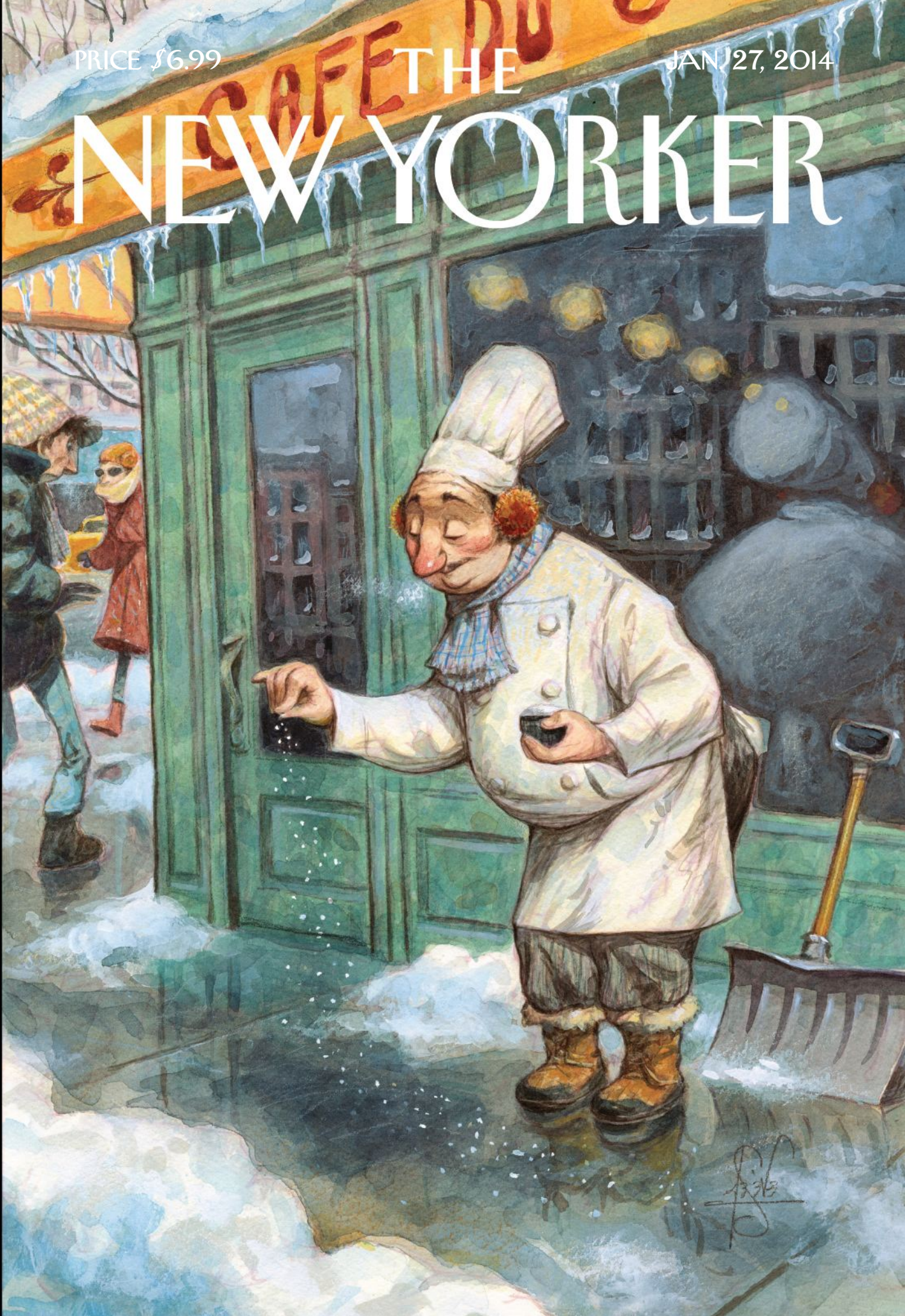


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THE NEW YORKER

JANUARY 27, 2014

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THE MAIL

THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

Michael Pollan reports on a debate over whether plants have intelligence; they don't ("The Intelligent Plant," December 23rd & 30th). The property being ascribed to plants as intelligence is shared by all organisms, even the single-celled amoeba. Life, like obscenity, is easy to recognize but hard to define. Still, we can identify general attributes. Growth is one, replication another. But these are insufficient: a crystal that grows, splits in half, and grows more is not alive. Organisms constantly sense their environment and adjust their conditions to maintain some kind of optimality. This is called acclimation (or, over the long term, adaptation) and represents a fundamental attribute of the living state. Intelligence makes humans superb acclimators. It depends on nerves, cells with highly ramified shapes that are deeply interconnected. There is nothing remotely like this in plants. Furthermore, human intelligence arose not only from making decisions among sensory inputs but also from managing musculature. Even though our intelligence today dwells in the aerie of abstraction, and choreography of movement has been outsourced within the brain, the history of being a locomotive engineer permeates the mind's workings. Plants have no muscles and no requirement for a central coordinator of motion. Plants do move, and powerfully, but on a scale that allows management by distributed cells. In those responses, any resemblance to our intelligence is superficial, like that of a mandrake root to a person. The purpose of acclimation and intelligence is similar, but the means differ; it is the means that defines phenomena in biology.

Tobias Baskin

*Professor, Biology Department
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Mass.*

I applaud the attention that Pollan pays to botany in his article, but he failed to mention that not all plants

live rooted in one place. Alternatives to this "sessile life style" are clear among tropical species and are much more analogous to animals than the examples he provides. Certain fig trees can "walk" on their stilt roots to extract themselves from an overly shady spot, or escape from under a tree that has fallen on them. (In an instance of comedy reflecting scientific discovery, Monty Python riffed on a strikingly similar idea when they made fun of David Attenborough in a 1974 sketch called "The Walking Tree of Dahomey.") Even more spectacular are species I have termed "nomadic vines," which wander a distance far in excess of their relatively unchanging length. One such nomad is the philodendron in your dentist's waiting room. In a rain forest, some philodendrons remain a few yards in length and yet they meander through a tree's canopy, acting like a snake searching for a place to bask. The plant grows small leaves and long thin stems to move quickly when in shade, changing over to the thick stems and large leaves when it reaches a patch of sunlight. Both walking trees and nomads change locations without muscles. Taking advantage of the "modular" strategy Pollan describes, they grow in the direction of motion while leaving their trailing parts to die. The results are fantastical: when a canopy-dwelling plant, such as an orchid, falls from a tree, it's likely to perish in the understory shade. But the philodendron simply uncoils itself, crawls over to the nearest tree trunk, and climbs up again.

Mark W. Moffett

*National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.*

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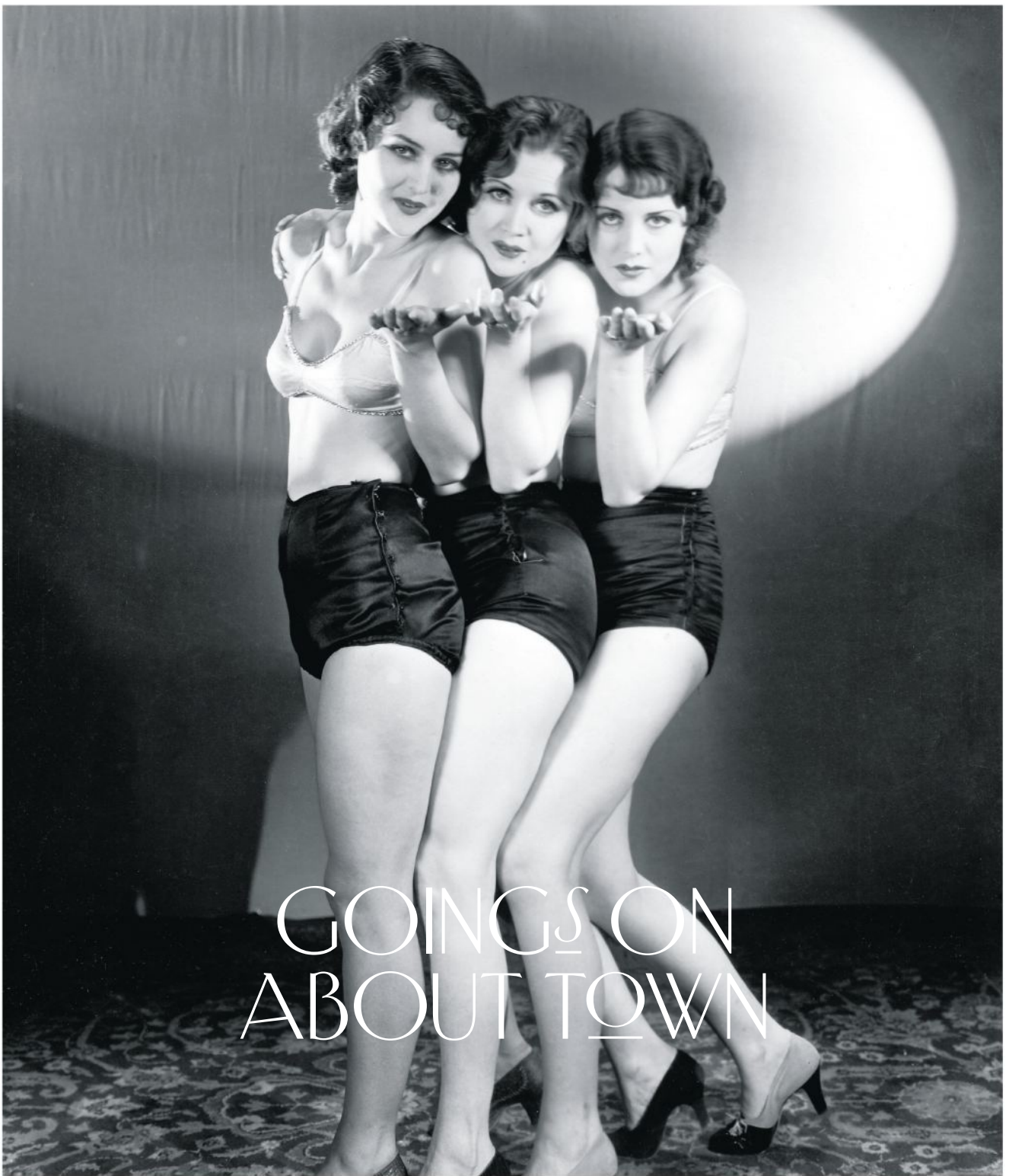
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

JANUARY 2014 WEDNESDAY 22ND THURSDAY 23RD FRIDAY 24TH SATURDAY 25TH SUNDAY 26TH MONDAY 27TH TUESDAY 28TH

TALKING PICTURES SEEM made for singing and dancing, but movie musicals didn't take off in earnest until Busby Berkeley invigorated the genre with "42nd Street," from 1933. His follow-up, "Gold Diggers of 1933"—including the three chorines seen here—is featured in a survey of fourteen musicals, opening Jan. 24 at Museum of the Moving Image. From the first scene, a vast production number in which Ginger Rogers sings "We're in the Money," Berkeley proves that for a musical to come alive it's the camera that has to dance. The series spotlights directorial originality in the filming of musical performance, as with the histrionic energy of Bob Fosse in "All That Jazz"; the baroque stylings of Vincente Minnelli in a trio of films that includes "An American in Paris"; and the naturalistic fury of Martin Scorsese in the drama "New York, New York."

ART | CLASSICAL MUSIC
FOOD & DRINK
MOVIES | THE THEATRE
NIGHT LIFE | DANCE
ABOVE & BEYOND



"Untitled (Woman Playing Solitaire)," from the "Kitchen Table Series" (1990), by Carrie Mae Weems.



A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Carrie Mae Weems's cultural diplomacy at the Guggenheim.

IN 1990, THE AMERICAN photographer Carrie Mae Weems staged a series of black-and-white scenes at her own kitchen table, starring herself, alone and with other models. These weren't straight-up self-portraits any more than Cindy Sherman's "Film Stills" were outtakes from movies. Alternating the pictures with framed panels of folkloric text, Weems distilled complexities of race, class, and gender into the story of a black Everywoman who was defined not just by her relationships—as a lover, mother, breadwinner, friend—but by her comfort with solitude. In the process, she elevated the sapless polemics of identity politics to the lush realm of neorealism.

Weems is now sixty. Since that career-making project, her gimlet-eyed, starkly

lyrical meditations on what constitutes ideas of difference have earned her a MacArthur "genius" grant, a Medal of Arts from the U.S. State Department, and a survey of thirty years' worth of work that opens this week at the Guggenheim. (The exhibition was organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, in Nashville, Tennessee; New York is its fifth and final stop.)

"Of course, I'm thrilled," Weems said, several days before the show opened. "I'm the first African-American woman to have a retrospective at the Guggenheim. Not to sound pretentious, but I *should* be having a show there. By now, it should be a moot point for a black artist—but it's not." She said she'd be just as happy if the museum were surveying someone else, mentioning

a few mid-career names, including Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, and Lyle Ashton Harris. "Of course, I might be lying to myself," she said. "But I'm not as interested in my own career as I am in moving a kind of cultural diplomacy forward."

One such advance followed Weems's 1995 series "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried," for which she enlarged daguerreotypes of African-American subjects, colored them red, and overlaid them with text. A portrait of a young woman, who is naked and turned sideways in front of the camera, reads, "You became a scientific profile." Superimposed on another photograph, of an elegantly attired woman gazing frankly ahead, are the words "Some said you were the spitting image of evil." The original pictures are in the archives of Harvard University, which threatened to sue Weems over their use but ended up acquiring the series for its collection.

Still, for an artist whose subsequent works have been set against the monuments of ancient Rome and the museums of Europe—not to mention the fabulous fashion show Weems staged for her 2009 color video "Afro-Chic"—the label "political" can feel constraining. "I think it's the easiest way of dealing with me," Weems said. "It's expedient, just like reducing things to my race or my gender. But I am not a political artist." On April 25, she will gather a group of artists, writers, choreographers, and musicians for a weekend of public programs at the Guggenheim, to join her in "thinking about what the cultural process of brown people has been." The title of one event reads like a synopsis of Weems's historical consciousness, her spirit of optimism, her fascination with language, and her sense of humor: "Past Tense, Future Perfect."

