base told me. "They are deterred." Similarly, U.S. Ambassador Kubiske has said

that villages, like superpowers, respond to shows of force. "These are not innocent communities," she said at a public event in September, in response to a question about Ahuas. "These are communities in which people find it not dangerous, perhaps, to help the drug traffickers who live there. Afterwards, many more people began to think that it was dangerous. We've seen some changes in behavior."

In the U.S., a gram of pure cocaine is worth roughly four grams of gold. Cocaine is harder to ship but much easier to produce than gold; making it from coca leaves is about as complicated as making corn syrup from corn. The amount of coca needed to supply the global market is relatively small: a plantation of two hundred thousand hectares, roughly half the size of Long Island, would be enough. For thirty years, the U.S. has chased this plantation around the Western Hemisphere.

In the late eighteen-thirties, an imperial commissioner in China named Lin Zexu arrested dealers, and destroyed more than a million kilos of opium. But the British East India Company, which brought the drug from India, went to war, forced China to reopen its ports, and resumed importing enough opium to satisfy the millions of users. This began what is known in China as the Century of National Humiliation.

More than a hundred years later, Mao Zedong adopted a more ruthless version of Lin Zexu's approach, tearing up fields, breaking pipes, and executing dealers. In some provinces, addicts were required to register with the local police, and there were rumors that anyone who had ever smoked opium would be rounded up and killed. At the beginning of Mao's reign, more than twenty million Chinese smoked opium. Within a few years, opium use in mainland China had all but disappeared.

Why did Mao succeed where Lin Zexu had failed? The victory was due in part to Mao's characteristic willingness to terrorize his people. But even more important were changes in the supply chain. In 1890, poppy cultivation was legalized, and soon domestic opium production exploded. During the Second World War, the Japanese colonized eastern China, planted opium, and encouraged consumption. By the mid-forties, when they left, almost all of the Chinese opium supply was homegrown. Mao did not have to argue with foreign governments, or bribe them, or send his armies abroad to burn the crops of indigent farmers, only to have them replant the moment he was gone. Unlike Lin Zexu, he could attack both the demand and the supply sides of the opium trade within the borders of his own country.

In La Moskitia, the U.S. acts through the Honduran government, which must itself wage a kind of foreign campaign. A boat ride away from Ahuas in Brus Laguna, the Honduran Army has an outpost on the edge of town. Painted over the barracks' wooden shutters is a flag, split along the diagonal between the five stars of Honduras and the U.S. Stars and Stripes. On the morning we visited, dogs and roosters wandered around the yard, and soldiers washed themselves from a water tank. The commanding officer, Captain Abraham Hernández, took us to a table in the shade. "What we lack is will from the people," he said. "Whenever there's a crash nearby, the whole community goes out to look for the drugs. They say they're going fishing."

The next day, Hernández borrowed a boat from the mayor, and we set off across a nearby lagoon with a few of his soldiers. Long ago, its marshy backwaters had been a pirate sanctuary. Recently, Hernández said, there had been violent "confrontations" with traffickers. An hour later, we arrived at an impressive *pista*—fifteen hundred metres of level ground concealed by high grass. Beside it were the remains of five airplanes. In its center was a circle of sand, where the military had gouged open the *pista*. The traffickers had returned, Hernández said, and filled in the hole. At the moment, there was not much he could do. The base in Brus Laguna was eight hours' walk away. He would file a report with his superior in the provincial capital. ♦

FIRST HUSBAND

ANTONYA NELSON

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRANT CORNETT

"Lovey," her husband said gently, which was his way. "It's for you." The velvet blackness of 2 A.M., of nearly death-deep sleep: the ringing telephone had been a fire alarm in her dream; reluctantly, she'd exited an unfamiliar building but not awakened, hovering in some liminal space. The building was filled with naked bodies, and she wished to return to them and their naughty party. "Lovey," her husband said again, and she was livid with him, with his dull insistence, forcing her to attend to him when what she wanted to do was run back inside the burning building. "Lovey," he said a third time, and then the light snapped on.

On the phone was Bernadette, her former stepdaughter. Her ex-husband's youngest and most difficult girl, who was busy apologizing, as usual.

"I'm so sorry, but he's been drinking," Bernadette was saying of her delinquent husband. "I need to find him before something happens. I mean, he can't afford to get arrested again."

"I can be there in twenty minutes."

"Actually? I'm sorry, but could I bring the kids to you? If he comes home, I don't want them to see him. You know, it's just so hard to have a conversation with kids around. Or a fight, for that matter, which is probably what's going to happen. God, I'm really so fucking sorry, Lovey. . . ."

"Bring them, please, it's fine—you should never worry about that." Sleep and dreams had fallen away, along with, she suddenly realized, her first husband, whose hand she'd been holding in the burning building. Had he been nude, too? That wouldn't have been like him, naked in public.

"I'm already in the car with them," Bernadette said. "I was thinking I could start on Central and just see if he's parked on some barstool or other. Please don't tell Dad, O.K.? I mean, he already thinks I'm a total fuckup and he hates Aaron enough. Plus, he'll tell my sisters." And then she was crying. Poor Bernadette. Had the girl ever not been miserable? Even as a child, she had cultivated hurtful friendships, had forever been suffering slights or neglect or flat-out cruelty, this girl like a loyal beaten dog.

"Honey, I would never tell your dad. We're not exactly on speaking terms. Bring the kids. I'm up. Don't worry."

"Actually?" Bernadette said. "I'm in your driveway. God, Lovey, I'm really, really sorry!"

The seven-year-old carried the diaper bag and a backpack, tilted sideways under the load, while his mother brought in the two car seats holding his sleeping sisters. "God, it smells like snow out there! How often does that happen at this time of year? I pumped," Bernadette explained in a whisper. "Give Lovey the breast milk," she told Caleb. The boy produced a pair of tepid yellowish Baggies. There was always something a little unsavory about dealing with breast milk. Maybe if Lovey had had her own babies she wouldn't have felt this way.

The girls were left in their car seats on the living-room rug, which seemed wrong, somehow, people lashed into chairs, especially the three-year-old, whose big head looked unnaturally perpendicular in a way that would lead to a terrible neck ache. On the other hand, the girls were sure to scream if wakened.

Bernadette was squinting at her cell phone, lips moving as she read something there. "Shit, he's with Lance—that can't end well. So I think she'll be good till maybe, like, four?" She pressed her hand into each breast, checking. "You could just nuke a bottle for her then. And Caleb—I don't think he'll sleep, but he could watch Looney Tunes, maybe? With no sound? Will you watch Looney Tunes on mute so Lovey can go back to bed, honey?"

"Don't worry about us," Lovey said. "We'll play Monotony." Lovey was the only person who would indulge Caleb's fondness for Monopoly. The boy had been her first grandchild, born the year she divorced his grandfather, when she was a mere thirty-seven—far too young to be called Grandma! In public she was often mistaken for his mother, and it was for Caleb that she'd come up with an acceptable nickname, Lovey, to take the place of Evelyn. He was a serious boy, a boy who hadn't spoken until he could do so in complete sentences, who'd said, quite frankly, after the birth of each of his sisters, that he did not like them. "How's your new sister?" somebody would ask. "Terrible," he'd reply. His feelings were so readily hurt. He was like his mother that way, a child too tender, who bruised. Nor did he laugh easily.

"Please don't think I'm a fuckup," Bernadette pleaded as she whirled her way toward the door. "And tell William I'm sorry I woke him. Be good, Caleb. I love you."

Caleb was already laying out the game board, counting money, and stacking up the Chance cards. He looked like his grandfather, Lovey's first husband—the same thick copper-colored hair, the large brown eyes and plush lips. Her first husband had been forty-five, at the tail end of his fruitful handsomeness, when she married him but still moving through the world with the confidence of a man who'd bedded a lot of women, all but the first few—when he was a beginner, on the receiving end of a romantic education—younger than him; he was a serial seducer. Lovey had been his third wife; perhaps she could have predicted that she would not succeed where two others had failed, but that was the nature of love, and of youth, and the combination, youthful love—they made you arrogant, or stubborn, impervious to the lessons of others.

If you paid attention to all the lessons of others, you might never do anything.

Caleb handed Lovey the dog. He was always the hat. "I want to be the banker," he said.

"Fine," she said, though this would make it more difficult for her to guarantee that he won. But that was the challenge in raising children, wasn't it? Insuring that your ability to deceive kept pace with their ability to see through you. At what point were you able to come completely clean? Could you ever, for example, reveal to children that parents did not, actually, love their offspring equally? Her ex-husband had preferred his eldest, the prettiest, the strongest. And Lovey? She'd always been partial to needy Bernadette. Bernadette's sisters had found their stepmother lacking. She was so young. For a while, it had been fun to play the hip young mother, the one who shared clothing with them, who liked their music, the four of them ganging up on her husband, their father, who was old, so old! So old-fashioned! So out of date! So shockable! But he wasn't, not really, and at some point his indulgence began to falter, his paternal tolerance turned tense, at least as it regarded Lovey, because eventually she was no

longer his pretty young wife; she was, instead, too familiar, too known and knowing, too something he could not even put his finger on, but he no longer wished to have sex with her, no longer found her desirable enough to be *able* to have sex with her. This wasn't willed, he assured her; it wasn't his fault. If she insisted, he could medicate himself into readiness, but did she really want that? Did she, he asked earnestly, want him to fake what he could not naturally feel? Was that the kind of love she wanted?