—Andrea K. Scott

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Museum of Modern Art

Isa Genzken

The German sculptor's sporadic output, abrupt stylistic changes, and personal vagaries have kept her at the margins of art-world notice, until now. This retrospective finds coherence in works that range from minimalist sculpture, charged with cryptic emotions, from the nineteen-seventies, to recent hilarious assemblages, featuring plastic toys and gussied-up mannequins, which secrete a steely aesthetic discipline. Unifying it all is a brash spirit that is strangely both celebratory and bedevilled. Genzken takes on the ideals of modern art and architecture along with the joys and the anxieties of life in contemporary cities. Her work employs vernacular materials, pop-cultural allusions, and seemingly slapdash procedures to mock—while also exploiting—the passive-aggressive obduracy of classic minimalism. Getting to the point of taking Genzken seriously requires an effort of trust, but the payoff is exhilarating. Through March 10.

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Daniel Gordon

With these elaborately collaged still-lives of material sourced from the Internet and reconstructed in 3-D, the Brooklyn-based photographer continues to make some of the most dazzling and disorienting pictures around. Except for two multilayered silhouette portraits of young women, Gordon's subjects are vividly colored tabletop arrangements of flowers, fruit, ceramic vases, and a stray lobster or zucchini on patterned backdrops in the Matisse mode. The confusion between the real and the constructed is almost impossible to resolve; examined closely, the most straightforward elements are revealed as clever fictions, both shrewd and entertaining. Through Feb. 7. (Horticultural Society of New York, 148 W. 37th St. 212-757-0915.)

Massimo Vitali

The Italian photographer's very big color pictures of beaches in Brazil, Sardinia, Crete, and Lampedusa are especially seductive on a cold winter day. Vitali captures broad and marvelously detailed vistas dotted with people in bathing suits. He's been making variations on this theme since 1995, and the work's skillful predictability is hardly affected by the addition, in two instances, of small, captioned news images hung as sidebars, like bulletins from a more troubled world. Two overhead views of a busy food market in São Paulo hint at a welcome new direction. Through Feb. 16. (Benrubi, 41 E. 57th St. 212-888-6007.)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Ingrid Calame

Since the mid-nineties, the Los Angeles-based painter has been turning marks she encounters in prosaic sites (the

bottom of an abandoned swimming pool, the floor of a steel mill) into formalist eye candy. For the large wall drawing here, she traced tire tracks at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and transferred the results to the gallery walls using powdered pigment. The feathery-edged design alternately suggests fuzzy mold, flocked wallpaper, topographical maps, migratory patterns, and the lines of an EKG, all skidding around the room in a decorative whirl. But Calame's formulaic approach could benefit from less control and more risk. Through Feb. 8. (Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500.)

Stan Douglas

"Luanda-Kinshasa," the newest video by the great Canadian artist, is a historical fiction: what if Miles Davis, so open to funk and Indian classical music in his 1972 record "On the Corner," had gone on to jam with the Afrobeat crowd? Reconstructing the CBS Thirtieth Street Studio in a Greenpoint church, Douglas assembles a band that never existed (led by Jason Moran, in a floppy-collared, seventies shirt) to play tunes that recall another era. Like many of the artist's previous feats, this one is bogglingly dense: the cinematography pays homage to Godard's "Sympathy for the Devil," and the audio and video tracks are distinct, permuted in every possible combination for a running time of more than six hours. Parse it, probe it, watch it flower—or just sit back and groove. Through Feb. 22 (Zwirner, 533 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)

Yvonne Jacquette

The octogenarian painter exhibits her familiar aerial landscapes—Bar Harbor, a Colorado town in the Rockies—but the most stimulating works here present a New York that's teeming and depopulated at once. With pointillist detail, Jacquette depicts the architecture of the city, from the Hayden Planetarium to the Bank of America tower, on Sixth Avenue, and the quirky palette and off-kilter perspectives render the most familiar scenes strange. In "Whitney Museum Under Construction II," completed last year and apparently painted from a room at the Standard Hotel, the construction site and the Hudson River bleed into each other, as rising steel girders and highway merge in a frenzy of red and blue stripes. Through Feb. 8. (DC Moore, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-247-2111.)

Tanya Marcuse

At first glance, the New York photographer's large, richly colored pictures of fruit rotting on the ground look like details of antique tapestries. Seesawing between the gorgeous and the grotesque, the work has more in common with Cindy Sherman's mold and mucus landscapes. Marcuse's densely packed images are just as wild and obsessive; despite their obvious, unnatural staging,

they feel almost alarmingly out of control. Everything here is overripe and swarming. Cicadas, snakes, a bat, and a desiccated frog nestle among dead leaves, along with wrinkled, decaying apples as fleshy and pale as bloated corpses. Through Feb. 22. (Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410.)

Richard Serra

He does it again. The greatest yet of Serra's curvy steel labyrinths is "Inside Out," on Twenty-first Street (closing Feb. 8): more than eighty feet long, forty wide, and thirteen high, made of two-inch-thick, tenderly red-rusted plates. Three of four new angular steelworks, on Twenty-fourth Street, deploy flat plates in ranks, a star configuration, and leanings against a wall; the fourth stacks massive blocks. Ancient Egyptians, when the pyramids premiered, may have felt as we do here: happily intimidated, vicariously proud. Through March 15. (Gagosian, 522 W. 21st St. 212-741-1717; 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111.)

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

"Come Like Shadows"

This absorbing if uneven group show, curated by the art critic David Cohen, takes its title from a line from "Macbeth," but its mood is more playful innuendo than Shakespearean doom. Facts, context, and details are obscured by intrusions, overlaps, and absences. The figures in Steve Locke's erotic lithographs perform sexual acts on invisible partners, and in Kerstin Drechsel's sketchily painted scenes in a lesbian night club the viewer is implicated as a voyeur. Some works illustrate their inclusion too literally (a starkly Hopperesque scene of a house by Duncan Hannah), while others feel like they wandered in from another show (Will Cotton's fashion illustrations of the actress Elle Fanning). The high point is an energetic Matt Bollinger painting in which, like a layered off-register silk-screen, a boy's face is shown twice, as if recording the passage of time. Through Feb. 16. (Zürcher Studio, 33 Bleecker St. 212-777-0790.)

OF NOTE "BACHELOR MACHINES"

Borrowing its title from the landmark 1975 exhibition curated by the Swiss polymath Harald Szeemann, this brainy, penetrating group show looks again at the eroticism of technology and the Duchampian interplay of bodies and engines. A sculpture by Carissa Rodriguez outfits a womblike ceramic vase with razor blades; an assemblage by Justin Beal, incorporating a silver fruit dish on a paint-splattered mechanical base, bears residues of life but no clear sign of it. Strongest of all are the paintings of James Hoff, who investigates culturally specific psychosomatic disorders: "Alien Hand Syndrome," for example, which turns a person's extremities ungovernable, as in "Dr. Strangelove." Through Feb. 2. (Room East, 41 Orchard St. 212-226-7108.)

MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—"Piero della Francesca: Personal Encounters." Through March 30.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—"Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New." Through April 21.

MOMA PSI

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

WHITNEY MUSEUM

Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—"Rituals of Rented Island." Through Feb. 2.

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—"Carrie Mae Weems." Opens Jan. 24.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM

200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—"Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey." Through March 9.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

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

JEWISH MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—"Art Spiegelman's Co-Mix: A Retrospective." Through March 23.

GALLERIES SHORT LIST

UPTOWN

Richard Artschwager
Gagosian

980 Madison Ave., at 76th St.
212-744-2313. Through Feb. 22.

Thomas Struth

Marian Goodman
24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160.
Through Feb. 22.

CHELSEA

Wade Guyton
Petzel

456 W. 18th St. 212-680-9467.
Through Feb. 22.

Josephine Halvorsen

Sikkema Jenkins
530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.
Opens Jan. 23.

DOWNTOWN

Sarah Crowner
Beauchene

327 Broome St. 212-375-8043.
Through Feb. 2.

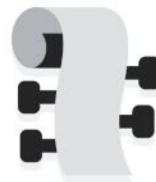
"Stay in Love"

Cooley
107 Norfolk St. 212-680-0564.

Gitlen

122 Norfolk St. 212-274-0761.
Through Feb. 2.

CLASSICAL MUSIC



OPERA

Metropolitan Opera

Joseph Calleja's irrepressibly sunny singing and bighearted presence enliven what would otherwise be a standard-issue performance of the Met's tried-and-true production of **"La Bohème."** Joining his dreamy, love-struck Rodolfo in Franco Zeffirelli's picturesque Parisian cityscapes are Alexey Markov's alluringly voiced Marcello, Irina Lungu's sympathetic Musetta, and the Mimi of Maija Kovaleska, a regular but minor presence on the Met's roster. Stefano Ranzani's brisk tempos convey the brash enthusiasm of Puccini's young bohemians but pass too quickly through the score's lovelier, more expansive moments. (Jan. 22 at 7:30 and Jan. 25 at 8.) • **Also playing:** Renée Fleming's career in opera may have slowed down a bit lately, but she remains indispensable in a number of key roles. She returns this week to lead the cast in **"Rusalka,"** portraying the gentle wood sprite who yearns to love like human beings. Three outstanding artists, Piotr Beczala, Dolora Zajick, and John Relyea, join her; Yannick Nézet-Séguin, a nimble and kinetic young conductor, leads Dvořák's richly symphonic score. (Jan. 23 and Jan. 27 at 7:30.) • A revival of **"Madama Butterfly"** features Amanda Echalaz, Bryan Hymel (a young tenor of exceptional promise), Elizabeth DeShong, and Scott Hendricks; Philippe Auguin. (Jan. 24 and Jan. 28 at 7:30.) • Donizetti's **"L'Elisir d'Amore,"** which debuted in 2012, features its original Adina, Anna Netrebko, and conductor, Maurizio Benini, with Ramón Vargas, Nicola Alaimo, and Erwin Schrott joining Netrebko in the leading roles. (Jan. 25 at 1.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic

The charismatic young cellist Gautier Capuçon, whose career has been building for a decade, makes his Philharmonic debut this week with a trusty hand at the podium, Andrey Boreyko; he plays Shostakovich's probing First Cello Concerto at the center of an all-Russian program that begins with "The Enchanted Kingdom," by the Rimsky-Korsakov protégé Nikolai Tcherepnin, and concludes with Tchaikovsky's irresistible Suite No. 3 in G Major. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Jan. 23 at 7:30, Jan. 24 at 2, and Jan. 25 at 8.)

Taka Kigawa and Ensemble LPR

The chic downtown music club's in-house chamber orchestra has a persuasive soloist in its upcoming program: Kigawa, long a New York new-music fixture, who will perform the beautiful and daunting Piano Concerto by Ligeti as well as solo works by Zosha Di Castri and Dai Fujikura. The concert also features a work by Brad Lubman and a classic by Varèse (**"Octandre"**). (158 Bleecker St. lprnyc.com. Jan. 24 at 8.)

Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

The conductorless chamber orchestra's all-Beethoven program—the **"Coriolan"** Overture, the Second Symphony, and the Piano Concerto No. 5, **"Emperor"**—should bring its legendary technical skill and stylistic élan to the fore; the guest artist is the 2009 Van Cliburn Competition gold medalist Nobuyuki Tsujii, who has been blind since birth. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Jan. 25 at 7.)

RECITALS

Simone Dinnerstein

The sensitive and deliberative young pianist, known for her traditionalism, offers a venue-appropriate program at the forward-looking Miller Theatre; it features works by George Crumb and Nico Muhly (a New York premiere) in addition to music by Bach and Beethoven (the towering, valedictory Sonata No. 32 in C Minor). (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. Jan. 23 at 8.)

"Focus!" Festival: "Alfred Schnittke's World"

Joel Sachs and his New Juilliard Ensemble celebrate what would have been the eightieth birthday of the Russian-German composer, a hugely influential figure whose explosively energetic and eclectic music helped define the stylistic convulsions of the nineteen-eighties and nineties. The series of six concerts begins with a program, conducted by Sachs, that offers Schnittke's Symphony No. 4 as well as works by two esteemed colleagues, Arvo Pärt and Giya Kancheli (**"Daytime Prayers"**). (Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, Juilliard School. Jan. 24 at 8. Free tickets are available at the Juilliard box office. Through Jan. 31.)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Classical grace dominates the Society's next concert, a program featuring Schubert's dulcet one-meeting

String Trio, Spohr's Grand Nonetto in F Major, and Beethoven's Septet in E-Flat Major. The musicians include the violinist Elmar Oliveira, the clarinetist Romie de Guise-Langlois, and the hornist Radovan Vlatković. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. Jan. 26 at 5.)

Paul Appleby

The clarion young tenor, who took the lead role in the Metropolitan Opera's recent production of Nico Muhly's **"Two Boys,"** offers a solo recital at Pace University's Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts, having secured two eminent pianists—both associated with the Met—to assist him. In the first half, Ken Noda accompanies him in songs by Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann (selections from **"Myrthen"**); after intermission, Appleby collaborates with Brian Zeger in songs by Britten (with texts by Auden), Bernstein, John Harbison, and John Musto. (3 Spruce St. 866-811-4111. Jan. 26 at 3.)

Marc-André Hamelin

Hamelin, a pianist whose style blends fiery bravura technique with a cool, analytical temperament, has always been an advocate for composers off the beaten track—a society that increasingly includes himself. He plays his **"Barcarolle"** at the head of a program at Zankel Hall that also includes Medtner's arch-Romantic Sonata in E Minor (**"Night Wind"**) and Schubert's Four Impromptus, D. 935. (212-247-7800. Jan. 27 at 7:30.)