Yes, she confessed, though only to herself. Yes, that was what she would take, if it was all he could offer.

"You told me to be honest," he said. "This is me being honest."

The first stage of the game was always the best—all that acquisition and possibility, the tidy array of money, the fairness. Caleb knelt in his chair, poised over the colorful board like a gargoyle, rolling for Lovey when she went to check on his sisters, moving her Scottie dog forward, providing her with two hundred dollars whenever Go came around. In order not to land on Boardwalk first, Lovey allowed one of the dice to fall to the floor, claiming a number that put her on Luxury Tax, whatever that was, instead. At last, Caleb acquired his beloved cobalt-blue plot. Later, once it was expensively developed, Lovey would land there an inordinate number of times so that he could fleece her.

Why was it so satisfying to see him win?

It was nice, this strange intimacy in the kitchen at three in the morning, no other light in the house. They were outside of time, Lovey thought, waiting for the rules to kick in again. If it did snow, school might be closed. Albuquerque was not accustomed to weather; Lovey had grown up in the Midwest, where snow days required an actual blizzard, instead of mere flurries or patches of ice. Her first husband had brought her to the desert; she could thank him, she supposed, for that gift. When they parted, he hadn't wanted much of what they'd collected together, in their twelve years. Was that generosity? Guilt? Or simple indifference?

Caleb heard the baby first, his head tipped toward the living room as his hand halted above the board in mid-count. "Forty-five seconds," he told Lovey, meaning the breast milk and the microwave. "I can do it." Lovey took the opportunity while the boy was at the refrigerator to slip a five-hundred-dollar bill from her stack of cash back into the bank.

She could not figure out the car seat's elaborate buckle, so the child's crying became hysterical. Caleb silently undid the clasp, then found the three-year-old's pacifier and stoppered her with it before she fully woke as well. "You're a good

boy," Lovey told him repeatedly. In the kitchen, the warm bottle waited. Lovey had only to sit down and assume the position, the girl's face beside her own breast. While she fed the baby, Caleb played both sides of the game, counting aloud, asking if Lovey wanted to buy the electric company or not. "Not," she said. Her pickiness about property he never questioned. He seemed to accept the idea that he alone knew that buying everything was the secret to success.

Caleb's sisters were utterly unlike their brother. They demanded what they wanted. They entered a room and immediately began competing to be its center of attention, the baby now knocking her head into Lovey's sternum, making fists with her hands and banging at her bottle; if her nails weren't clipped, she'd rake her own face until it bled. They required a lot of attention. They made a great deal of noise. The three-year-old could not be reasoned with; it was useless to try. She did not understand taking turns or sharing, and resorted to crude short-cutting substitutions like grabbing and screaming. "If they were dogs," Caleb had told Lovey of his sisters, "you could put them in a cage."

"If they were dogs," Lovey said, "you could take them to the pound."

When the baby began gagging, Caleb informed Lovey that the bottle was to blame, that the milk came out faster than it did from his mother's breast, that the baby was used to sucking harder, so she choked herself. "Greedy girl," Lovey murmured. "I wonder where your daddy is."

"I don't know," Caleb said. "But he rode his bike and he forgot his helmet."

"Dangerous." Although safer, by far, than driving. Aaron's sobriety was tenuous, court-ordered, the elephant in the room at any family get-together. He would sit meekly at the table studying his sparkling water while others pretended not to be aware of his every sip. Months would pass—a new child would be born, a better job would come along, things would be looking up—and then the phone call in the middle of the night. Bernadette had always loved boys like this, bad boys, attractive and uncontrollable. Her first boyfriend had drowned in a lake after driving a car into it. Some other night, and Bernadette could have been in that car with him. Aaron had probably been friends with that boy—it would make sense. Bernadette hadn't really had a chance to get much past high school. She'd got pregnant with Caleb in her first semester at the U. The child had been responsible for her cleaning up her act and completing that year, her only college experience. In fact, Caleb's arrival had given everyone some distraction. His grandfather had gone—left not only Lovey but his daughters, moved a thousand miles north, and started anew—but in his place was this beautiful, easy child.

Without Aaron, there would be no Caleb. Lovey had to remind herself of this sad fact. Her ex-stepson-in-law caused a lot of trouble, but, because of him, here before her was a boy for her to love, who loved her. Caleb would grow up and perhaps grow away from her—there was no shared blood, and someday he would understand that. Someday he might untie the knots of those prefixes that labelled Lovey, ex- and step-. He would turn into a teen-ager and disappear, like his father, into the night. Lovey had lived through those adolescent years with her first husband's three daughters, each girl more outrageous than the one before, culminating with the spectacular misbehavior of Bernadette, who'd had, it seemed, no kernel of self-control or restraint at her center, who'd run away, totalled vehicles, got arrested, inhaled or smoked or drunk whatever substance anyone handed her, landed in jail, who had perhaps been

unable to find a way to make herself want to continue living.

Until Caleb. The boy had saved her as well.

The baby was still fussy after her bottle, agitated and thrashing. She didn't want a pacifier. She didn't want to be left kicking on the floor under the spell of a musical mobile. She didn't need a new diaper, couldn't be made contented. It was as if she wished to break out of her own skin. Lovey sat her on her lap and the child grabbed up the game tokens, stuffing one into her mouth before either Caleb or Lovey could stop her.

"If she swallows it, we have to wait for it to come out in her poop," Caleb said. "Which is gross."

"Jesus Christ!" Lovey hooked her index finger into the child's mouth, removing the little metal dog. "Maybe she's still hungry," she said over the girl's renewed outrage.

The noise woke the three-year-old, who began wailing from the living room, "Ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-ma!" Her brother went to fetch her, having first pushed the game to the center of the table, out of reach. Lovey put several of her peach and blue hundred- and fifty-dollar bills back in the bank. She also removed a few houses from the long crowded row of red and yellow properties, where she'd become an inadvertent real-estate mogul.

In came sad Celia, not as lovely as her older brother or her little sister, the child who'd lost in the looks lottery, big-featured and big-boned. She also seemed developmentally behind—still wearing diapers, still chewing on a pacifier, still sobbing inarticulately. It felt bad to dislike her, and Lovey would never have admitted to it, but the child irritated her. She sat now on the kitchen floor and continued to wail for her mother. Over and over, the plea, a pitiful mass of green mucus beneath her nose and chin. Lovey had closed the kitchen door to keep William from waking. He had hospital rounds in the morning, in a mere four hours; he needed his sleep. These children did not compel his specific interest, coming into his life, as they had, two or three times removed, these ex-step-in-laws-by-marriage. He had his own children to fret over; their hardships were another whole scenario, ongoing across town, in his former house, with his ex-wife and her new husband.

Lovey got out the candy, the surefire solution, a small pile of M&M's for Celia to take solace in. "Is there enough for me?" Caleb asked.

"Not really," Lovey said. "Just the one snack bag. I have raisins."

"No, thanks." He sighed. Raisins: that was his lot in life.

Even after her second bottle, the baby was not satisfied. Bernadette had predicted 4 A.M., and here it was. Lovey texted her and got no reply.

"There's formula in the bag," Caleb told her, and then proceeded to fix a bottle of it, studying the lines on the bottle, levelling the powder with a knife on the scoop. It made Lovey sad to see him shake up the concoction before microwaving it, and sadder still to watch him test its temperature on his wrist.

A text arrived from Bernadette: "Found him, heading home!"

"Everybody fine here," Lovey wrote back. The beauty of texting: no telltale soundtrack. For the kitchen was loud, both girls miserable, the chocolate gone, the formula apparently not to the baby's taste. She wanted the real thing, from the real source.

"Hey there," William said, announcing himself, hair mashed flat against his temple, shirtless and in gym shorts. Seeing him like this always reminded Lovey that her first husband would never have walked around without a shirt, without his hair combed; he was vain about his body, his age, his aging body. Again, she tried to recall: had he been nude in her dream? He had often taken an apple to bed with him at night, so that he could freshen his breath with a bite first thing in the morning. William gave Lovey a perfunctory stale-smelling peck on the cheek. "What's all the hubbub, bub?" he asked the three-year-old as he stepped over her to get to the coffeemaker.

The child swung her arm out to hit his shin.

"I'm sorry," Lovey said.

"Mercy," William said. "That kid packs a wallop. And you appear to be getting your ass kicked," he said, regarding the game. "I've arrived here not a moment too soon." Lovey's first husband had been known to storm out of dinner parties, to take offense at nothing, to cut off friendships—"Dead to me!" he would de-

"It tastes and smells just like a glass of wine!"

clare. He'd behaved like a child always on the verge of a tantrum. With him, Lovey had had to be careful, to tread lightly, to pay her full attention. All of her friends preferred William. They approved of his jocularity, his slow-moving, steady ways. He'd been an E.R. doc; it had given him perspective. In this dawn kitchen, there was, to his practiced eyes, no real trouble.

"Give me that," William said, taking the baby from Lovey. "Let's try some shock therapy, shall we?" He opened the back door and stepped out into the cold air, which silenced the baby instantaneously. When he brought her back inside and she began to wail again, he did the same thing.

Caleb said, "Maybe you should leave her out there?"

"It'd be tempting if there weren't snow. And then there's *that* one," William said, "sitting in her own filth." This made Caleb laugh, a bright burst of surprised happiness. He would repeat this expression for days, amusing himself with its perfectly droll un-profaneness.

William took over the Monopoly game while Lovey attended to diapers. "What is that pile of cash doing there?" he asked, of the Free Parking money. It wasn't in the rules, but it was tradition. William's children were teen-age boys who played high-school football. That was the sort of father he'd been, one who enjoyed a team and rules. If Caleb had been his son, he'd have had a bristly haircut and would never have been allowed to stay up all night playing Monopoly. If he'd had to play a board game, it would have been something dignified, like chess.

By the time Lovey got back with the freshly clothed girls, Caleb's lip was trembling, something William wouldn't necessarily notice, since he was playing along just to be a good sport, a placeholder. The Free Parking money was gone, she noted.

Lovey let Celia knock the whole enterprise to the floor, a glorious clattering spill of cards and tokens and fluttering cash.

"An act of God," William declared. He stretched and scratched, finished his coffee, gave Lovey a knowing lift of his brow and Caleb a ruffling of his hair, then disappeared into the shower. By the time he returned, the game was under way again and Lovey was nearly destitute.

"You're hopeless, honey," William said, settling at his computer for the news. "Hey, look," he said, swinging the screen around for Lovey to see. For a few seconds, Lovey studied the Facebook photograph: Bernadette in a short dress, holding a cigarette and a beer bottle, Aaron to her right, another man to her left, the two of them equally in possession of her in a flagrantly drugged and drunken state. "Freak blizzard in Duke City!" the caption read, the time imprint only thirty minutes earlier. As a teen-ager, Bernadette had come to Lovey on many an occasion, wasted and weeping, repentant and apologetic, afraid of her mercurial father, claiming again and again that only Lovey understood her. That same girl was in the photograph, her loose sedated face, flanked by the same idle boys, whose reckless seduction she could not resist. And then suddenly the photograph was gone. As if it had been a product of Lovey's imagination, something she had dreamed. "She took it down," William said. "Of course. She realized you'd see it—of course she took it down."

"What?" Caleb asked, monitoring what was happening.

"Let's check with your mom about school," Lovey said. "Maybe you can take the day off."

"I don't want to miss school."

"Maybe it'll be a snow day."

When Bernadette answered, Lovey understood immediately that she was still drunk. "Lovey," she said. "I'm sorry. The good news is I found him, he's fine, but the bad news is we have to talk—it's time to come to Jesus, again."

Lovey's first husband had stolen her best years, keeping her captive during

OBITUARY

Dawn awoke and rose one person down that day.
Across the Universe, the obituary and I
Engulfed a granola-and-yogurt parfait.

I found my focus in his rifle's sights.
I was crossed out in the list
Of his next of kin, in Halifax black-and-white.

He bowled frame upon frame of erect Jesuits.
He changed his name. He synchronized Christ
With deep time, a paleontologist turned priest.

He taught the Inuit not to shiver or shout
When they enunciated pure Canadian:
They traded their own pelts for the cool E.S.L.

He flew to Seoul, to the reggae gymnasium,
To the icebreaker mojito outing,
To twin Filipinas with my features.

I stood sentry and watched my own reëntry,
Expecting a theft, never expecting
To witness myself absconded when I absconded,

Both looter and loot, at night, on foot . . .
What happens to me now, no one can say:
When the sun breaks now it just breaks even;

Somewhere the cock-crow cul-de-sac *alarum* sounds;
The curtain falls and so concludes
My offensive, possibly illegal vaudeville act.

—*Dan Chiasson*

the time that she might, in some other circumstance, have delivered children of her own. He'd fooled her, she thought. He'd held her hostage and then released her when it was too late. That was the story she told herself and mostly believed. And Bernadette alone of the three girls subscribed to it as well. The others had split their loyalty equally, judging nobody, visiting their father, accepting their second stepmother, who was the same age as they. Only impulsive Bernadette had severed ties. Only loyal Bernadette had stood by Lovey.

"Let her sober up before you take the kids home," William advised. "Let them both sober up. How about you guys go watch TV?" he asked the children. "How's about I set up some 'Tom and Jerry'?"

Lovey had met William through friends, a match everyone approved of. "Age-appropriate," her friends and family had agreed, pleased to have Lovey squarely tucked away again, married. Her parents had never been happy about her first marriage, had never visited without awkwardness and sad sighs over the terrible absence of true grandchildren, the presence of these three half-time stepdaughters who did not particularly respond to them. In everyone else's view, Lovey was lucky to have got out before her older husband became like a third aging parent, before the inevitable illness and decline. Those eventualities were still ahead, she supposed. He was sixty-four now, his new wife in her thirties, an undeniably beautiful woman. Young. Fresh.

And William? Lovey loved him well enough, in the way of adulthood, she thought, not in the feverish former manner of witless drowning immersion, that love she'd fallen into heedlessly, as if into a body of water, with no idea of what such a thing could cost her. It had nearly killed her, when all was said and done. Meaning she'd felt like dying. She would never be that kind of lover again, never endanger herself that way again. And she understood that William, too, had been disposed of, that his ex-wife had had a similar nuclear potency for him, and that he loved Lovey now with the conscious intensity of somebody who was aware that he was exacting a kind of revenge—or, perhaps, simply acting in the belief that his ex was paying attention, that he had a need to prove that he'd survive and thrive, the victor. *A* victor, anyway.

"I feel like an idiot," she told William, once the children were out of earshot. "How could I let her do this to me?"

"What has she done, really?" he said. "I mean, she could have got you to babysit, if she'd wanted. She could have asked you to stay over at her house with them, and you would have. Or she could have told you they were going on a date night or something. Either way, you would have hung out with the kids overnight, so it's really not so different. When you think about it."

"I guess I thought she trusted me."

"She left her children with you. She called you when she felt like getting trashed. How much more trust do you want?"

"I still feel like a fool."

"Don't beat yourself up. Everything's fine. See you tonight." He provided another peck on the cheek, this time of the minty variety. And, once again, Lovey thought of her first husband—his apple-flavored mouth, his kisses that could paralyze her with brutal desire, still, still, even in absentia.

Caleb came back from the television to put in a request from Celia. "She wants Cheerios. I told her no milk in the living room, then she threw the remote at me." He touched his forehead. He was too thin, and now he had dark circles under his eyes. Lovey should have made him go to bed. From the living room came the ruckus of cartoon violence. The three-year-old liked to turn up the volume; maybe she was loud because she was a little deaf—Lovey would have to mention that possibility to Bernadette. When she next saw Bernadette.

Meanwhile, Caleb was checking the game board. "Lovey," he said, "what happened to all your money?"

"What do you mean?"

His face was suddenly furious, his rage as rare as his laughter, and this time aimed at her. "Don't let me win," he demanded. "Don't you dare let me win!" ♦

NYR.KR/THISWEEKINFICTION
Antonya Nelson on "First Husband."

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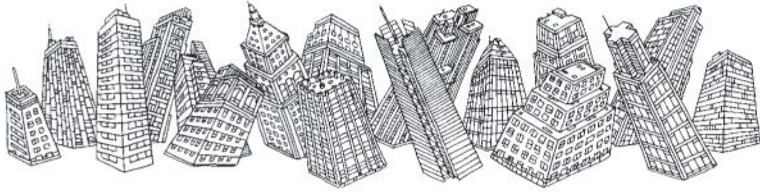


BOOKS

THE BIRDS

Why the passenger pigeon became extinct.

BY JONATHAN ROSEN

Imagine that tomorrow morning you woke up and discovered that the familiar rock pigeon—scientifically known as *Columba livia*, popularly known as the rat with wings—had disappeared. It was gone not simply from your window ledge but from Piazza San Marco, Trafalgar Square, the Gateway of India arch, and every park, sidewalk, telephone wire, and rooftop in between. Would you grieve for the loss of a familiar creature, or rip out the spikes on your air-conditioner and celebrate? Perhaps your reaction would depend on the cause of the extinction. If the birds had been carried off in a mass avian rapture, or a pigeon-specific flu, you might let them pass without guilt, but if they had been hunted to death by humans you might feel honor-bound to genetically engineer them back to life.

ABOVE: VASCO MOURÃO; BELOW: PHOTOGRAPH BY BUTCHER WALSH

In his new book about the passenger pigeon, the naturalist Joel Greenberg sets out to answer a puzzling question: How could the bird

PAINTING BY WALTON FORD

This thought experiment occurred to me while reading "A Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction" (Bloomsbury), Joel Greenberg's study of a bird that really did vanish after near-ubiquity, and that really is the subject of Frankenpigeon dreams of resurrection. Even before the age of bioengineering, *Ectopistes migratorius* could seem as much science-fiction fable as fact, which is why it is good to have Greenberg's book, the first major work in sixty years about the most famous extinct species since the dodo.