Anne Sofie von Otter and Emanuel Ax

The lyrical majesty of Brahms is the focus of this concert by two beloved veteran artists. The mezzo-soprano sings such favorite lieder as **"Ständchen"** and **"Auf dem Kirchhofe"** (as well as the New York premiere of Nico Muhly's **"So Many Things,"** a Brahms tribute); the pianist not only accompanies her but also performs a selection of solo Intermezzi from Brahms's Opp. 117 and 118 collections. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Jan. 28 at 8.)

OF NOTE THE HILLIARD ENSEMBLE: "ARKHANGELOS"

The elegant and exacting male vocal quartet will disband at the end of this, its fortieth-anniversary season. Its New York farewell concert, held at the Temple of Dendur, certainly has sweep, a survey of a thousand years of Christian music that includes selections from medieval France, Renaissance England, and our own time (by Arvo Pärt, among others). (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Jan. 22 at 7.)



GOINGS ON, ONLINE

See more classical events at nyr.kr/classical, including a New York Festival of Song **"NYFOS Next"** concert of contemporary vocal music, hosted by Mark Adamo, at OPERA America's National Opera Center.

For more night-life listings, including information about the **"Masters of Ceremony"** hip-hop reunion, at Radio City Music Hall, and Bobby McFerrin, at Jazz at Lincoln Center, visit nyr.kr/nightlife.



Chris Lee

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FOOD & DRINK

BAR TAB WISE MEN

355 Bowery (646-590-4244)

You enter this night spot by walking through an inviting, larger-than-life photograph from the seventies that's superimposed on its outside wall. It shows five stylish women in front of a Chinatown steak house run by the family of Christina Chin, a fashion-magazine creative director, who opened the bar last year with her friends Danielle Levitt, a photographer, and Caroleyn Ng. Its motto is "Friends always come first." "Two of the owners grew up together," a bartender named Patrick said on a recent evening. He wore a skinny tie and had the hair style of a young Crispin Glover. The bar's interior is retro L.E.S.: red-and-black, geometric, boozy, meaty, with lamps that resemble chess players in "Through the Looking Glass." As the playlist veered pleasantly through eras—Devo, the Smiths, Small Black—Patrick flamed orange peels and served tasty, formidable cocktails, including a Thief in the Night and a Burlington, which featured bourbon, Calvados, lemon juice, and a dash of maple syrup. ("Vermont or Quebec?" a Canadian customer asked.) On weekends, the regulars—editors, artists, locals—dance to records spun by AndrewAndrew, Jah Cousteau, or, recently, Nick Zinner, from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. "The dancing gets going," Patrick said. "It's friendly and welcoming, but definitely, like, sexy. People are definitely doing their sexy thing."

—Sarah Larson



TABLES FOR TWO

ROTISSERIE GEORGETTE

14 E. 60th St. (212-390-8060)

GEORGETTE FARKAS WAS THE HEAD of public relations for Daniel Boulud, the famous French chef, when she decided to open a French place of her own. Rotisserie Georgette has a simple conceit—roast chicken—but it's a strikingly sophisticated space, with a clientele to match. The restaurant has many draws, but the second-best thing about it is its location. It's on the Upper East Side, which means there is finally somewhere to go for something other than a salad after a hectic morning with the crowds at the Met. The best thing about the restaurant is the smell coming from the giant brass-trimmed ovens at the back of the dining room, where Pennsylvania chickens roast slowly in rotation. You can get one stuffed with wild mushrooms, draped with two slabs of seared foie gras, and served with a side of double entendre (it's called Poule de Luxe, slang for a woman with expensive tastes), but the bird is better in an unadorned state, with a sauce of herbes de Provence, enough garlic to kick a cold, and sturdy pommes frites for mopping-up duties.

Diverging from the restaurant's signature dish is not encouraged by the waitstaff, many of whom are French and have strong and abundant opinions on how the meal should proceed. It's easiest to sink into one of the red banquettes, or a high-backed carriage chair up front, and surrender to the subtle opulence of the experience. Beyond the *poulet rôti*, options are scarce anyhow, and are dominated by other roasted preparations, like an appetizer of sap-green leeks, rendered velvety and sweet by the oven. Under the heading "Never Enough Potatoes," there's a stuffed, crisped Idaho potato, which is filled with creamy Parmesan mash to prove the point. What else is good? The pepper steak has a memorable crust. And that great Gallic bar snack *oeufs mayo* is topped with various salty whimsies—tapenade, chorizo, black truffle—and comes on a pewter tray. (The only thing to say about the cocktails is stick with wine, but veering between overwrought and watery mixed drinks seems an authentically French shortcoming.)

Dessert may not be up to you. At lunch, a parfait of prune-Armagnac ice cream and crumbled cookies might appear; at dinner, a tarte tatin. The tarte comes with crème fraîche, ladled tableside with dramatic flair, and at that point of exquisite freshness where it tastes more sharp than sweet. Order Muscadet and the selection will be waved away; Cognac arrives instead. (A gleeful "Oops, I poured too much!" accompanied an afternoon-ending glass.) On leaving, a prescription for the next day is given: the leftover chicken should be made into a sandwich. Use some mustard. It will taste even better than it did today. The annoying thing about all this French bossiness is that they're right, of course.

—Amelia Lester

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MOVIES



OPENING

AATSINKI

A documentary, directed by Jessica Oreck, about a family of reindeer herders in rural Finland. In Finnish. Opening Jan. 24. (IFC Center.)

GLORIA

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Jan. 24. (In limited release.)

I, FRANKENSTEIN

A fantasy, directed by Stuart Beattie, about a battle between Frankenstein's monster (Aaron Eckhart) and a horde of immortal demons. Opening Jan. 24. (In wide release.)

OLD GOATS

Taylor Gutferson directed this comedy, about three elderly men on Bainbridge Island who confront the challenges of aging. Opening Jan. 24. (Cinema Village.)

STRANGER BY THE LAKE

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Jan. 24. (In limited release.)

24 EXPOSURES

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Jan. 24. (In limited release.)

VISITORS

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Jan. 24. (In limited release.)

ALSO PLAYING

G.B.F.: In limited release.

Ride Along: In wide release.

When I Saw You: Museum of Modern Art.

NOW PLAYING

Cleo from 5 to 7

One of the few films directed by a woman in which the viewer can sense a difference. The story is about the moods of a beautiful, chic popular singer (Corinne Marchand) during the two hours she waits to find out if she has cancer. Childish and fearful, she consults her horoscope and goes to a fortune-teller; she buys a hat; she rehearses a song; she cries. And, throughout, the writer-director, Agnès Varda, sustains an unsentimental yet subjective tone that is almost unique in the history of movies. With Antoine Bourseiller, Dorothée Blanck, and Dominique Davray. In French. Released in 1962. —*Pauline Kael* (French Institute Alliance Française; Jan. 28.)

Gloria

Gloria (Paulina García), a fifty-fiveish divorcée who's in good shape and eager for men, regularly visits what appear to be singles bars for the middle-aged in Santiago, Chile. She meets a somewhat older man, Rodolfo (Sergio Hernández), who has a fine, modulated voice and melancholy eyes, and they begin an affair. The Chilean director Sebastián Lelio shoots their explicit sex scenes matter-of-factly; he demonstrates strikingly good sense, which puts American squeamishness to shame. The affair has its ups and downs, and Lelio (working with the screenwriter Gonzalo Maza) chronicles a strange, upsetting month or two in Gloria's life during which everything threatens to unravel. He gives her lonely moments when small incidents and even the quiet passing of time feel like an interrogation of her life. The film grows in power—it's unnerving and reassuring at the same time. In Spanish. —*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 1/20/14.) (In limited 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 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 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. —*Anthony Lane* (12/9/13) (In wide release.)

Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit

An extremely sinister Russian oligarch, Viktor Cherevin (Kenneth Branagh), commanding a chic black-on-black office among the brilliant towers of the new Moscow, plans to unleash a terrorist attack on American soil and then sink the country's economy by selling billions in treasury bonds. Only Jack Ryan (a likable Chris Pine), a newly recruited young C.I.A. analyst, can stop him. The movie features Tom Clancy's signature character and reflects the author's end-is-nigh alarmism, but since it's not based on any of his novels, it's distressingly shorn of his ecstatic talk about ordnance—armaments, calibres, and the like. Branagh is also the director; the crisp, gleaming images are by the cinematographer, Haris Zambarloukos; the lightning-fast editing is by Martin Walsh. With Kevin Costner, as the super-agent who recruits Ryan, and Keira Knightley, working her mouth and arms desperately, as Ryan's fiancée. —*D.D.* (1/20/14) (In wide release.)

Labor Day

The year is 1987, and a teen-age boy named Henry (Gattlin Griffith) lives the quiet life with Adele (Kate Winslet), his divorced mother. Their routine is interrupted by Frank (Josh Brolin), a convicted murderer who has fled from custody and holes up in their home over the Labor Day weekend. His initial air of menace fades, and soon—absurdly soon, you might think—he becomes a part of the family, teaching Henry a range of manly skills and seducing the frail and loveless Adele. The seduction itself is waged largely by euphemism, as when Frank gets his hands all moist and juicy with a dash of home baking; at times like this, the movie—the first truly serious and joke-free tale to be directed by Jason Reitman—offers

more to laugh at than most of his comedies do. It looks swell, and Winslet adds another portrait of pained watchfulness to her gallery of suffering heroines, but the result feels like a richly implausible dream disguised as a soulful drama. —*A.L.* (1/13/14) (In limited release.)

Lone Survivor

The director Peter Berg's exciting and harrowing re-creation of an actual operation that took place in Afghanistan in 2005. The story involves four members of a Navy SEAL team (played by Mark Wahlberg, Taylor Kitsch, Ben Foster, and Emile Hirsch) who get cut off in Taliban territory and continue to fight, in a treacherously rocky terrain, against a horde of enemy warriors and despite multiple wounds. The heart of the movie is combat—in particular, a long sequence that Berg films with great attention to spatial organization and to blood and suffering, too. —*D.D.* (1/6/14) (In wide release.)

Love Me Tonight

Cleverness squared equals brilliance in this scintillating 1932 musical comedy, starring Maurice Chevalier as an amorous tailor and Jeanette MacDonald as a princess who thinks he's a nobleman. This collaboration between the visual stylist Rouben Mamoulian and the songwriters Rodgers and Hart has a feathery dexterity. After Chevalier starts to sing "Isn't It Romantic" in his Paris shop, the number gets continued by others in a cab and on a troop train, on a march and in a Gypsy camp, until it's picked up by MacDonald on her balcony; it's a blissful expression of love as a feeling that can span a country and wed opposites. Chevalier is ebullient, MacDonald ardent and at ease with her own sensational figure. The cast includes the witty, gorgeous Myrna Loy, as a man-hungry aristocrat, and Hollywood's favorite upper-crust patriarch, C. Aubrey Smith, who in one of many strokes of comic ingenuity warbles a verse or two. —*Michael Sragow* (Museum of the Moving Image; Jan. 26.)

The Past

An Iranian man, Ahmad (Ali Mossaffa), 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 there



FRONT ROW

Richard Brody discusses classic movie musicals.



DVD OF THE WEEK

A video discussion of Edgar G. Ulmer's "Carnegie Hall," from 1947, in our digital edition.

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.)

That Old Dream That Moves

In the lambent sunshine of rural southern France, a vast and decrepit factory—now nearly empty—is being stripped of its vestigial machinery by its few remaining laborers in anticipation of their own impending layoff. One of them, the young, slender, acerbic, and standoffish Jacques (Pierre Louis-Calixte), is fiercely devoted to the task at hand. He's unconcerned about the layoff and free-spiritedly sanguine about life after the factory; unlike his colleagues, he has no wife and no children. Jacques is gay, and he finds himself increasingly drawn to the lumpy middle-class project manager, Donand (Jean-Marie Combelles). For Alain Guiraudie, the director of this 2001 featurette, the world of physical labor is a man's world; the bluff nudity of the locker room vibrates with erotic tension, and the strenuous exertions in enforced close proximity emit hormonal shock waves. With poised and incisive images, the director finds the energizing fault lines in the loam of local culture and melds hulking industrial strength with the luminous enticements of the landscape. In French.—*Richard Brody* (Film Society of Lincoln Center; Jan. 25 and Jan. 29-30.)

There Was a Father

This wartime drama by Yasujiro Ozu, from 1942, spans about fifteen years in the life of a fractured family. The widower Shuhei Horikawa (the Ozu regular Chishu Ryu), a middle-school teacher, struggles to raise his young son, Ryohei (Shuji Sano), and struggles all the more after he quits his job: during a class trip, one of his students dies in a boating accident, and Shuhei blames himself. He takes refuge in a small town and sends Ryohei to boarding school; in the effort to make a living, he moves to distant Tokyo and sees his son even less frequently. Ozu telescopes time with deft audacity: the grown Ryohei, also a teacher, finds himself posted far from Tokyo and still yearns to see his father. But within the framework of the aching melodrama the director daringly highlights the weight of tradition and duty that crushes the

individual spirit. In such chilling nuances as Shuhei's catastrophically silent and implacable grief, his starchy demands of fealty to work, his joyful anticipation of Ryohei's military service, and Ryohei's calm lessons on the destructive properties of TNT, Ozu reveals a society heading blindly toward the abyss and destroying its future in the name of the past. In Japanese.—*R.B.* (Anthology Film Archives; Jan. 24 and Jan. 26.)

24 Exposures

Billy (Adam Wingard), a photographer who specializes in what he calls "personal fetish photos"—all featuring young women in various states of undress and often pretending to be victims of violence—is questioned by a detective (Simon Barrett) who is investigating a series of unsolved murders. Meanwhile, Billy's relationship with his girlfriend, Alex (Caroline White), is tested twice—first, by his attraction to one of his models, Callie (Sophia Takal), who joins the couple for a threesome, then, by the informal photo shoot he arranges at home with a new participant, Rebecca (Helen Rogers), a waitress. In this sleek yet confessional drama by the prolific filmmaker Joe Swanberg, the boundaries of art and life are probed with a knowing yet uneasy directness. Billy admits that his photographs arise from his own fantasies and desires, yet struggles to keep them from becoming realities even as he stages them in studios and on location. The incongruously glossy camerawork (by Adam Pinney) suggests precisely the sort of soft-core saleability that Billy's—and Swanberg's—self-revelations skirt. As Billy attracts new models for his work, the movie audaciously displays the fantasies—and, perhaps, the realities—that these women, too, are pursuing.—*R.B.* (IFC Center.)

Visitors

A calculated philosophical emptiness pervades the solemnly contemplative, minutely gliding, powdery-matte images of this visual symphony by the director Godfrey Reggio. Silent portraits in extreme close-up—first, of a calm gorilla, followed by a series of model-like people (with an emphasis on children) staring into the camera—alternate with architectural views of skyscrapers under time-lapse clouds darting through darkened skies, the ruins of an amusement park, the lunar surface, a garbage dump, all set to insistent, wall-to-wall music by Philip Glass. The postcard profundity of the luxury images befits a commercial in search of a product; a single ordinary word from any participant would shatter the illusion of substance. In its superficial depth, the movie resembles a cinematic mantra involving the words "people" and "planet." But in one extended sequence, showing blasted trees in a swamp, Glass's music

reaches a high level of invention; the gripping performance, conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, shunts the bland images into oblivion.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

Wanda

The actress Barbara Loden's only film as a director, from 1970, is a harrowing, epiphanic masterwork. She also stars as the title character, Wanda Goronski, a pallid wraith in an anthracite landscape. Reduced to anomie by the drudgery and banality of a mining town, she flees her husband and young children and rides off with a buttoned-down, steely-eyed drifter (Michael Higgins). Unbeknownst to her, he is a robber on the run as well as a fussy, domineering brute who improves her manners and her wardrobe even while launching her on a criminal path. Though suspicious from the start, Wanda is ready for anything that makes her feel alive—and the movie matches her in audacity and sensibility. Loden's indelible depiction of Wanda's degradation, resistance, and resignation blends intense psychological realism with a spontaneous, quasi-musical mastery of form. Her grainy images, with their attention to place, light, and detail, have an intimate, sculptural texture; they give matter a soul.—*R.B.* (Nitehawk Cinema; Jan. 28.)

The Wolf of Wall Street

Martin Scorsese's three-hour burlesque of loathsome, crooked financial activity and extravagant personal debauchery is meant to epitomize everything that has gone wrong with the money culture. Leonardo DiCaprio's Jordan Belfort (a real-world scoundrel and swindler) comes right at us, narrating directly to the camera, like a low-rent Richard III; he pitches us his shady deals and his druggery, manic life. At the brokerage that Belfort sets up, DiCaprio, addressing the troops, arches his back, nearly swallows the mike, and preaches the gospel of winning, killing, and triumphing. Physically, DiCaprio's work is astounding, but it's also one of the most completely externalized performances in movie history—Jordan Belfort is not, in the end, very interesting. Neither is the movie: Scorsese stages the money-making, orgies, and drug-taking with such jubilant, unreflective vitality that they might be part of a Broadway musical—a knock-the-tourists-dead show called "Greed!" With Jonah Hill, as Belfort's henchman; Kyle Chandler, as the relentless and surprisingly subtle F.B.I. agent who pursues Belfort; and Margot Robbie, as the inevitable blond trophy wife. Rodrigo Prieto did the cinematography, some of it spectacular, and Terence Winter, adapting Belfort's boastful book, creates flurries of raucously cynical dialogue.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

Titles in bold are reviewed.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"Cinema Conservancy Screening Series." Jan. 22 at 8:45: "Afraid of Everything" (1999, David Barker). • "Artists Space Presents." Jan. 23 at 7:30: "Memories of Underdevelopment" (1968, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea). • "Essential Cinema." Jan. 24 at 7 and Jan. 25 at 9: "I Was Born, But..." (1932, Yasujiro Ozu; silent). • Jan. 24 at 9:15 and Jan. 26 at 4: "There Was a Father." • Jan. 25 at 4:45 and Jan. 26 at 6: "The Rules of the Game" (1939, Jean Renoir). • Jan. 25 at 7 and Jan. 26 at 8:30: "The Flowers of St. Francis" (1949, Roberto Rossellini).

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Jan. 24-30 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:30: "My Darling Clementine" (1946, John Ford).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—The films of Alain Guiraudie. Jan. 24 at 9:30, Jan. 26 at 7, and Jan. 28 at 9: "The King of Escape" (2009). • Jan. 25 at 5, Jan. 29 at 9:15, and Jan. 30 at 7: "That Old Dream That Moves." • Jan. 25 at 7 and Jan. 26 at 3 and 9: "Time Has Come" (2005). • Jan. 26 at 5, Jan. 28 at 7, and Jan. 30 at 9: "Sunshine for the Scoundrels" (2001).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE

FRANÇAISE

55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—"Remastered and Restored: Treasures of French Cinema." Jan. 28 at 4 and 7:30: "Cleo from 5 to 7." The 7:30 screening will be introduced by the novelist Catherine Millet.

JAPAN SOCIETY

333 E. 47th St. (212-832-1155)—"A Tribute to Donald Richie." Jan. 24 at 7: "Himatsuri" (1985, Mitsuo Yanagimachi), introduced by the writer Ian Buruma.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

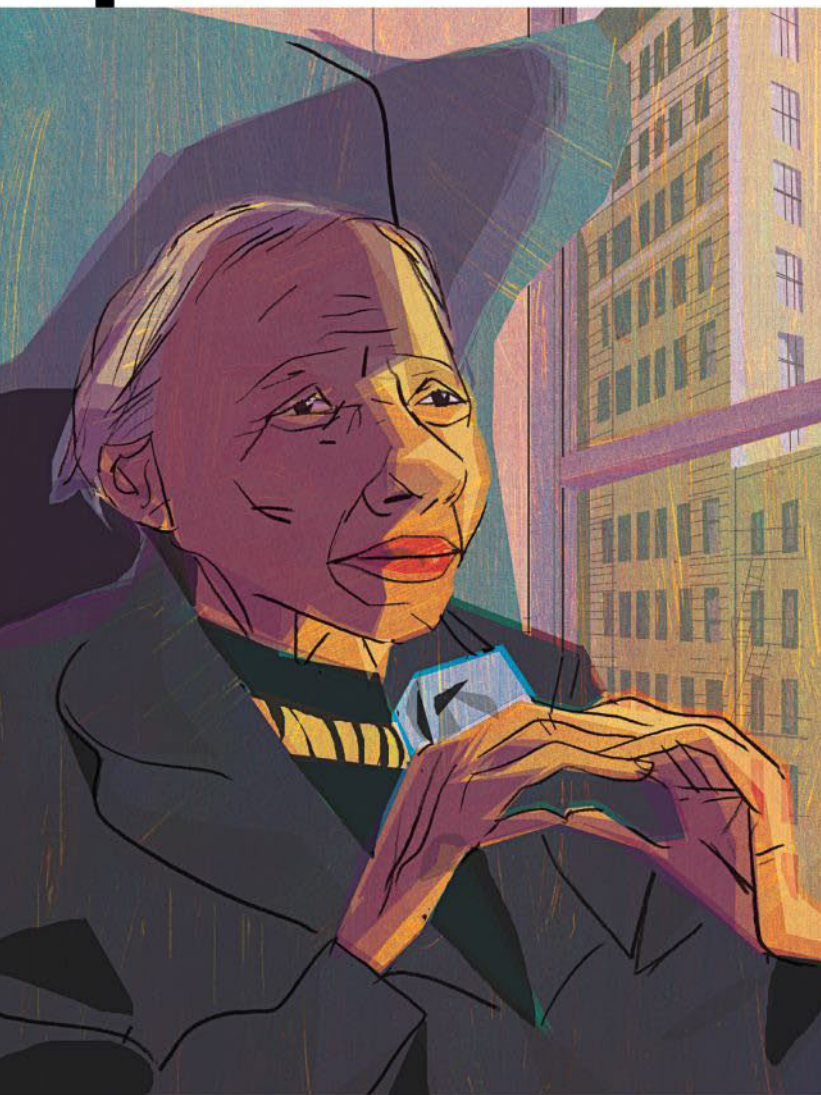
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"An Auteurist History of Film." Jan. 22-24 at 1:30: A documentary program, including "Ireland: The Tear and the Smile" (1961, Willard Van Dyke).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"See It Big! Musicals." Jan. 24 at 7: "All That Jazz" (1979, Bob Fosse). • Jan. 25 at 2: "The Sound of Music" (1964, Robert Wise). • Jan. 26 at 3:30: "Love Me Tonight." • Jan. 26 at 6: "Gigi" (1958, Vincente Minnelli).

NITEHAWK CINEMA

136 Metropolitan Ave. at Berry St., Williamsburg (718-384-3980)—"The Deuce." Jan. 23 at 9:30: "Cat People" (1982, Paul Schrader). • "VICE Presents: The Film Foundation Screening Series." Jan. 28 at 9:30: "Wanda."



GIRL TALK

La Mama celebrates the pioneering work of Adrienne Kennedy.

IN 1987, WHILE WORKING as an assistant in the *Village Voice's* art department, I came across a strikingly laid-out book. It had photographs of unknown black people mixed in with photographs of movie stars like Ingrid Bergman, Clark Gable, and Judy Garland. It was a memoir, of sorts, called "People Who Led to My Plays," by Adrienne Kennedy. I had never heard of her. This was the first paragraph: "More and more often as my plays are performed in colleges and taught in universities, people ask me . . . who influenced you to write in such a nonlinear way?" The book itself—a gorgeous amalgamation of black-American history, culture, and dreams—was nonlinear. I had never read such a representation of what it must be like for my sisters to live in the world—and I felt the same shock of recognition when I saw Kennedy's plays.

Following her marriage, in 1953, to Joseph Kennedy, a professor,

Adrienne Kennedy left her native Ohio for New York, and then moved to Ghana. This was in the heady days of pan-Africanism, and, by the time Kennedy returned to New York, the images that had accumulated in her head throughout so many voyages—a surreal world filled with family secrets, the evils and mysteries of European and religious history, the vulnerability and terror felt by black females—came together in her first major one-act, "Funnyhouse of a Negro," which she wrote in 1961. The Obie Award-winning play was co-produced in 1964 by Kennedy's then mentor, Edward Albee. It launched her career.

Kennedy went on to make experimental theatre at odds with the Black Arts Movement of the same time, which was spearheaded by Amiri Baraka in 1965. The movement called for a distinctly revolutionary theatre that reflected black life, especially following Malcolm X's death and the race riots in Harlem. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Kennedy made work—such as "A Lesson in Dead Language" and "An Evening with Dead Essex"—that had almost nothing to do with ideology. Her focus has always been on dislocation and femaleness. Her protagonists live in a surreal sphere where their bodies are at the mercy of their imaginations. They have been undone by racism; the ever-present spectre of Europe, with its "real" history and authority; American movies; and the hysteria, fear, and attraction underlying what light-skinned women think of their darker-skinned fathers or partners.

In her 1976 masterwork, "A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White," Kennedy takes some of the white-movie-star power that flooded her dreams as a child, changes it around, and puts the spotlight on a twisted, powerful femaleness. (None of the male movie stars speak in the play.) Indeed, one of the characters in the piece is Bette Davis, but Bette's parents are black, and she wonders aloud if, when she has her baby, she'll "turn into a river of blood and die."

In 1976, La Mama hosted an operatic version of Kennedy's outstanding 1966 play "A Rat's Mass," directed and composed by Cecil Taylor. Now, on Jan. 25, La Mama will present a panel that addresses Kennedy's life and work. Meanwhile JACK, a new arts center in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, is producing a revival of her 1989 play, "She Talks to Beethoven." Essentially a monologue, the piece deals with the same emotional territory that Kennedy covers in her memoir: the disparate elements of a mind at war with itself, and a body at war with that mind, trying to come to some kind of truce in a battle-scarred world.

—Hilton Als

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

The Bridges of Madison County

Jason Robert Brown wrote the music and lyrics and Marsha Norman wrote the book for this new musical, based on the novel by Robert James Waller. Kelli O'Hara and Steven Pasquale star; Bartlett Sher directs. In previews. (Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Intimacy

The New Group presents the world premiere of a comedy by Thomas Bradshaw, directed by Scott Elliott, about the surprises lurking within a racially diverse suburban community. In previews. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

Outside Mullingar

Brian 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. In previews. Opens Jan. 23. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

Stop Hitting Yourself

LCT3 presents a play by the Rude Mechs, inspired by musicals of the nineteen-thirties, about the intersection of capitalism and charity. In previews. Opens Jan. 27. (Claire Tow, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

Beautiful—The Carole King Musical

The sixteen-year-old Brooklyn kid Carole King (Jessie Mueller) plays a song she's written for the record exec Don Kirshner (Jeb Brown), and he buys it; she teams up with the handsome lyricist Gerry Goffin (Jake Epstein), and they fall in love; the Shirelles record their song "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?," and it goes to No. 1. Then the real drama begins. Doug McGrath's affectionate musical biography, directed by Marc Bruni, is full of terrific songs (including "One Fine Day," "The Locomotion," and "On Broadway") performed by knockout singers. It's the story not just of King and Goffin but of their friends and rivals Barry Mann (Jarrod Spector) and Cynthia Weil (Anika Larsen), the broader world of the early-sixties rock-and-roll hit factories, and the forces that gave rise to King's evolution as a solo artist. Mueller's performance is astonishing in its humility, warmth, and beauty; by the time she performs "Tapestry" at Carnegie Hall, her triumph feels like the whole room's. (Stephen Sondheim, 124 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.)