The passenger pigeon—sometimes called "the blue pigeon," for its color, though the blue was blended with gray, red, copper, and brown—should not be confused with its distant cousin, the message-bearing carrier pigeon, which is really just a domesticated rock pigeon in military dress. Unlike the rock pigeon—domesticated six thousand years ago, now feral, and brought to these shores by Europeans in the early seventeenth century—the passenger pigeon was native to North America, where it roved over a billion acres of the continent searching for bumper crops of tree nuts. It was here, like the American bison, when Europeans arrived, and it was here when the peoples we consider indigenous migrated across their land bridge thousands of years before that. It evolved on the unspoiled continent and was allied with the big trees that once covered much of the Northeast and the Midwest.

The passenger pigeon was also the most numerous bird species in North America, and possibly the world, dominating the eastern half of the continent in numbers that stagger the imagination. In 1813, John James Audubon saw a flock—if that is what you call an agglomeration of birds moving at sixty miles an hour and obliterating the noonday sun—that was merely the advance guard of a multitude that took three days to pass. Alexander Wilson, the other great bird observer of the time, reckoned that a flock he saw contained 2,230,272,000 individuals. To get your head around just how many passenger pigeons that would mean, consider that there are only about two hundred and sixty million rock pigeons in the world today. You would have to imagine more than *eight times* the total world population of rock pigeons, all flying at the same time in a connected mass.

go from a population of billions to zero in less than fifty years?

No wonder witnesses frequently described the birds in quasi-Biblical, if not apocalyptic, language. A flight over Columbus, Ohio, in 1855 elicited the following eye-witness account:

> As the watchers stared, the hum increased to a mighty throbbing. Now everyone was out of the houses and stores, looking apprehensively at the growing cloud, which was blotting out the rays of the sun. Children screamed and ran for home. Women gathered their long skirts and hurried for the shelter of stores. Horses bolted. A few people mumbled frightened words about the approach of the millennium, and several dropped on their knees and prayed.

On the ground, the birds were equally prodigious. A joint at the corners of the lower bill enabled their mouths to more than double in size. Their crops could hold "up to a quarter of a pint of foodstuffs," and they could vomit at will if they saw a food that they liked better. Thoreau, a keen watcher of the birds, marvelled that they could swallow acorns whole. A Detroit newspaper in the late nineteenth century described the squabs as having "the digestive capacity of half a dozen 14-year-old boys."

In their wake, passenger pigeons left behind denuded fields and ravaged woods; descriptions conjure up those First World War photographs of amputated trees in no man's land. "They would roost in one place until they broke all the limbs off the trees," one old-timer recalled, "then they would move to Joining timber & treat it likewise, then fire would break out in the old Roost and Destroy the remainder of the timber." Their droppings, which coated branches and lay a

foot thick on the ground, like snow, proved toxic to the understory and fatal to the trees.

One hunter recalled a nighttime visit to a swamp in Ohio in 1845, when he was sixteen; he mistook for haystacks what were in fact alder and willow trees, bowed to the ground under gigantic pyramids of birds many bodies deep. As late as 1871, a single nesting ground in Sparta, Wisconsin, covered eight hundred and fifty square miles, hosting more than a hundred million birds.

But the profusion was misleading. Twenty-nine years later, a boy in Ohio shot a passenger pigeon out of a tree with a twelve-gauge shotgun, killing what was quickly identified as the last wild member of the species (though Greenberg has discovered evidence of a specimen taken in 1902). A small captive population remained at the Cincinnati Zoo, including a pair patriotically named George and Martha, but there would be no new feathered nation. By 1910, Martha was the sole survivor, an extraordinary fate for a bird whose ancestors had, in Audubon's words, sounded—from a distance!—like "a hard gale at sea, passing through the rigging of a close-reefed vessel."

Martha spent four years as a melancholy zoo attraction. Visitors tossed sand to get her to move. Officials offered a thousand-dollar reward for a mate, but on September 1, 1914, the last passenger pigeon in the world died.

That we know the date is part of the jarring incongruity of the story. Imagine knowing that the last *Tyrannosaurus rex* keeled over on a Tuesday in June. Newspapers described how Martha was frozen in a three-hundred-pound block of ice and sent by train from Cincinnati to Washington, D.C. There she was skinned, stuffed, and put on display at the Smithsonian for a nation guiltily waking up to its role in the destruction of the bird and its habitat.

Equal parts natural history, elegy, and environmental outcry, "A Feathered River Across the Sky" has been published to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of Martha's death. Greenberg, a bird blogger and the author of "A Natural History of the Chicago Region," among other books, has also helped create Project Passenger Pigeon, a loose affiliation of educational institutions, museums, and nature societies hoping to use Martha's anniversary as a "teaching moment" about the tangled relationship between people and the natural world.

A painstaking researcher, Greenberg writes with a naturalist's curiosity about the birds, the more than forty-two genera of plants they ate, the crops they favored, and their love of "mast"—the collective name for beechnuts, acorns, and other hard forest fruits that fall in staggered cycles of reproductive boom and bust. Passenger pigeons had an uncanny knack for discovering mast, possibly because they dispatched scouts, though it is hard to know for sure, since the bird was little studied while it lived, beyond how to catch, kill, and cook it. Answering even basic questions about the passenger pigeon requires a sort of forensic ornithology, which gives "Feathered River Across the Sky" an unexpected poignancy at the very points where it is most nature-nerdy. A characteristic sentence begins, "Yet another of the great questions that can never be answered regarding the life history of this species is how many times a year they bred." But the central question that Greenberg sets out to answer is how a bird could go from a population of billions to zero in less than fifty years.

The short answer is that it tasted good. Also, it was easy to kill and so abundant that it often seemed, in the days before refrigeration, like the quail that fell on the Israelites in Exodus. In 1781, after a crop failure, a flock of pigeons saved a large swath of New Hampshire from starvation. Despite the occasional apocalyptic shiver, most Americans looked up and decided that it was cloudy with a chance of meatballs.

The birds were such tempting targets that, in the early eighteenth century, cities had to ban hunting in town, because, in the words of one ordinance, from 1727, "everyone takes the liberty of shooting thoughtlessly from his windows, the threshold of his door, the middle of the streets." You did not even need a gun: you could poke them from their nests with poles or beat them out of the air with clubs—the weapon of choice Mark Twain recalled from his boyhood, in Hannibal, Missouri. Squabs were fattened on "pigeon milk"—the sloughed-off lining of the birds' crop that parents regurgitated for their young—and got so plump, Greenberg reports, that they would fall to earth with a "splat."

The birds even killed themselves. Greenberg conjures a vision of pigeons crammed into their huge roosts, and then asks the reader to "imagine the destruction that would ensue when tree limbs, or at times entire trees, snapped and plummeted to the ground, crushing hundreds if not thousands of birds. When flocks descended to drink, at times the birds that landed first would drown under the weight of newcomers." No wonder Martha lived so long in her lonely cage.

Seneca Indians called the bird simply Big Bread, and told a story about an ancient white pigeon visiting a warrior with the news that passenger pigeons had been selected as a tribute to mankind. Greenberg gestures toward the notion that Native Americans harbored a proto-conservation ethic toward the birds, but that distinction breaks down as his narrative of destruction progresses, which is perhaps just as well, because our propensity for using things up is certainly species-wide. It was paleo-Indians who helped hunt megafauna like the mammoth to extinction, the Maori in New Zealand who ate the flightless moa to death, and prehistoric Pacific Islanders who extirpated more than a thousand species of birds.

For both Native Americans and European settlers, the appearance of passenger pigeons or the discovery of one of their giant roosting grounds became a festive occasion where every member of the family had a role: shooting the birds, knocking squabs out of nests, chasing the unfledged runaways, and collecting the dead for pickling, salting, baking, or boiling.

Many of the hunting stories have a tall-tale aspect perfectly in tune with the fantastic aura that surrounds the birds. Boys stuck long hickory poles into the ground, pulled on ropes tied to the tips of the poles, and knocked birds down simply by making the poles quiver. Nets were stretched between trees. A roosting ground in Tennessee was set on fire and

“scorched corpses were then collected the next day for personal use or sale” from two-foot-high piles of the dead.

More elaborate methods were used, of course—like luring the birds into nets with a live pigeon, which is the origin of the term “stool pigeon.” A demand for stool pigeons opened up a trade in live birds, and so did the later development of “trap shooting,” in which live birds were mechanically launched into the air for sportsmen. So many birds died in transport to the shoots that huge numbers were needed. (The “clay pigeon” was devised by passenger-pigeon hunters to replicate the experience after the actual birds grew scarce.)

As long as America was rural and untraversed by railroads, the killing did not seem to do much more than dent the vast pigeon population. After the Civil War, however, things began to change rapidly. You could find out by telegraph where pigeons were nesting, get there quickly by train, and sell what you killed to a city hundreds of miles away. Soon market hunters began operating on an enormous scale, cramming tens of thousands of birds into boxcars—especially after Gustavus Swift introduced the refrigerator car, in 1878. This meant that rural migrants to growing cities could still get wild game, and the well-heeled could eat Ballotine of Squab à la Madison, served by a new class of restaurant, like Delmonico’s, in New York, where fine dining was becoming a feature of urban life. All this coincided with an explosion in logging, which began destroying the habitat of pigeons just as hunters were destroying the pigeons themselves.