I Am the Wind

In the Norwegian playwright Jon Fosse's one-act drama, translated by Simon Stephens, two actors stand on

the floor of the tiny theatre—their only prop a long black rope—pretending to be on a rolling sailboat out at sea. One character is a suicidal young sailor (Christopher Tierney) so inarticulate that he can't find the words to describe his feelings; the other is an older intellectual type (Louis Butelli), frustrated and increasingly frightened because he can't get the sailor to tell him what's wrong, and they're headed into dangerously deep water. The point of this cryptic, overserious play has been either lost in translation or just overshadowed by Paul Takacs's direction of Tierney, who poses distractingly on the stage like angst-y beefcake, his jeans falling off his butt, his long, wet hair in his eyes. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Through Jan. 26.)

King Lear

The role of Lear requires a stamina rarely found in actors old enough to play it, but Frank Langella—redoubtable at the age of seventy-six—growls through the part like a grizzly bear. In Angus Jackson's production, imported from the Chichester Festival Theatre, Langella shrieks into the rain, tears open his shirt, and frolics with muddy feet; when he scolds his daughter Cordelia (Isabella Laughland) for her lack of flattery, he is fearsome. Sapped of his power and his faculties, he becomes a shrunken giant, clinging to his kingly grandness until, finally, that goes, too. Langella leads a cast of able Brits, including the exceptional Max Bennett, whose Edmund is as shrewd in his treachery as Lear is blind to it. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

Machinal

Rebecca Hall stars in this 1928 drama by Sophie Treadwell; Lyndsey Turner directs the Roundabout Theatre Company production. (Reviewed in this issue.) (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Tom Stoppard's 1965 tragicomedy—which imagines what two relatively insignificant characters in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" are doing offstage during the main action of the play—is a masterpiece, not unlike Shakespeare's plays; it's artfully, imaginatively written, multidimensional, and hilarious. In the hands of the Acting Company, though—who are presenting the show in repertory with "Hamlet"—the play is, at best, clever, and, at worst, flat. Rosencrantz (Grant Fletcher Prewitt) and Guildenstern (Ian Gould) are childhood friends of Hamlet's who are commissioned by his murderous uncle/stepfather to take the prince to Denmark to be killed. Under the direction of John Rando, the actors miss Stoppard's subtle, moment-to-moment profundity and instead go for broad, cartoonish laughs. (Pearl, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-563-9261.)

She Is King

Laryssa Husiak's hour-long play—part of the Incubator Arts Project's "Other Forces" festival—is a reenactment of three television interviews that occurred at important junctures in the tennis great Billie Jean King's life: the first, in 1973, just after the feisty feminist athlete (played by Husiak) beat Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes" tournament; the second, seven years later, when King was a much loved, seasoned pro; and the third, a year later, with Barbara Walters (Louisa Bradshaw), just after King was devastatingly outed by her former secretary, with whom she'd had an extramarital affair. Husiak, directed by Katherine Brook, is funny, entertaining, and sympathetic as a closeted woman in the public eye. Unfortunately, the show, which feels otherwise polished, is undermined by the decision to use five middle-school-aged non-actors as the TV crew: their amateurish excitement is distracting. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-352-3101. Through Jan. 26.)

She Talks to Beethoven

JACK presents a looping thirty-minute performance installation of this play by Adrienne Kennedy, about an African-American woman living in Ghana in 1961. Charlotte Brathwaite directs. (505 ½ Waverly Ave., Brooklyn. brownpaperickets.com. Through Jan. 25.)

Take Me Home

This "Other Forces" festival show snubs Broadway for the alleys, lanes, and byways of lower Manhattan. Set within a decommissioned taxi and staged for only three spectators at a time, this forty-minute "mobile performance" seats audience members behind the garrulous driver, Ace (the animated Modesto "Flako" Jimenez), as he cruises for fares, hot pretzels, and lost love. Under Meghan Finn's direction, not all of the elements (sound, video, live performance) mesh as neatly as they might, and Alexandra Collier's script sometimes suggests that her thesaurus deserves co-writing credit. But despite the rigged meter, this is a sweet, generous, and inventive piece. The taxi's windows frame the city like a tatty proscenium, lending seedy beauty to the people and buildings that glide by. When Ace pulls over, advising you to "let go of your troubles, but take your trash," you're tempted to tip. (Undisclosed location. 866-811-4111.)

TYSON vs. ALI

Reid Farrington directs this show, part of the COIL festival. (Reviewed in this issue.) (3LD Art & Technology Center, 80 Greenwich St. 212-352-3101.)

ALSO PLAYING

AFTER MIDNIGHT

Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 877-250-2929.

ALMOST, MAINE

Gym at Judson, 243 Thompson St. 866-811-4111.

THE BOOK OF MORMON

Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.

BRONX BOMBERS

Circle in the Square, 235 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.

BUYER & CELLAR

Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444.

THE COMMONS OF PENSACOLA

City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.

CRAVING FOR TRAVEL

Peter Jay Sharp, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.

CRY, TROJANS!

Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 212-966-3651.

A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO LOVE AND MURDER

Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK

Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737. Through Jan. 26.

KINKY BOOTS

Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG

DISTANCE RUNNER
Atlantic Stage 2, at 330 W. 16th St. 212-352-3101.

A MAN'S A MAN

Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111.

MATILDA THE MUSICAL

Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

NATASHA, PIERRE & THE GREAT COMET OF 1812

Kazino Times Square, 45th St. between Broadway and Eighth Ave. 212-239-6200.

THE NIGHT ALIVE

Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111.

A NIGHT WITH JANIS JOPLIN

Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

RODGERS • HAMMERSTEIN'S CINDERELLA

Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200.

ROW AFTER ROW

City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.

THE TRIBUTE ARTIST

59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.

TWELFTH NIGHT / RICHARD III

Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-279-4200.

WICKED

Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-239-6200.



NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

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

Dr. Dog

For its eighth album, "B-Room," this psychedelic-pop collective attempted a makeover. They ditched Meth Beach studio, where they had been recording for years, and built a new space out of an abandoned silversmith mill outside their native Philadelphia. Aiming for an organic, stripped-down sound, the sextet tracked most of the songs in live takes, largely avoiding the

overdubbing used in previous albums. Despite the changes, the results are pretty much what we've come to expect from the soulful band, inspired by the sounds of the sixties and seventies: hook-filled, genre-mashing jams with a flair for funk and a soft spot for melodies. (Terminal 5, 610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. Jan. 25.)

The Gene Clark "No Other" Tour

In 1974, Clark (1944-1991), the charismatic co-founder of the Byrds, released a solo album, "No Other," that was a commercial flop, panned for its overindulgent studio sound and lack of straightforward singles. It has since been recognized as a lost classic of folk rock, and in an effort to rescue both the work and Clark from relative obscurity, members of the dream-pop band **Beach House** have formed a supergroup and engineered a short tribute tour. The artists include **Robin Pecknold**, of Fleet Foxes, **Daniel Rossen**, of Grizzly Bear, **Hamilton Leithauser**, of the Walkmen, **Jenn Wasner**, of Wye Oak, and **Iain Matthews**, of Fairport Convention and Plainsong. They will perform the record in its entirety. A newly edited version of the documentary "The Byrd Who Flew Alone: The Triumphs and Tragedy of Gene Clark" will also be shown. (Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. Jan. 25.)

Golden Arm Trio

The Austin, Texas-based pianist, drummer, and film composer **Graham Reynolds** brings his long-standing band to town for a rare appearance. Reynolds's taut compositions, here performed by piano, pedal steel, bass, drums, and a special guest, **Todd Reynolds**, on violin, reveal a variety of influences, including John Barry's classic sixties Bond themes and Western swing. For this performance, the group will perform selections from the numerous Richard Linklater movies that Reynolds has scored, a few rock-tinged Ellington compositions, and an excerpt from an intriguing new work of his called "Marfa Triptych: Three Portraits of West Texas." (Joe's Pub, 425 Lafayette St. 212-539-8778. Jan. 28.)

Neutral Milk Hotel

The much loved nineties indie-folk quartet, led by Jeff Mangum, a reclusive singer who belts out his poignant lyrics in a loud nasal bleat, has reunited for a full tour, its first in

well over a decade, to perform songs from its two, now classic albums, "On Avery Island" and "In the Aeroplane Over the Sea," a touching ode to Anne Frank. (Capitol Theatre, 149 Westchester Ave., Port Chester, N.Y. 877-435-9849. Jan. 22; BAM—Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Jan. 23-25; Webster Hall, 125 E. 11th St. 212-353-1600. Jan. 27-28.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Sutton Foster

An abundantly talented singer and dancer used to effortlessly seducing Broadway audiences with her effusive charm, Foster also knows how to balance pizzazz and intimate delivery to win over a small room. Despite the weather, she's keeping her swell rendition of "Air Conditioner" on the set list, along with material from the likes of Sondheim and Porter. (Café Carlyle, Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. 212-744-1600. Through Jan. 24.)

Vijay Iyer

This 2013 MacArthur Fellowship-winning pianist and composer is also an intrepid conceptualist unafraid to address political and social issues in his ambitious multimedia projects. But a trio setting may be the best way to appreciate his daring playing, as heard on such important recordings as the critically acclaimed album "Accelerando"; he's joined here by his longtime bandmates **Stephan Crump**, on bass, and **Marcus Gilmore**, on drums. (Allen Room, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. Jan. 24-25.)

Guillermo Klein y Los Guachos

The growing resurgence of the large ensemble in contemporary jazz is a welcome trend that owes much to this farsighted Argentinean composer, arranger, and bandleader who was ahead of the curve by the nineties. Klein returns to the city with his bold Los Guachos unit, which incorporates elements of his native musical influences and features such vital local players as the saxophonist **Bill McHenry** and the guitarist **Ben Monder**. (Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Jan. 21-26.)

Mehliana

Brad Mehldau concentrates on the electric piano and vintage synthesizers in this duo, a recent partnership with the drummer **Mark Guiliana**; they released their first recording, "Taming the Dragon," last fall. While devotees of Mehldau's acoustic trio may balk, fans more inclined to the cinematic sweep of his 2010 album, "Highway Rider," or his sonically adventurous release "Largo" will find bliss. (Highline Ballroom, 431 W. 16th St. 212-414-5994. Jan. 22.)

The Gene Clark "No Other" tour brings Robin Pecknold, Jenn Wasner, Hamilton Leithauser, Victoria Legrand, and Daniel Rossen (clockwise from the top) to the Music Hall of Williamsburg.





DANCE

New York City Ballet

The choreography of George Balanchine dominates the schedule in the early part of the season. Over the next few weeks, the company performs his evening-length ballet “Jewels” several times, with many casts to choose from. (See nycballet.com for casting.) Each of its three sections represents a different style and mood—sylvan and mysterious in “Emeralds,” jazzy and brash in “Rubies,” refined and elegiac in “Diamonds”—and is set to music by a different composer: Fauré, Stravinsky, and Tchaikovsky. On Jan. 25, the company pays tribute to its founder (born on Jan. 22, 1904) with a day of activities, including workshops for children and adults, an onstage lecture demonstration on Balanchine technique, and two all-Balanchine programs. • Jan. 22 and Jan. 28 at 7:30 and Jan. 25 at 8: “Jewels.” • Jan. 23 at 7:30: “Kammermusik No. 2,” “After the Rain,” “Concerto Barocco,” “The Infernal

Machine,” and “Rubies.” • Jan. 24 at 8: “Dances at a Gathering” and “Union Jack.” • Jan. 25 at 2 and Jan. 26 at 3: “Concerto Barocco,” “Kammermusik No. 2,” and “Who Cares?” (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Through March 2.)

Sarah Michelson

In 2012, Michelson’s “Devotion Study #1—The American Dancer” became the first dance work ever included in a Whitney Biennial. It won that year’s highly lucrative Bucksbaum Award. The piece was, essentially, five dancers walking backward in circles for ninety minutes, but its minimalist, exhausting austerity was undercut by annoying voice-overs and self-referencing. Now Michelson returns to the museum with “4,” the final installment of her “Devotion” series. Advance tickets sold out fast, but day-of seats may open up. (Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Ave. at 75th St. 212-570-3600. Jan. 24-26 at 2. Through Feb. 2.)

New York Theatre Ballet

The embattled chamber company, still searching for a new home after being pushed out of its Murray Hill digs, soldiers on for another engagement at Florence Gould Hall. In the morning and early afternoon, the dancers perform the company’s bread and butter, a child-friendly production inspired by Lewis Carroll and early twentieth-century vaudeville revues (“Alice in Wonderland Folies”). In the evening, the troupe presents “Visionaries,” an ambitious mixed program of new works. These include “Short Memory,” a plotless ensemble piece by the ballet postmodernist Pam Tanowitz; “Light Flooding Into Darkened Rooms,” a pas de deux that draws on the intimate world of Vermeer, made for the company by the British modern-dance choreographer Richard Alston; and “Ten Imaginary Dances,” a playful work by the late Remy Charlip, a longtime member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. (55 E. 59th St. 800-982-2787. Jan. 24-25 at 7: “Visionaries.” Jan. 25 at 1 and Jan. 26 at 11 A.M., 1, and 3:30: “Alice in Wonderland Folies.”)

Douglas Dunn & Dancers

Like Merce Cunningham, in whose company he began, the seventy-one-

year-old Dunn is doing some of his best work at an advanced age. An aubade is a song of lovers parting at dawn, and Dunn’s new semiautobiographical “Aubade,” which features prerecorded and real-time video by Charles Atlas, text by the poet Anne Waldman, and live music by Steve Taylor, is shaded by mortality and aging. The choreographer, always a witty and wily performer, joins the cast of fifteen, as does the brilliant and strange Christopher Williams, who should be well suited to the role of a trickster figure. (Alexander Kasser Theatre, 1 Normal Ave., Montclair, N.J. 973-655-5112. Jan. 24 at 7:30, Jan. 25 at 8, and Jan. 26 at 3. Through Feb. 1.)

“Works and Process”

Originally the publisher of a fine performance journal, 2wice Arts Foundation now produces clever apps featuring choreography designed specifically for the iPad. In Dot Dot Dot, for example, the dancer Tom Gold taps, jumps, and twirls on a grid, appearing and disappearing at the touch of a finger. At the Guggenheim, Gold sits down with Patsy Tarr, the founder of 2wice, to discuss this collaboration and the foundation’s mission of fusing small-screen technology with dance. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. Jan. 27 at 7:30.)

ABOVE & BEYOND

Bushwick Book Club

In January, 2009, the musician Susan Hwang founded this monthly event where local musicians perform original pieces inspired by a preselected text. The first book was Kurt Vonnegut’s “Breakfast of Champions,” an appropriate choice for the anything-goes Bushwick venue Goodbye Blue Monday, whose name was an alternate title to Vonnegut’s novel. Every month features a different book, but Januarys are reserved for Vonnegut. For its fifth anniversary, on Jan. 22, the show draws from “Welcome to the Monkey House,” his short-story anthology. There will be performances by the joke-folker Phoebe Kreutz; the energetic pair Kenichi (Ken) Minami and Adam Aron Amram, who perform as Ken South Rock; and Hwang herself. (1087 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718-453-6343.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The Winter Antiques Show, the grande dame of New York fairs, rolls

into the Park Avenue Armory for its sixtieth season (Jan. 24-Feb. 2). Once again, the armory’s cavernous hall will be reconfigured into a maze of dealers’ stalls, filled with Chipendale chests, gilt mantel clocks, Art Nouveau pendants (from La Vieille Russie), and other temptations. Humbler objects, such as a clown-faced shooting-gallery target (from Allan Katz Americana), add a touch of folk flavor. (Park Ave. at 67th St. 718-665-5250.) • **Sotheby’s** holds its Americana sales on Jan. 24-25, opening with a session that includes an Audubon watercolor of two squirrels and a strikingly spare decoy made in Maine at the end of the nineteenth century; the second day features more than seven hundred lots of folk art from the collection of Ralph Esmerian, the onetime chairman of the American Folk Art Museum, now serving a prison sentence for fraud. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) • **Christie’s** American auctions fall on Jan. 23-24, opening with a sale of silver that features a set of circus figures

by Tiffany. The general auction on the following day is heavy on furniture, but also includes Colonial portraits as well as a winter scene (“The Old Covered Bridge”) by Grandma Moses. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • A document recently uncovered in a museum attic, amid a pile of Colonial doctors’ bills, goes up for sale at

Leigh Keno’s **Keno Auctions** (Jan. 26). The twelve pages are of serious historical interest: an early draft (written by Robert R. Livingston, who would co-author the Declaration of Independence) of an appeal to the people of Britain on behalf of the American colonists, in the early days of the Revolutionary War. (127 E. 69th St. 212-734-2381.)

READINGS AND TALKS

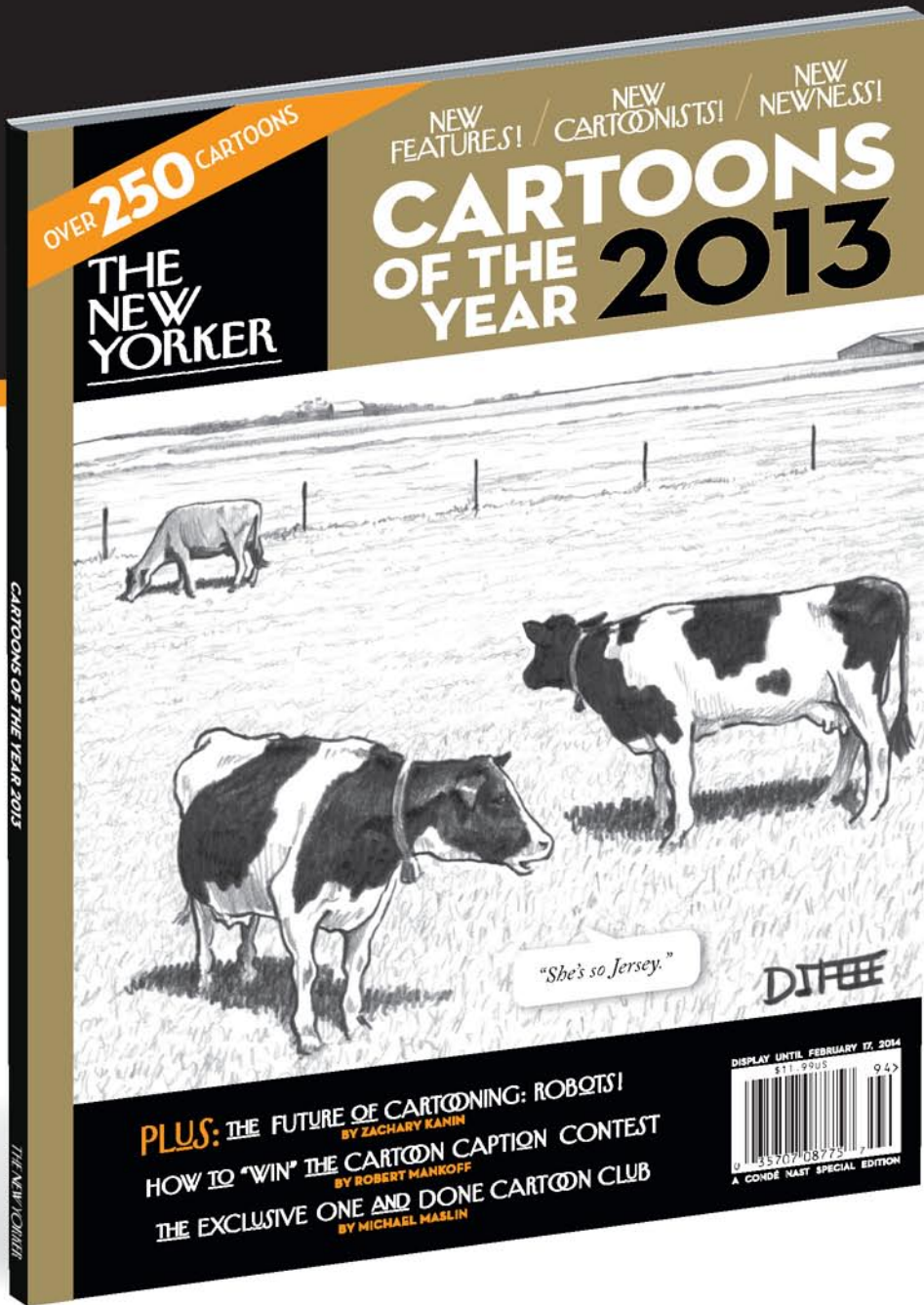
WordTheatre

The Los Angeles-based nonprofit WordTheatre returns to the East Coast, with the actors Carla Gugino and Samantha Mathis reading stories involving dogs, by Joyce Carol Oates and Amy Hempel, both of whom will be on hand to discuss their work and answer questions. Bill Henderson, founder of the Pushcart Prize and the author of “All My Dogs: A Life,” is the moderator. (NeueHouse, 110 E. 25th St. For tickets and more information, call 310-915-5150, or visit wordtheatre.com. Jan. 23 at 7.)

“The Making of Americans”

The magazine *Triple Canopy* has organized its third annual marathon reading of Gertrude Stein’s classic work. The event is expected to take about forty-eight hours. More than a hundred writers, actors, and artists have been enlisted to take part, but open slots are being set aside for walk-ins. Coffee and doughnuts are promised for dawn; booze is available throughout. (155 Freeman St., Brooklyn. For more information, visit canopycanopycanopy.com. Jan. 24, starting at 5.)

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT RED LIGHT

Sitting in traffic destroys the soul. In the Hobbesian logic of a jam, each car becomes every other car's enemy, and life's purposefulness turns on itself. Time dilates. The NPR headlines roll by, then roll by again. Inching your way toward the tauntingly designated E-Z Pass lane, you grow to despise the man in the gray Audi, but it's the woman in the blue Subaru who cuts you off. Progress slows until you reach a standstill. You begin to fantasize that you're the victim of a malevolent force, that your lane has been singled out for some sort of cruel test or act of vengeance. This is a sign that you've lost touch with reality—unless, of course, you live in New Jersey.

Last week, as the scandal inevitably known as Bridgegate bubbled away, Governor Chris Christie delivered his fourth annual State of the State address, in Trenton. It was, to paraphrase A. A. Milne, a Sad Christie, a Melancholy Christie, a Small and Sorry Christie who spoke to state lawmakers. The Republican governor, normally the King of I, was all about comity and collaboration. He alluded only briefly to the incident in Fort Lee, and only vaguely. "Mistakes were clearly made," he said. The very next day, the *Wall Street Journal* published a photograph of Christie chatting with David Wildstein, the official at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey who apparently ordered up the George Washington Bridge lane closings. The picture, taken mid-backlog, was plainly at odds with the Governor's assertion that he and Wildstein had scarcely spoken in years. Meanwhile, the New Jersey Assembly and Senate, both controlled by Democrats, initiated a new round of investigations aimed at tying Christie even more directly to the tieup. It's too early to say what these investigations will uncover; on Thursday, subpoenas were issued to seventeen people, including the Governor's chief spokesman, his former campaign manager, and his chief counsel. Already,

though, the scandal has done so much damage to the Christie administration and to every other organization it has touched that it almost doesn't seem to matter.

Back in 1921, when the Port of New York Authority, as it was then chauvinistically called, was founded, it was—in the words of Jameson Doig, a professor emeritus at Princeton and the author of "Empire on the Hudson," a six-hundred-page history of the agency—a "reformer's vision." A product of the Progressive Era, the authority was to be insulated from the vagaries of politics on both sides of the river, which is to say also from Trenton's and Albany's multifarious forms of corruption. Half its commissioners would be appointed by the governor of New York and half by the governor of New Jersey, but to promote their independence they would serve staggered, six-year terms.

Amazingly, this arrangement worked for the better part of the twentieth century. One of the Port Authority's first major construction projects was, as it happens, the George Washington Bridge. When the bridge was dedicated, on October 24, 1931, New York's governor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, declared that the authority was "charting the

course toward the more able and honorable administration of our nation's affairs," and that it should serve as "a model for government agencies throughout the land." The span—twice as long as any suspension bridge previously built—was completed below budget and ahead of schedule. The authority earned a reputation for integrity and professionalism. Writing in the nineteen-fifties, a reporter for the *Newark News* noted the "incredible vigor and efficiency" of its operations, "as contrasted with the slumberland of the average City Hall."

A recent audit of the Port Authority, which, in addition to the George Washington Bridge, now runs the



New York metropolitan area's three major airports, the PATH train, the Holland Tunnel, the Lincoln Tunnel, the Bayonne Bridge, the Goethals Bridge, and the Outerbridge Crossing, described the agency's operations succinctly as "dysfunctional." The audit, performed by a private consulting firm, suggested that at least some of the problems could be traced back to September 11, 2001, when the authority, which owned and was also headquartered in the World Trade Center, lost its executive director and eighty-three other employees. The terrorist attack, the report observed, took "a significant emotional toll on the psyche of the organization."

In this case, as in so many others, farce followed tragedy. As soon as Christie took office, in 2010, he set about stuffing the weakened agency with his supporters. A lawsuit filed by a former employee revealed that within two years the new administration had sought berths at the Port Authority for nearly fifty loyalists. These included Wildstein, who attended high school with Christie, in Livingston, and was hired as the agency's interstate-capital-projects director, at a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year. (Wildstein resigned last month.) The patronage push made front-page news in the *Bergen Record* in early 2012, a development that should have been chastening to the Christie administration, but wasn't.

By the end of the year, the patronage count at the agency had reportedly reached eighty. By September, 2013, when the events at the center of the scandal took place, the authority was in such disarray that top-level Christie appointees were barely speaking to their colleagues from across the Hudson. The authority's executive director, Patrick Foye, a New Yorker, seems not to have learned about the jam in Fort Lee until four days in; when he did, he ordered the lanes reopened. The chairman, David Samson, a New Jerseyan, responded with fury. Foye, he wrote in a private e-mail since made public, had a habit of "stirring up trouble." This time, Samson said, Foye had "made a big mistake." The chairman reached for a suitable metaphor: "He's playing in traffic."

Politics, as everyone knows, is not a profession for the fastidious. But there are rules even about stretching the rules, a precept that Christie either never bothered to learn or chose to ignore. As a consequence, his political career is now quite possibly in ruins. Unfortunately for anyone who flies out of Newark or Kennedy Airport, or who takes the PATH train or the George Washington Bridge, or who just believes in the "honorable administration of our nation's affairs," so, too, is the Port Authority.

—Elizabeth Kolbert

DEPT. OF HOSPITALITY STAYCATION



There are many things to fear in the apartments of strangers—the smell of weird food, the hair on the bar of soap, the petulant cat, the tumbleweeds of dust and lint. Yet Airbnb, the short-term home-rental company that was started in 2008, has prospered (2012 valuation: \$2.5 billion) by connecting potential guests with some three hundred and fifty thousand hosts, managing around five hundred and fifty thousand properties, in thirty-four thousand cities. Hosts determine rates; Airbnb gets a transaction fee and posts guest-generated reviews on its Web site (and, for hosts, ratings of guests). It's as simple as subletting on Craigslist, with a lower risk of bunking with a murderer.

But legislators and hotel lobbyists have accused some New York hosts of violating a 2010 law that prohibits people from letting their apartments for fewer than thirty days if they are not present, and of failing to pay the city's hotel-occupancy tax. In October, the state attorney general's office subpoenaed the site's user

data for New York hosts, and Airbnb launched a campaign to revise the law.

The other day, a dozen Airbnb hosts and guests gathered for a summit to discuss what they could do to stay in business. They met in the basement apartment of a house with white vinyl siding, in South Slope, owned by a voluble woman named Evelyn Badia. Three and a half years ago, she lost a job in ad production, turned to hosting, and has since earned around a hundred thousand dollars by renting rooms to more than two hundred guests. "The good, the bad, and the ugly, and then the naked ones," she said. "Let me put it this way: now they get robes."