“Let me give you a fake e-mail address as well—just to drive home the point.”

Greenberg hauntingly documents the way people kept “seeing” the birds after the great flocks vanished, or devising outlandish theories to explain where they might have gone. The journal *Science* speculated that they were in the desert of Arizona; another journal, the *Auk*, suggested that they were east of Puget Sound, and a lumberman claimed to have seen millions in Chile. Henry Ford was convinced that they had all drowned in the Pacific en route to Asia. The flocks were like phantom limbs that the country kept on feeling. Or perhaps the birds’ disappearance, and the human role in it, was simply too much to bear.

In keeping with these fantasies, it isn’t at all surprising that there is a plan afoot to resurrect the bird, or at least to bring back a genetically approximate simulacrum. To this end, Revive & Restore, an offshoot of Stewart Brand’s Long Now Foundation, has enlisted the assistance of the Harvard geneticist George Church, who helped initiate the Human Genome Project, to work on what is frequently referred to as “de-extinction.”

De-extinction became big news after a conference last March—sponsored by Revive & Restore, TED, and *National Geographic*—broadcast plans to take passenger-pigeon genes recovered from the toe pads of museum specimens, combine them with genes from the band-tailed pigeon (the genetic next of kin), and use them to modify another bird, possibly a chicken, so that it would lay a passenger-pigeon egg that could be raised by a band-tailed pigeon but taught to flock by a homing pigeon. If all this sounds like pure fantasy, bear in mind that in Dubai, in 2011, a “chimeric duck” was successfully engineered: it walked like a duck and quacked like a duck but was in fact a chicken, at least reproductively.

“Feathered River” touches on de-extinction in a few neutral paragraphs in the appendix, without getting into the question of why anyone would *want* to bring back a bird whose habitat was destroyed, and that descended on buckwheat fields like a plague of locusts even when it was there. But the destructiveness of the bird hardly disqualifies it from serving as an environmental teaching tool. If anything, the passenger pigeon is a bracing corrective to notions of a natural world detached from its fecund terrors. The bird’s propensity for eating everything and taking over earth and sky makes it seem, frankly, a little like us. As Greenberg notes, “a widely held view is that this species could not sustain itself without a giant population,” so that decline itself became a cause of further decline. In other words, passenger pigeons lived by collaboration on a giant scale, and may

have died by it. Yet what Greenberg sees is not the clash of two irreconcilable species with gargantuan needs but a story of victimizers and victims.

We did hunt the passenger pigeon to death, even if we didn't quite understand at the time what we were doing. We also might have saved it, at least in token form, if only our technological genius and our conservation consciousness—two things that set us apart from other animals—had come together sooner. But Greenberg's emphasis on bloodguilt can give his book a religious impatience, however secularized. He has a habit of blurring time and place so that the whole country seems hell-bent on blasting, stomping, and literally biting the pigeons to death, as if it were this zeal, and not a complex web of industrial and environmental factors, that led to their extinction. "What a shame that passenger pigeons became extinct," he writes, mocking a woman whose 1808 memoir recalls the "gayety" of a pigeon hunt—at a time when there were perhaps five billion of the birds in the world. "Future generations would be denied the near euphoria that apparently accompanied raising a gun toward a flock of pigeons and firing."

Human beings live in their historical and cultural contexts as much as passenger pigeons lived in fields, trees, and sky; it is important to remember, for example, that rural people hunted for food in the days before factory farming and supermarkets. The chicken industry in this country alone kills more than seven billion birds a year—far more than the total number of passenger pigeons at their peak. Nobody in the nineteenth century had figured out how to make the slaughter of the birds sustainable, but it is worth wondering what we would think of the passenger pigeon, and ourselves, if they had.

It would also have been useful if Greenberg had explored the fact that when the last of the great flocks were being killed off, in the eighteen-seventies, America was suffering from the aftershocks of the Panic of 1873 and the economic depression that followed. (In her book "Flight Maps," the historian Jennifer Price does this well.) Financial hardship doesn't have to justify the elimination of a species to help explain why poor country people saw a flock of birds not as a conservation opportunity but as an economic one. This is especially important in light of Greenberg's environmental purposes, since today, too, regions of economic hardship often overlap with areas where many species are at risk of extinction, surely an argument for making economic development a cornerstone of environmental activism. There is only so much fair-trade chocolate one developing country can produce.

Greenberg's book is rich in natural history, but when it comes to human history he is more of an environmentalist looking back in anger. He introduces trap shooting by writing, "The great fun that naturally flowed from killing passenger pigeons was evidently not enough for some. They wanted competition and ways to turn the slaughter into a game." The scattershot sarcasm manages to dismiss hunters, financial necessity, and human nature along with Greenberg's immediate target.

Understanding the relationship between guns and conservation is as important as understanding the relationship between passenger pigeons and beechnuts. The environmental movement that emerged as the passenger pigeon was disappearing—and that was inspired by the bird's plight to save the bison—was largely a movement of hunters. The Boone and Crockett Club, founded for rich sportsmen in 1887, by Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell, morphed into a powerful lobbying group that boasted among its members John F. Lacey, the Republican congressman from Iowa, who spoke movingly about the passenger pigeon on the floor of the House of Representatives as he argued for what became the first federal bird-protection law, the Lacey Act, of 1900. These men were conservationists not in spite of their trophy hunting but because of it—they wanted vast protected forests because they wanted a vast supply of creatures to kill. The "near euphoria" of shooting things, in their case, was a key to saving them. But the patricians of the Boone and Crockett Club shared Greenberg's contempt for market hunters, men who made a living from the things they killed.

One of the club's members, Madison Grant, went further, moving the club toward a more strictly preservationist attitude, and the radical idea that unspoiled nature itself is the trophy. Arguably the most important environmentalist of his age, Grant created vital hunting laws, built the New York Zoological Society, and helped save the bison. That he was also a biological racist of such extreme convictions that Hitler sent him a fan letter is, however, also part of the story. So is the fact that William Hornaday, who helped Grant reintroduce bison into Oklahoma, displayed a Congolese Pygmy in the monkey house of the Bronx Zoo in 1906.

The environmental movement has more skeletons than *Ectopistes migratorius* in its closet, and why shouldn't it? We are only human, and as complex as the creatures we mourn. Now, however, would be a good time to lay out all the bones and see them as part of the teaching moment that Martha's anniversary provides.

In his appendix, Greenberg includes a lone paragraph called, simply, "Eugenics," in which he expresses bafflement that among the papers of his hero, A. W. Schorger—whose 1955 book on the passenger pigeon became the source for all later studies—he found a pamphlet warning that "talented humans" were going the way of "yesteryear's passenger pigeon."

"It takes a far more imaginative mind than mine," Greenberg observes, "to connect the extinction of the passenger pigeon with eugenics." But in fact he makes the connection himself when he writes about R. W. Shufeldt, the scientist who dissected Martha for the Smithsonian. Greenberg notes that he was "disappointed to learn" that Shufeldt, along with important scientific work on birds, "authored a vile screed on domestic race relations. So while he had no regard for many of his fellow citizens, he was moved by the object on his dissecting table." Such was the passion men like Shufeldt displayed for nature that Greenberg, despite his disgust, can't resist closing his account of Martha with the scientist's sentimental decision not to dissect the bird's heart, and with his salute to "the last 'Blue Pigeon' that the world will ever see alive."

Two years after Martha's death, Madison Grant published "The Passing of the Great Race," a warning about the threat to pure "Nordic" peoples from immigrants he viewed as invasive species. White men, Grant believed, needed protection as much as the bison and the passenger pigeon. To that end, he helped

persuade Congress to keep Jews, Asians, and Eastern Europeans—the rock pigeons of the world—out of the country.

Is it possible to love the bird on the table more than your fellow-citizens? Of course—especially if you gerrymander humanity into discrete populations and value some groups more than others. For Grant, this was a racial matter, but there are lots of ways to divide a population. We no longer live in an age when a powerful President and his hunting buddies can snatch up millions of acres of wilderness and set them aside for the public good; without a broad consensus, there is not much hope of saving anything.

And without a capacity for complexity there is not much hope of knowing even what needs saving. The great biologist E. O. Wilson speaks about a coming wave of extinctions whose scope eludes us, because though there may be anywhere from ten million to a hundred million species in the world, we have identified far fewer than two million. Unlike the passenger pigeon, these creatures may be hidden in oceans, forest canopies, handfuls of earth. It takes effort and imagination to sift through this information, just as it requires an educated humanism to figure out whether a de-extinction project holds real environmental promise or is only an ancient longing for resurrection disguised as bioengineering.

Thoreau, in a mysteriously beautiful passage in his 1862 essay "Walking," likens the diminishing numbers of passenger pigeons in New England to the dwindling number of thoughts in a man's head, "for the grove in our minds is laid waste." Thinking of the birds as missing thoughts is a good way to honor them. Martha and her billions were undone by the complicated, pitiless tangle of our modern industrialized world, but Thoreau's nineteenth-century protest—"Simplify, simplify"—will not help us in the twenty-first. Indeed, when it comes to our relationship to nature, the wish for simplicity may be the most destructive thing in the world. ♦

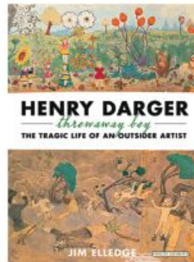
BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

From the Allentown (Penn.) Morning Call.

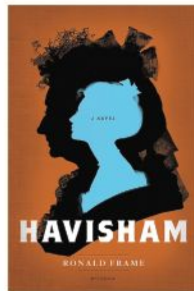
The longest game in Penn State history ended with members of the alumni band washing onto the field after Belton's touchdown capped a messy masterpiece that took the wind even from the Lions' head coach.

BRIEFLY NOTED

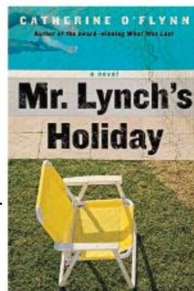
INSIDE THE DREAM PALACE, *by Sherill Tippins (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).* This history explores the ups and downs of the Chelsea Hotel, where scores of the twentieth century's greatest artists and writers lived. Opened in 1884 as one the first New York examples of a coöperative "home club" (a concept inspired by the French utopian philosopher Charles Fourier), it began as a community-minded, affordable residence where people from various classes and professions (but particularly artists) could live and create. Tippins tells riveting stories about the Chelsea's artists, but she also captures a much grander, and more pressing, narrative: that of the ongoing battle between art and capitalism in the city.



HENRY DARGER, *by Jim Elledge (Overlook Duckworth).* This famous outsider artist was an anonymous janitor until his death, in 1973, when hundreds of watercolors of children in distress and thousands of unpublished manuscript pages were found in his Chicago apartment. Elledge's biography presents him as a fragile gay man in a secret long-term relationship and argues that his work was a response to an abusive childhood spent in asylums, shelters, and the slums of early-twentieth-century Chicago. But this analysis relies on a lot of extrapolation (for instance, from gnomic diary entries), and doesn't really illuminate his prolific output. "Every picture seems to look at you straight in the face as if you had some secret to tell," Darger wrote. One wishes that the book had better realized the link between his pain and his paintings.



HAVISHAM, *by Ronald Frame (Picador).* This literary prequel imagines the life of Catherine Havisham, from privileged childhood to the macabre death scene of Dickens's "Great Expectations." Adopting a character whose fate is sealed reduces the potential for surprise, but Frame's book is a pleasurable read. He wisely refrains from mimicking Dickens's style, writing in Catherine's voice (which reaches us, strangely, from beyond the grave); she speaks to the reader as if to a diary, and her account is given to poignant repetition and occasional verse. The novel runs into trouble, though, as its time line catches up to the story we know. Catherine has been too sensible a narrator; her necessary descent into madness feels sudden and unsubstantiated.



MR. LYNCH'S HOLIDAY, *by Catherine O'Flynn (Holt).* When Dermot Lynch, a retired and newly widowed Englishman, decides to visit his son and daughter-in-law in a seaside village in southern Spain, he excitedly writes to say that he is looking forward to getting his "first taste of 'abroad.'" But he arrives to find a development that has been deserted midway through construction, and a son deserted by his wife. "Instances of disrepair and chaos" are everywhere in this recession-based novel, as father and son adjust to circumstances and to one another. Most memorable are the figures of bewildered expats who "have left comfortable lives in search of somewhere even better." As one of them says, "It's a kind of greed, don't you think?"

MUSICAL EVENTS

HOLY FOOL

"Falstaff" at the Met.

BY ALEX ROSS

In 2013, the Metropolitan Opera marked the bicentennials of Wagner and Verdi—the schismatic popes of nineteenth-century opera—by mounting new productions of their final masterpieces, "Parsifal" and "Falstaff." On the surface, the two works seem radically unalike, confirming the stereotypical polarity between light-suffused Italianate values and the forest dusk of Germanic tradition. But there is common ground between them. Both are tales of fools: the "pure fool" of Wagner's quasi-Christian allegory, who learns compassion and heals spiritual wounds, and the indomitable rascal of Verdi and Arrigo Boito's Shakespeare adaptation, who, through wounds of a self-inflicted sort, teaches his companions that "the world is but a joke, man is born a clown." Each work, in its way, looks past dull reality in search of shadowy truths. Franz Werfel summarized the continuity thus: "'Falstaff' is the comedy of overcoming the world, just as 'Parsifal' is the mystery play of overcoming the world."

Verdi himself sealed the connection by inserting a quotation from "Parsifal" into Falstaff's despairing monologue at the start of Act III. As Falstaff sings "Che giornataccia nera" ("What a black, bad day"), the strings play a prowling motif associated with Wagner's emasculated magician Klingsor, who tries to ensnare Parsifal in his flower-maiden garden. No doubt, a degree of irony is intended—Verdi resented Wagner's influence over Italian music at the end of the nineteenth century, and in this passage he seems to be mocking rampant Wagnerism—yet the allusion is actually quite precise. Just as Klingsor's garden is exposed as a mirage covering a wasteland, Falstaff's merry façade falls away, revealing an inner void. Wagner, for his part, loved the Falstaff plays. As Peter Conrad observes, in his recent book "Verdi and/or Wagner," the Meister once entertained his guests by playing the "Parsifal" Prelude at the piano and then reciting from the Falstaff scenes in "Henry IV, Part 2." Cosima Wagner remarked, "We found little difficulty in passing from the Saviour to Sir John!"

At the Met, the transition hasn't been quite so easy. "Parsifal," which played back in February and March, came off better. The production, by François Girard, offered a thinly peopled array of steel-gray and blood-red tableaux, evocative of a postapocalyptic cult gathering. Despite lapses and longueurs, it proved an authentically strange, disorienting experience: the director and his cast were grappling with the toughest philosophical questions of the piece, even if, inevitably, they had no answers. The most striking moment came at the end, when the cursed wanderer Kundry, rather than being shut out of the final Holy Grail ritual, found a place of honor within it, uncovering the sacred cup and holding it aloft. The gesture echoed Wagner's unrealized plan for a Buddhist opera, "The Victors," about the first woman to be ordained by the Buddha.

Robert Carsen's new staging of "Falstaff," which opened in early December and plays through January 11th, is, by contrast, puzzlingly skin deep. The director, among the most prolific and resourceful in the opera world, had done well in two earlier projects at the Met: his "Eugene Onegin," first seen in 1997, was spare and piercing, and his widely travelled "Mefistofele," which came to the Met in 1999, was an ironic feast of kitsch. Among other Carsen productions, I particularly admired a "Frau Ohne Schatten," in Vienna, which transferred Hugo von Hofmannsthal's fairy-tale plot to the high-bourgeois salons of the Viennese fin de siècle, to unexpectedly harrowing effect.

In his "Falstaff," which previously ap-

As Falstaff, Ambrogio Maestri all but dances his way through the part.

BEATRIZ SCHILLER

peared at the Royal Opera House, Carsen moves the action to the nineteen-fifties, when England's imperial spaces were being converted to more mundane uses. Shakespeare's Garter Inn, for example, becomes a stuffy old hotel that must accommodate the nouveau riche. The sets, by Paul Steinberg, conjure a collision between fading pomp and American-style consumer culture: Alice Ford presides over a palatial Formica kitchen. All well and good, but where, exactly, does Falstaff fit in this Clement Attlee universe? I couldn't make out whether he is supposed to be a gentleman who has fallen on hard times or a low-born fellow putting on airs. And either profile seems too confining for the outlaw energies that fire the Falstaff spirit. His lusty shenanigans, and the pranks that the merry wives hatch in response, get lost in the immaculate art direction, and extended pauses between scenes sap momentum.

The laboriousness of the show is a pity, because a generally fine cast—including Angela Meade, a vocally agile Alice Ford, and Stephanie Blythe, a booming Mistress Quickly—works hard to spice up the ensembles. And Ambrogio Maestri, in the title role, has the makings of a once-in-a-generation Falstaff. His voice rings out freely, and he sings with incisive diction and an instinctive understanding of Verdi's compressed, propulsive phrases. A bear of a man, he moves nimbly, all but dancing his way through the part. What's missing, at least in this outing, is the undertow of melancholy—the existential chill that emerges at the beginning of Act III and when, later, Falstaff counts out the chimes at midnight. Perhaps James Levine's conducting is partly responsible; on the second night of the run, Levine was in full command of Verdi's fabulous musical machinery, but the crypto-Wagnerian textures in the final act failed to register. There should be a sense of an abyss opening beneath the music. It closes quickly, yet the memory of it lingers to the end.

The Met is fond of decorating its advertising material with closeups of its more movie-star-like stars. On the cover of the 2013-14 brochure, Mariusz Kwiecien and Anna Netrebko, promoting "Eugene Onegin," clutch each other in the style of a Hollywood period romance; elsewhere, Jonas Kaufmann strikes a foxy pose. Such campaigns are evidently deemed essential in the eternal hunt for new audiences, though I sometimes wonder how well they're working. At a recent "Rosenkavalier," long a reliable draw, I saw rows of vacant seats, and the house grew emptier as the evening went on. One gent across the aisle from me spent the first act fussing with his iPhone, ignoring the elegant Austrian soprano Martina Serafin as she gave a poised, idiomatic reading of the Marschallin's monologue ("Time is a strange thing"). Why had he bothered to pay three hundred bucks? Who were these people who strolled out after Act II, missing some of the most absurdly beautiful music ever composed for voices? I left feeling unusually morose about the fate of opera in New York.