Ashley Baia, a young woman wearing thick-framed glasses, a camel blazer, and a polka-dot blouse, explained the strategy. "You're essentially people who represent 'turf,' which is something we call chunks of area. So if you're a host in Harlem you'd be a Harlem team leader," she said.

Baia is the director of organizing and community engagement at Peers, a nonprofit that was formed this summer to defend the rights of users of the sharing economy. (Douglas Atkin, the co-founder of Peers, is also Airbnb's global head of community.) She wanted to teach the Airbnbbers the model of grassroots field organizing that she had

learned working on Obama's Presidential campaigns.

Joie Reinstein, a professional trend forecaster who has used Airbnb all over the world, said, "I think that what will really rally people is the idea of defending the entire sharing economy"—ride-sharing companies such as Lyft, boat-sharing companies such as Boatbound, clothes-sharing companies such as thredUP—"which should be the future economy." She continued, "I read the other day that Seoul, South Korea, is the most sharing city in the world. And they're such a progressive nation! So, if they're saying the sharing economy is important, then New York should care about it, too."

In December, Airbnb released a video of four hosts, in Hamilton Heights, Astoria, and Williamsburg, inviting Bill de Blasio to send his friends and family to lodge with them for the inauguration. A couple of months earlier, de Blasio had responded to a question about Airbnb, in a Reddit forum: "While I appreciate the potential of the sharing economy, and I do think there's some historical precedent, the challenges posed by Airbnb today are real, in terms of safety, public tax revenue, etc."

"The State Senate reconvenes in January"—and will consider two bills to redefine the 2010 law—"so that's our

go-time for really organizing,” Baia told the group. “Your stories have to be shared. Because I think there’s this view that there are these landlords who are like slumlords.” Non-slumlords scoffed. Baia described other initiatives, including a Twitter tool to make it easier for people to petition their senators, and postcarding stations at flea markets.

“Why can’t we just have a group that’s self-policing?” Chris Gatto asked. He started a life-coaching service with the money he made hosting in his East Village walkup.

Rob González, a former Sotheby’s real-estate agent who is now an actor, said, “We don’t believe that the government should be defining what the sharing economy is; we believe that the people who participate in it should be defining it.” González teaches an online class called Life Hack: How to Live Rent-Free in NYC.

“Yes, we the people! We the people!” Badia chanted.

“Airbnb is just a company that I use to vet guests,” David Medeiros, a former postal worker with a Mike Piazza mustache, said. The hallway in his Prospect Lefferts Gardens house is lined with photographs he has taken of his guests. “I’m my own corporation. I have a tax-I.D. number. You want to talk about Airbnb, but it’s not Airbnb—it’s your *neighbor*—it’s you, it’s him, it’s her, it’s all of us as individuals.” He added, “And the reality is that if Airbnb went belly up tomorrow, people have started doing this, and it’s still going to happen. The genie’s out of the bottle.”

—Emma Allen

THE MUSICAL LIFE SACRED STEEL



The Campbell Brothers—Chuck, Phil, and Darick—play a specialized strain of gospel music called Sacred Steel. Sacred Steel features lap and pedal steel guitars, and it is indigenous to the House of God Church, a schismatic Pentecostal church, whose headquarters are in Nashville. There is a House of

God church in Brooklyn, at 9024 Ditmas Avenue, and one in Harlem, at 127 West 128th Street, where the Campbells played about a year ago.

The Campbells, who have a new CD and performed at Lincoln Center, as part of the 2013 White Light Festival, live in Rochester, New York. The other morning, they got up at three-thirty and drove to the city to have breakfast at Katz’s Delicatessen, on East Houston Street. Chuck and Darick were on their way to North Carolina, to play with their sideline band, the Slide Brothers, which includes the Sacred Steel elder Calvin Cooke.



The Campbell Brothers

At a table at the back of the restaurant, one of the brothers said that their father, who was a House of God preacher, didn’t play music but loved the steel guitar.

“Dad did try to play the drums,” Phil pointed out.

“Everybody in the church could play drums,” Darick said.

“Everybody *sat* on the drums, but not everybody could *play*,” Phil said.

They all nodded, then Chuck said that Sacred Steel started in Philadelphia, in the nineteen-thirties: “A man named Willie Eason was the first. His brother, Troman, had a lap steel because of the Hawaiian-guitar craze. Behind his brother’s back, Willie would take it to the church and mimic the voices.”

Chuck got his first lap steel for Christmas in 1968, when he was eleven. “As children, we were taught against secular music, but for some reason they would let us watch ‘Hee Haw’ and ‘The Grand Ole Opry,’” he said. “Country music didn’t seem like blues or R. & B., I guess, and

the Opry had gospel songs. We would sit through ‘Hee Haw’ just for the twenty seconds of steel solo. The House of God Church has a major convocation in Nashville every June. One time, we went into this music store and we see Jimmy Day, one of the legendary pedal steel players, and he’s playing with a whiskey bottle beside him. We pray for our anointing, to learn to play, and I’m told you can only play this instrument if you have the Holy Spirit. He’s got a whole different spirit, and he’s playing, Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross.”

The House of God Church has two divisions, one called the Jewell Dominion and the other called the Keith Dominion. “Our father was a bishop in the Keith,” Chuck said.

“The headquarters were side by side, and you weren’t supposed to go into the other one,” Phil said. “If you were Keith, the only thing worse than playing blues was playing the Jewell music. The Jewell was almost a boogie-woogie, bebop groove, with a Delta blues on top. Keith was hard-driving rock and roll. It was *like* blues, but we didn’t call it blues. We called it church music.” Jewell, he said, is more melodic, slower, and more sedate. “You can only play so much Jewell in Keith before people going to say, ‘You going to play tonight? I’m not feeling it.’”

If the church leaders felt that the musicians weren’t playing with sufficient spirit, the judgments they made were sometimes harsh. “We never had a critic say worse about us than they said in church,” Phil said.

“I tell people we were brought up on negative reinforcement,” Chuck said.

“The soloist would be singing, and if it’s not happening she’d be saying, ‘I wish I had some musicians who knew how to play,’” Phil recalled. “The minister’s sermon not going the way he wanted, you could easily be the fall guy. That’s the humbling thing about the church.”

At the convocations, there were day and night services. Lesser musicians played during the day and, if they did well, were sometimes invited to play at night. “You just hope that one of the greats doesn’t show up, though, because you know the policy,” Chuck said. “You finish the song you’re playing and pack up.”

“We would hear, ‘You’ll never be as

good as Henry Nelson,' one of the greats," Chuck said.

"And that was from family," Darick added. The brothers agreed, however, that it made them practice harder.

Before Chuck and Darick headed for North Carolina, the Campbells stopped at Matt Umanov Guitars, on Bleeker Street, where Chuck set up his pedal steel and, with Darick on lap steel, played "Amazing Grace," and they had their photograph taken with Umanov.

Chuck made one more remark that his brothers agreed with: "You knew you had a bad service, you knew you had bombed out, when the ladies said, 'We're praying for you.'"

—Alec Wilkinson

POESY DEPT.

BACK OF THE ENVELOPE



Jen Bervin, a visual artist and a poet, first read Emily Dickinson as most people who read Emily Dickinson do, in a poetry collection aimed at high-school students. It was not until Bervin was getting her master's degree in poetry, at the University of Denver, that she first saw a page in Dickinson's own hand. "Seeing what the poems looked like changed everything," Bervin explained one recent afternoon, in her studio, in Gowanus. "What I was re-

sponding to was the visual composition."

Dickinson's editors had often given her poems line breaks that differed from those on the manuscripts. In addition, her pages were covered with tiny crosses and other markings that had not been preserved in any printed edition. "It seemed to me that what she was doing was much more interesting than what was being done to her," Bervin observed. That insight led to Bervin's first Dickinson-related work, in 2006: a collection of large-scale reproductions of composite pages from Dickinson's "fascicles," or homemade booklets, stitched onto cotton batting, with the crosses and marks restored in red thread and most of the words omitted. "Red is a mending color, to me," Bervin said. "It's a way of visualizing what has been removed, and calling attention to that. I just needed to see what it looks like when it is all put back." The sturdy quilts marked with delicate tracers recall Dickinson's inspired, homebound artistic practice. "I think her work requires a great deal of visual attention," Bervin said.

A more recent Dickinson-related project is "The Gorgeous Nothings," a book co-edited by Bervin and Marta Werner, a professor of English literature at D'Youville College, in Buffalo, and a Dickinson scholar. (Originally published as a limited edition by Granary Books, it has just been released in a trade edition by New Directions.) "The Gorgeous Nothings" reproduces Dickinson's so-called "envelope poems"—the mostly

late compositions that Dickinson made on scraps of correspondence. The book contains fifty-two scale reproductions of Dickinson's compositions, written in pencil on envelopes that have sometimes been unfolded and occasionally torn, with some postage stamps excised. In addition to an index by first line, the back pages of the book catalogue the works by shape or structure, displayed like butterflies in an lepidopterist's specimen cabinet.

"One of the big problems with work on Dickinson is this question of genre—what are these things?" Werner said the other day. "People will say these are coincidental relationships, but once you see the documents together it is very difficult not to see connections among them." Werner contests the suggestion that Dickinson wrote on envelopes simply out of Yankee parsimony. "I have seen her write a rough draft on a piece of gilt-edged stationery—that was in some sense unbelievably wasteful, in this gorgeous way," she says. "I think she is always negotiating with the shape of the page."

One work, written on the envelope of a letter from Otis Lord, who is thought by some scholars to have been Dickinson's lover, can be read both folded and unfolded—the phrase "A Miracle for/all" is tucked into one corner, by the postal office's frank. Werner points out that many of the poems are about the problems of communication. "The nineteenth century is when these really fraught relationships with communication begin," she said. "Telepathy is big. The postal system is changing—you can have this intimate, absolute connection almost immediately. Yet this is also the era of the dead-letter office, of things not getting there." The Dickinson envelopes may be particularly poignant now, Werner says, "because we are far into the age of the anxiety of communication—maybe at the end of it."

In the future, Bervin said that she would like to produce an edition of Dickinson for the general reader. "I feel like I work for her—I feel that it's so unjust that her work still isn't published with the right line breaks, or all the words. There's a literary arrogance in choosing for a writer who chose so carefully," Bervin said. "She was utterly brilliant: she figured out how to have all her time to work. Tell me that's not well chosen."

—Rebecca Mead



Kanin

"Can I buy you a drink? And then if things don't work out between us you can pay me back?"

THE FINANCIAL PAGE

THE CULT OF OVERWORK

For decades, junior bankers and Wall Street firms had an unspoken pact: in exchange for reasonably high-paying jobs and a shot at obscene wealth, young analysts agreed to work fifteen hours a day, and forgo anything resembling a normal life. But things may be changing. Last October, Goldman Sachs told its junior investment-banking analysts not to work on Saturdays, and it has said that all analysts, on average, should be working no more than seventy to seventy-five hours a week. A couple of weeks ago, Bank of America Merrill Lynch said that analysts are expected to have four weekend days off a month. And, last week, Credit Suisse told its analysts that they should not be in the office on Saturdays.

These changes may sound small, but, in the context of the Street, they're positively radical. Alexandra Michel, a former Goldman associate who is now on the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, published a nine-year study of two big investment banks and found that people spent up to a hundred and twenty hours a week on the job. In the pre-cell-phone, pre-e-mail days, it was possible for people to find respite when they left the office. But, as David Solomon, the global co-head of investment banking at Goldman, told me, "Today, technology means that we're all available 24/7. And, because everyone demands instant gratification and instant connectivity, there are no boundaries, no breaks."

Cry me a river, you might say. But what happened on Wall Street is just an extreme version of what's happened to so-called knowledge workers in general. Thirty years ago, the best-paid workers in the U.S. were much less likely to work long days than low-paid workers were. By 2006, the best paid were twice as likely to work long hours as the poorly paid, and the trend seems to be accelerating. A 2008 Harvard Business School survey of a thousand professionals found that ninety-four per cent worked fifty hours or more a week, and almost half worked in excess of sixty-five hours a week. Overwork has become a credential of prosperity.

The perplexing thing about the cult of overwork is that, as we've known for a while, long hours diminish both productivity and quality. Among industrial workers, overtime raises the rate of mistakes and safety mishaps; likewise, for knowledge workers fatigue and sleep-deprivation make it hard to perform at a high cognitive level. As Solomon put it, past a certain point overworked people become "less efficient and less effective." And the effects are cumulative. The bank-

ers Michel studied started to break down in their fourth year on the job. They suffered from depression, anxiety, and immune-system problems, and performance reviews showed that their creativity and judgment declined.

If the benefits of working fewer hours are this clear, why has it been so hard for businesses to embrace the idea? Simple economics certainly plays a role: in some cases, such as law firms that bill by the hour, the system can reward you for working longer, not smarter. And even if a person pulling all-nighters is less productive than a well-rested substitute would be, it's still cheaper to pay one person to work a hundred hours a week than two people to work fifty hours apiece. (In the case of medicine, residents work long hours not just because it's good training but also because they're a cheap source of labor.) On top of this, the productivity of most knowledge workers is much harder to quantify than that of, say, an assembly-line worker. So, as Bob Pozen, a former president of Fidelity Management and the author of "Extreme Productivity," a book on slashing work hours, told me, "Time becomes an easy metric to measure how productive someone is, even though it doesn't have any necessary connection to what they achieve."

Habit, too, is powerful: things are done a certain way because that's how they've been done before, and because that's the way the people in charge were trained. When new regulations limited medical residents' working hours to eighty a week, many doctors complained of declining standards and mollycoddling, and said that it would have a disastrous effect on training, even though residents in Europe work many fewer hours, without harming the quality of medical care. "I went through it, so you should" is a difficult impulse to resist.