On certain nights this fall, though, the atmosphere changed. In a revival of Herbert Wernicke's 2001 production of "Die Frau Ohne Schatten," the soprano Christine Goerke gave a career-transforming performance as the Dyer's Wife, displaying the kind of vocal stamina that Wagner-Strauss fanciers have been awaiting since Birgit Nilsson delivered her last "Hojotoho!" Goerke first made her name in Handel, Gluck, and Mozart, in the late nineteen-nineties; after a brief vocal crisis, she reëmerged with a startlingly strong dramatic-soprano instrument. Just as important, she can create a character as she sings, linking musical phrases to form dramatic paragraphs. She was rewarded with an ovation rather more voluminous than the one that Netrebko received on the opening night of "Onegin."

A similar charge went through the house in the middle of a run of "Norma," when Meade assumed the title role and the lavishly gifted young mezzo Jamie Barton sang Adalgisa. Again, characters emerged not through the striking of poses but through the shaping of the musical line. Again, there was pandemonium in the audience. The pure charisma of voice is, finally, what people come to opera for. Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, hasn't been associated with a voices-first philosophy, but after Goerke's triumph in "Frau" he showed admirable flexibility in signing her up for a series of major roles, including Elektra, Turandot, and Brünnhilde. If the Met's marketing can convey what it's like to hear such a voice incandescing before your ears, there will be no empty seats. ♦

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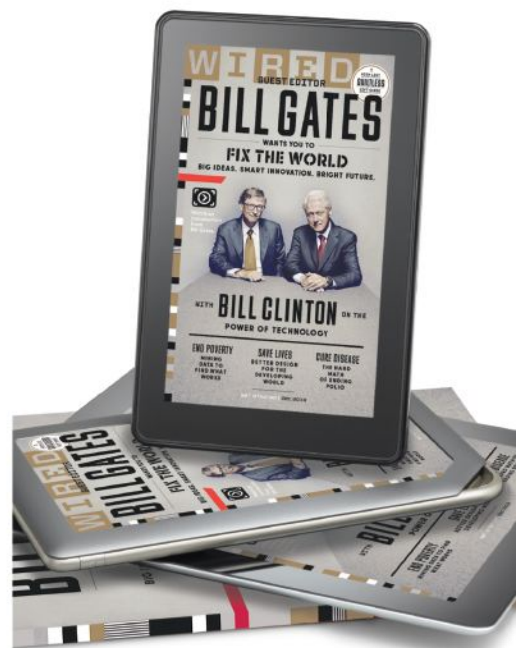

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DANCING

DEVOTION

Star turns at the Alvin Ailey Company.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Ronald K. Brown, the most acclaimed choreographer now working with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, was born in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in 1966. He knew from childhood that he would grow up to be a dancer. When he was six, he took lessons sponsored by the Police Athletic League. For a second-grade black-history assignment, in which students dressed up as inspirational African-Americans, he wore a white T-shirt and black tights, the costume that Arthur Mitchell had worn in his most famous role, in Balanchine's "Agon." Brown also spent a summer studying with Mary Anthony, a celebrated teacher of modern dance. At the age of nineteen, he founded his own dance company, Evidence. Soon, like other young African-American choreographers, he was travelling regularly to Africa to work with its dance companies and to soak up its arts. Hence the basic components of his style: African traditional and popular dance and music, plus American modern dance and club culture. In 2000, he told Melanye White Dixon, of *Attitude* magazine, that he and his friends liked to go out to clubs at 4 A.M. and dance for five or six hours.

Another important source of Brown's work is religion. His family was devout, and he is loyal to their beliefs. Practically every piece I have seen by him has a religious base. "Grace" (1999) shows a group of people ignoring the operation of grace in their lives—and just dancing fabulously. Then, on Sunday (the dance is bracketed by performances of Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday"), they rediscover their faith—indeed, if I'm not mistaken, they die, exalted and forgiven. "Serving Nia" (2001) finds the ensemble in Heaven, honoring three forms of "purpose"—or, in Swahili, *nia*. Now, for the Ailey company, Brown has made "Four Corners," which the troupe is currently performing in its City Center season. The title has to do, in part, with the four corners of the world, where, in the Book of Revelation, angels will appear on Judgment Day, holding the four winds of the earth before unleashing them on the sinners. This sounds dire, but the title was also inspired by a set of lyrics that Carl Hancock Rux derived from the Book of Revelation, and which accompanies a section of the piece. "Stand," Rux tells the angels and, it seems, the earthlings. "You are beautiful and lovely."

The Ailey company's senior dancer, Matthew Rushing, can go almost instantaneously from one position to the next.

Brown says that what he does is

PHOTOGRAPH BY IOULEX

"storytelling," but, as this list of works suggests, the stories are getting less clear—more mixed, more ambiguous. You have to read the press release to find out what's going on. I'll be damned if I saw four corners in "Four Corners." Twice, by my count, four dancers moved in unison in a square formation, but this was no more remarkable than if four fairies had done it in "The Sleeping Beauty." And other kinds of patterns—solos, trios—were more common than quartets.

Not just religion but also Africa seems more absorbed—suggested rather than flat-out portrayed—in Brown's recent work. He has said that, because he has worked repeatedly in Africa, he has no need to romanticize his roots, or to claim old-country authenticity for his new dances. This has given him time, instead, to concentrate on the dancing. Between whatever bookends he chooses—a prayer dance in "Grace," angels with winds—he supplies what I believe is the most impressive West African-based dancing to be seen in New York today.

The dances occur mostly in small groups—duets, trios, quartets—that break out from the ensemble and play in counterpoint to one another. This is exciting, but more exciting is the dancing that each individual performs. As always with the Ailey company, I try to look at the stars, and then some young person comes onstage and I can't look away. This time it was Belen Pereyra, age twenty-six. I don't recall ever noticing her before. On the night, this season, when I first saw "Grace," I could not believe Pereyra's speed, her spontaneity, her astonishing, open-legged jumps. It was like watching a baby or an animal—movement that is completely natural, but which, in an adult, is the product only of art and long training. You look at her pas de chat *en tournant* (high-legged turning jump) and you think you're going to burst into tears. There are no theatrics here, no pushing, no look-at-me, but merely dance as it might be done without an audience.

The Ailey company's senior dancer, Matthew Rushing, is, to me, the very epitome of forcefulness without pushing—indeed, *because* of not pushing. Rushing has spent twenty years with the troupe. After becoming a rehearsal director, in 2010, he sat out a European tour. He says that his body couldn't take it anymore. (The Ailey company has the longest touring schedule of any American company.) Then he returned, but as a "guest artist," which seems to mean that he can pick his roles and his schedule. Again and again, he is featured in the first cast of a new dance. Two weeks ago, the company staged a program called "Celebrating Matthew Rushing." They clearly want to keep him.

To me, the ideal age for a dancer, on average, is thirty. Rushing is forty, but he is not the average dancer. He has breathtaking speed, by which I do not mean that he can run across the stage fast, but that he can go almost instantaneously from one position to the next, so that you don't have to look at some blurry business in between. The two qualities, apart from character and technique, that are most important in a dancer are phrasing, as with any musician, and clarity. From the moment Rushing joined the Ailey company, he shone in both departments. In addition, he has a sweet smile, sparingly deployed (normally, he wears a quizzical expression), and his big back sweats up handsomely in performance. But his most sterling virtue—strangely, for so great a dancer—is modesty, or proportion.

This is a critical issue. The troupe had always been primarily a men's company, and in the past the men have often sold the work hard—big grins, big kicks, big indifference to gradation. (Ailey had danced on Broadway, and he liked pizzazz.) I asked Rushing what, as a rehearsal director, he found himself having to work on the most, and he said, "Dynamics. Dynamic range"—in other words, how to go from soft to loud, little to big, and back. The same has been said of Ron Brown's coaching. In the words of the Ailey veteran Renee Robinson, Brown "would always tell us to pull back a bit, and trust that the feeling would take us to the shape." Both men are asking these superbly trained dancers to let go, a little bit, of their technique, or to let it serve *them*. That's how we get a dancer like Belen Pereyra. The lesson is being learned. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

HOME TRUTHS

"August: Osage County," "The Invisible Woman," and "Lone Survivor."

BY DAVID DENBY

Meryl Streep plays a difficult mother in a new movie directed by John Wells.

I haven't seen Tracy Letts's Pulitzer Prize-winning play "August: Osage County," but people whose judgment I trust say that the piece worked powerfully in the theatre—which is, perhaps, where it should have remained. The play lasts for more than three hours; the movie version, starring Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts, runs about two. Some character detail has been cut, but the structural lines of "Osage County" remain clear (boy, are they clear—virtually every scene cries, "This is a play!"), and the zingers that made it explosive are still there. Yet, despite the startling moments and some nasty fun, the movie sits awkwardly on the screen.

Set near Pawhuska, Oklahoma, in 2007, the movie takes place mainly after Beverly Weston (Sam Shepard), a one-time poet and full-time alcoholic, has disappeared. A few days later, he is found dead, a presumed suicide. His widow, Violet (Meryl Streep), a malevolent and witty pillhead, zonked half the time but devastating when she stays in focus, is triumphant because she has survived her husband. She is joined at the family home by her three daughters: an unhappy cynic (Julia Roberts), a bland saint (Julianne Nicholson), and a ditz with dreadful taste in men (Juliette Lewis). Husbands, children, and other assorted relatives also show up, most of them, in one way or another, disappointed with life and with themselves and ready to lay into the others. A Native American woman (Misty Upham)—a servant—presides over the chaos like a ministering angel. The decency and the generosity that are instinctively hers have mostly vanished from the Weston clan. The play has been called an act of mourning for a nation in decline, but people who see profound meaning in "Osage County" may be fooling themselves about its appeal. There are moments of pathos and reckoning, but when Letts is writing well his people tear one another apart.

In the original stage version, mounted by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, in Chicago, and again in the Broadway production, a complicated set featured rooms of the house on multiple levels, each room lighting up or going dark as needed. The director of the movie, John Wells ("Company Men"), shows us the desolate Oklahoma plains, but most of the action here, too, takes place in and around the Weston manse. The centerpiece is a long dinner after Beverly's funeral, in the course of which Violet demeans her dead husband, stiffs her daughters out of their inheritance, and insults everyone else. In the end, violence breaks out—Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts wind up rolling around on the floor, clawing at each other. The scene starts well but feels overwrought—too tightly packed, too obviously mounted for its horrible climax. On the stage, there are only so many places that actors can go. But movie actors—and movie cameras—can go anywhere, and, as the dinner escalated from embarrassment to disaster, I kept wondering why no one left to go for a walk or at least stepped outside for a smoke. The characters are boxed in by the setting, by closeups and reaction shots, and by the inexorable pace of the editing.

Theatre actors can shape their scenes in response to how people in the audience, at some distance from the stage, are laughing or sighing on a given night. The open space between actors and audience is a medium of exchange. But in Wells's movie the camera stays relentlessly on top of the actors, especially Meryl Streep. She makes a wonderful entrance: Violet is stoned and giggly from too many pills, and Streep's body, seemingly boneless, sways, tilts, staggers, and slides to the floor. Violet is undergoing chemotherapy for mouth cancer, and her hair is sparse and gray. For the funeral dinner, however, she wears a big dark wig; she's dressed for a party. An addict who somehow knows people's secrets, she has convinced herself that her insults are a form of truth-telling. Cruelty is her one remaining pleasure. Violet's kind of hyper-articulate spitefulness can be entertaining in the theatre, in the hands of an incisive actress like, say, Stockard Channing; the sour view of life, after all, has some truth to it and mirrors what we all feel at times. But Violet is just a selfish woman with a vicious tongue, and Streep, hardening her voice, shouting, and speaking lines with whacking emphasis, is too concerned with making Violet the Lady Macbeth of the plains. In Lillian Hellman's play "The Little Foxes" (which this play draws on heav-

 ILLUSTRATION BY STAMATIS LASKOS

ily), the villainess Regina schemes to get money, allows her husband to die, and suffers the disaffection of her daughter. In the movie adaptation, Bette Davis keeps things small, mean, and tight; she scales to the camera. Streep overwhelms it.

Julia Roberts, however, as Violet's oldest daughter, Barbara, wields a self-contained anger. Burned by her mother in the past, Barbara fled to Colorado, but now, back in the Weston house, she flares up again. The most interesting thing in the movie is the way that Barbara haplessly begins to resemble her mother, and Roberts portrays well Barbara's feelings of rage and self-disgust at finding Violet's destructiveness alive in her own soul. Margot Martindale, as Mattie Fae, Violet's vulgar and catty sister, and Chris Cooper, as Mattie Fae's long-suffering husband, are very fine, and the other actors have effective moments, but the material's theatrical origins hamper our enjoyment of the performances: the last-act revelations are so overdetermined that they have little shock value. As you watch, you don't think of the decline of American civilization; you think that these are good actors giving themselves a hell of a workout in a misbegotten movie.

When we first see Charles Dickens (Ralph Fiennes) in "The Invisible Woman," he's arranging amateur theatricals, joking faster than a music-hall entertainer, and receiving and bestowing praise with equal enjoyment. I can't imagine anyone making a better Dickens than Fiennes, who also directed the movie. His eyes dart everywhere, and his body is energized in every limb, yet he has moments of quiet in which he sinks deep into an interior cavern of melancholy. Miserable with his wife, Catherine, who has grown heavy and dull, Dickens, forty-five when the movie begins, slowly but steadily persuades an eighteen-year-old actress, Ellen Ternan (Felicity Jones), to become his mistress. The movie is based on Claire Tomalin's 1990 book, of the same title, but not much is known about Ternan. In this telling—which has a strong feminist thrust—she's an intellectual young woman who, in another era, might have been a literature professor (she eventually became a teacher). She adores Dickens's work, offering the kind of fervent and detailed appreciation that would probably serve as an aphrodisiac for any writer.

Dickens finds himself in an awkward position. He can't divorce Catherine, but he separates from her, literally, walling off half their house and moving her into it. He's the most famous man in Britain, and he's famously benevolent, too—a philanthropist and a moralist who has raised money for the restitution of "fallen women." And yet he's in love with someone less than half his age, whose reputation he's soiling. The movie is framed by scenes of Ternan's life in 1883, thirteen years after Dickens's death, when she's still haunted by him, and given to long, lonely walks on the beach. Fiennes and his team have mounted a handsome re-creation of Victorian England, but the Dickens-Ternan affair isn't much of a story—at least, not as realized here. What was the nature of Dickens's attraction to Ternan? Did he idealize her, as he did several young female characters in his fiction? Or had he fallen into the sexual obsession of a middle-aged man? Why is Dickens mute and stricken? We don't know. Certainly, the author of "Bleak House" and "Our Mutual Friend" understood despair, but somehow I doubt that sexual happiness makes anyone lose his sense of humor.

Peter Berg's exciting but harrowing "Lone Survivor" re-stages a military operation in Afghanistan from 2005. Four members of a Navy SEAL team are cut off in Taliban territory but continue to fight, in treacherously rocky terrain, and despite multiple wounds. It's a patriotic homage to the toughness and endurance of an élite force, embodied here by Mark Wahlberg, Taylor Kitsch, Ben Foster, and Emile Hirsch. The movie doesn't explicitly ask what the American forces are doing in Afghanistan. Yet there's a fierce debate among the men about how to handle some goatherds they take prisoner, which effectively interrogates the purpose of fighting against a guerrilla group lodged in a native population.

The heart of the movie, however, is combat: specifically, a long sequence that has been shot with much greater attention to spatial organization—where one soldier is in relation to another as they fire—than filmmakers, in the past, have given such scenes. The sequence, as the men get hit, is also more explicit about wounds, blood, and suffering. "Lone Survivor" will not please people exasperated by an endless war, but it's an achievement nonetheless. ♦

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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 David Borchart, must be received by Sunday, January 5th. The finalists in the December 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 20th issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the United States, Canada (except Quebec), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"There's water everywhere."
Harold Gamble, Fort Collins, Colo.

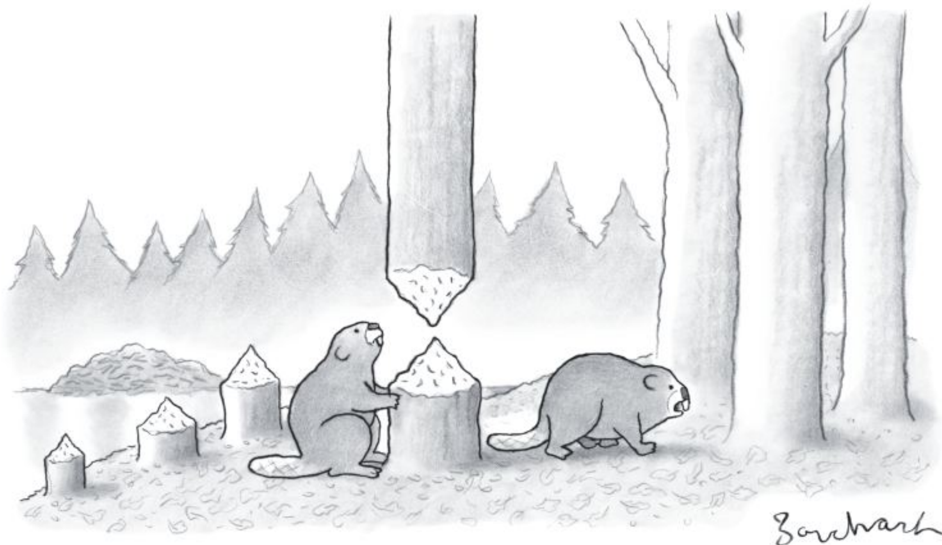
THE FINALISTS

"They now think that kryptonite is actually good for you, in small doses."
Christopher Larson, New York City

"Your X-rays show—well, you already know."
Nancy Hook, Plainville, Conn.

"Sounds like a bird—no, a plane!"
William Coyle, Flushing, N.Y.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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