To make these new policies stick, then, banks have to change not just rules but expectations. Indeed, as Michel told me, "it isn't really external rules that force bankers to work the way they do. It's an entire cultural system." She cites the example of a consulting firm that mandated that people stay out of the office on weekends, only to discover that they were working secretly from home. In a culture that venerates overwork, people internalize crazy hours as the norm. As the anthropologist Karen Ho writes in her book "Liquidated," "On Wall Street, hard work is always overwork." Grinding out hundred-hour weeks for years helps bankers think of themselves as tougher and more dedicated than everyone else. And working fifteen hours a day doesn't just demonstrate your commitment to a company; it also reinforces that commitment. Over time, the simple fact that you work so much becomes proof that the job is worthwhile, and being in the office day and night becomes a kind of permanent initiation ritual. The challenge for Wall Street is: can it still get bankers to run with the pack if it stops treating them like dogs?

—James Surowiecki



IN COLD MUD

The obstacle-racing craze gets serious.

BY LIZZIE WIDDICOMBE



Tough Mudder features challenges like the Arctic Enema and Electroshock Therapy.

Last summer, I signed up for a ten-mile trail run at the Northstar California Resort, a ski hill near Lake Tahoe. It was a bright, cool morning, and the run took place on piney mountain trails. My companions, five young professionals, and I chatted as we jogged. Things were good. Trail running isn't so bad! I thought, for the first time in my athletic career. Then, at a bend in the path, I heard whoops, and blood-curdling screams. It sounded like a village being attacked by marauding barbarians. In a clearing in the woods were two metal dumpsters, each eight feet wide and thirty feet long, filled with nine thousand gallons of melting ice, mixed with mud, to create a near-freezing slush. Ladders were propped up against the sides of them, and young people were lining up to jump in, as spectators cheered.

I was not on a fun run. I was taking part in a Tough Mudder—a ten-to-twelve-mile course that includes “hard-core” military-style obstacles, designed to challenge “strength, stamina, mental grit,

and camaraderie.” Participants endure events that force them to overcome their fears: leaping over fire pits, slithering through tightly enclosed spaces, plunging from intimidating heights.

The dumpster contraption, called the Arctic Enema, tests the reasonable fear that most people have of becoming an ice cube. After I watched a few burly men and toned women scream as they hit the water, thrashing and yelping, it was my turn. Ice glittered below me. I heard myself whining, “I’m really scared.”

To the uninitiated, it can be hard to explain the appeal of Tough Mudder, a company co-founded by a thirty-three-year-old Brit named Will Dean. In the past three years, Tough Mudder has helped transform obstacle racing from grade-school diversion to one of the country’s fastest-growing athletic activities. In 2010, an estimated fifty thousand people took part in obstacle races; last year, the number was 3.5 million, and Tough Mudder alone brought in a hundred and

fifteen million dollars in revenue. More than seven hundred thousand people paid around a hundred and fifty dollars each for the privilege of suffering through a Tough Mudder. The company’s success has helped take mainstream what was once an obscure pastime: there’s money in mud. One competitor told me, “It’s a gold rush.”

The popularity of obstacle races owes something to the broader trend toward “functional fitness”—which encompasses such fads as CrossFit, *P90X*, and “boot camps.” The idea is to reclaim athleticism from the sanitized realm of the elliptical machine and get back to the basics that kept our prehistoric forebears fit: running, jumping, climbing on things—with the added benefit of a buffer physique. (Tough Mudder’s Web site describes marathons as “boring,” and adds, “Road-running may give you a healthy set of lungs, but will leave you with as much upper body strength as Keira Knightley.”)

But the Arctic Enema doesn’t have much to do with getting in shape. Pain and suffering aren’t by-products; they’re the main event. Why would anyone *pay* for that? Tough Mudder’s “core customers” are men in their twenties and thirties. As any armchair anthropologist will tell you, young men have long engaged in tribal rites of passage to test courage and toughness. Groups of Maasai boys undergo a ritual circumcision, leave their villages, and set up a warrior camp together for about ten years. Boys of the Brazilian Sateré-Mawé tribe are initiated into manhood if they can keep their hands in a glove filled with stinging ants for several minutes without screaming.

The overgrown adolescents of America have come up with their own substitutes for such rituals: Outward Bound, cow tipping, fraternity initiations, reality shows like “American Gladiators” and “Survivor.” In the mythopoetic branch of the men’s movement of the eighties and nineties, started by the writer Robert Bly, disenchanted office workers went off into the woods to bang drums, bond, and get in touch with their inner “Wild Man.” “The Wild Man is not opposed to civilization; but he’s not completely contained by it either,” Bly wrote, in “Iron John.”

These days, initiation into the warrior class is no longer strictly the province of men. The Tough Mudder Facebook page features photographs of women crawling

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through trenches and scaling walls, their faces smeared with mud, their teeth clenched in primal pain and determination. Other images show slogans, such as “Life begins at the end of your comfort zone” and “I do not whine—kids whine.” (This last one is a snippet from the Mudder Pledge, which participants recite before every race.) On blogs, rapturous testimonials recount the Tough Mudder experience: “We’re a different breed, my friends. Don’t let anyone tell you different. We’re not crazy. We’re just muddas. . . . We make a new damn road in the middle of two roads everyone else is talking about, and we get to the pub at the end first.”

I met up with Will Dean early on the morning of the Tahoe Tough Mudder. He has feathery blond hair, a youthful face, and a British-seeming combination of charm and aloofness. Dean is a graduate of Harvard Business School, and, in his twenties, he worked for the British government, in counterterrorism. Officially, he is cagey about the gig, which he refers to as his time “with the Foreign Office,” but he seems aware of the cachet that it lends to the Tough Mudder brand, which attracts fans of the military as well as active service members. The company’s marketing materials proclaim that its obstacles are “designed by British Special Forces.” In Tahoe, Dean mused, “All this stuff—putting on massive events—isn’t that different from working on counterterrorism projects.”

Dean is not imposing—he’s tall, but his body has been softened by the demands of the C.E.O.’s life—and he wore baggy gym shorts and a thermal jersey under a blue T-shirt with the logo of Wounded Warrior, a veterans’ charity that Tough Mudder supports. We took a chairlift to the base area at Northstar, and walked directly into what looked like a festival scene from “Game of Thrones.” Crowds of shirtless men stood around in packs, stretching. Concession stands sold beer and a snack called “French hot dogs,” while, at a Test Your Strength machine, people pounded a target with iron mallets. Techno music blasted from an enormous sound system. The place teemed with platoons of young, fit people who wore T-shirts printed with their team names: “RawDawgz” and “Wolf Pack.” Occasionally, one of them would let out a cry of “Hoo-rah!”—the Tough

Mudder chant, which echoes the Marines’ “Oorah!”

Walking around the base camp was like being in the Bahamas during spring break—but all the unhinged high jinks were in the name of health, not of getting wasted. And, for all the half-naked, athletic bodies around us, there was no sexual tension in the air. “It’s supposed to be a carnival of tough,” Dean told me. He noted that the company’s unofficial slogan is “Iron Man meets Burning Man,” and that Mudders go home with orange headbands, which they can wear to signal membership in an in-group. “People want to be challenged, but if you can mix that with something that’s part of a shared experience—being part of a wider tribe—it gives you a sense of identity.”

We stopped by a fitness area, where a muscular woman in a sports bra did pull-ups while a crowd of men chanted, “One more! One more!” “CrossFitters,” Dean said, referring to the high-intensity exercise phenomenon. Eventually, we came to a barber stand, sponsored by Bic, where people lined up to have their hair shaved into one of two scary-looking styles: Mohawk or mullet. Desi Houston, a female pharmacy technician, who wore a pirate costume and a drawn-on mustache, was waiting in line to get a Mohawk. Running a hand through her long brown hair, she explained her decision: “I turn thirty this year, so I figure, Fuck it.” At some events, the company has an on-site tattoo artist, offering to imprint people’s bodies with the Tough Mudder logo—an image of a man emerging from an inferno.

Despite the macho trappings of Tough Mudder, Dean does his best to attract an audience that extends beyond fitness fanatics. The event is not timed, which, he said, makes it the “antithesis of the rat race,” which Dean sees as especially American. “One thing that used to irritate me when I did marathons during business school, the first question was always ‘What time did you do?’” he told me. In his last marathon, Dean ran a 3:45. “I do not pretend to be an elite athlete,” he said. A few times, I made the mistake of referring to the event as a “race,” and Dean interrupted me: “It’s not a race, it’s a challenge.”

Nevertheless, my feelings about my own toughness levels were doubtful. As Dean and I toured the base camp, I began to regret taking this assignment. “Are you all right?” he asked, at one point. I’d fallen

into a kind of fear trance. “Oh, yes,” I said, weakly. We made our way to the starting line. Entering a Tough Mudder requires an initial bonding exercise: you scramble over a six-foot-high wooden wall, which throws you and a pack of other Mudders together in a crowded, sawdust-strewn space known as “the start chute.” Dean and I clambered over the wall (actually, a nice, muscular man behind us pushed me over it with about as much effort as it would have taken to tap a beach ball), and found ourselves with a group of very young, very tough-looking individuals. Mohawks and running shoes were prevalent, as were costumes: behind us, a group of shirtless men wore red-white-and-blue suspenders, sequinned skirts, and tiny top hats. There were plenty of women, but in general the crowd skewed male and beefy. Aggressive heavy-metal music blared.

People tend to do Tough Mudders in teams. Dean and I were running the course with several executives from the company—all in their twenties and thirties—including Carol Gottshall, a P.R. representative, who wore a Tough Mudder tank top and had her hair in pigtails; Cristina DeVito, the company’s chief development officer at the time; Alex Patterson, then the company’s chief culture officer; and John Fidoe, the director of European marketing. I wore spandex—standard obstacle-course attire—porous aqua shoes, and, somewhat uncomfortably, a GoPro video camera strapped to my head.

Before events, Sean Corvelle, a standup comedian, delivers motivational speeches to pump up the crowd and convey a more elevated sense of mission. Corvelle, who wore a backward newsboy cap and eye-black, led us in a tribute to the active military personnel in the group (there were several) and elaborated on the types of heroism we civilians might be displaying: “You are the people who get the kids to school, go to work, pay the bills! You’re the ones who set up that foundation for people that are struggling with cancer, people that are being challenged with obesity, that have some physical challenge. Maybe they’ve lost their job and they have given up hope. . . . Hoo-rah to you heroes!”

There were several more chants of “Hoo-rah!” followed by a dance called the “Mudder sway.” (A dance, not wildly different from saluting “*Sieg*

Heil,” where you jab one hand in the air to Corvelle’s cries of “When I say ‘Tough!’ you say ‘Mudder!’”) Soon came a solemn rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and a recitation of the Mudder Pledge. A whistle blew, and we were off and running.

I’ve often wondered, as people do, how I will meet my end. As I stood in the paddock, my heart pounding from excess coffee intake, I had a realization: heart attack. But, once the race began, and the crowd thinned on the mountain trails, my thoughts began to slow down. Our team joined the people jogging through the woods—sometimes performing little stunts (pretending to have a bowel movement, for example) or shouting “Hoorah!” It was like being part of a friendly army on the march.

The second Tough Mudder obstacle is called the Kiss of Mud: a long stretch of barbed wire, eighteen inches from the ground. It’s a kind of muddy baptism, Dean explained. “People love mud,” he said. “You see this regression back into childhood.” There were issues, however—in California, the dirt is thin and silty, producing a pebble-filled gruel when mixed with water. The ideal mud, Dean said, holding a handful of the stuff, is on the East Coast: “You want to have a part where it’s like”—he made farting sounds that evoked tromping through sticky gloop—“and also parts where you’re wading in it and really can’t move.”

Tough Mudder focusses on promoting “buzzworthy” obstacles, like the Fire Walker, a run through burning firewood, and Electroshock Therapy, in which people dash through dangling wires that deliver ten-thousand-volt electric shocks. This last one is perhaps the most notorious Tough Mudder event: I’d tortured myself by watching YouTube videos from a Tough Mudder, in Arizona, where wave upon wave of burly men fell to the ground, stunned, as they hit the wires.

This Kiss of Mud actually didn’t look so hard, if you ignored the barbed wire. I got on the ground and began slithering on my stomach. It wasn’t painful—looking around at my comrades, I felt like part of a school of salamanders—but it wasn’t comfortable. I could feel my limbs scraping against rocks. But people were whooping and grunting, and a certain exhilaration kicked in. Someone chanted, “Mudder die!”

The Arctic Enema was the scene of my first mini panic attack. To complete it, you have to dive into the ice water and pass under a wooden board. Cristina DeVito was reassuring. “We can go together,” she said, as she stood beside me at the dumpster. After hesitating—and whining—at the edge of the ice-filled dumpster for a good ten seconds, I splashed in. I could feel the breath being knocked out of me, my limbs seizing up, but, before I knew it, I was on the far side of the partition. DeVito and Gottshall emerged behind me, wild-eyed and panting, and, to my surprise, I found myself giving them high fives.

After a while, the event took on a rhythm. We’d jog for a stretch—or walk, when we got winded—stopping to chat with other Tough Mudder participants or chuckle at the signs that studded the road: “Leave Dignity Here”; “When was the last time you really earned a beer?”; “You couldn’t run a bath.” (Dean didn’t like that last one. “It’s kind of offensive and not funny,” he said.)

At its heart, Tough Mudder is a group-bonding exercise. From the female members of my team, Gottshall and DeVito, I learned that women are big proponents of positive reinforcement (“You go, girl!”; “You got this!”). From the male members, I learned that even city-bound office workers enjoy the occasional act of rugged gallantry—hoisting struggling females over log walls, for instance. (It goes both ways: during an event called the Warrior Carry—where each teammate is supposed to be carried through a stretch of the course by the others, like a fallen comrade—Alex Patterson waited expectantly. DeVito and I each took one butt cheek and, with much difficulty, did the deed.)

Dean was the least playful member of the group. Though he’s not much older than many of his employees, he maintains a watchful, slightly parental air. His approach to the obstacles was quiet and methodical, despite inevitable awkward moments. (One came as two teammates struggled, and failed, to hoist him to the edge of a wooden parapet called the Berlin Wall.)

Between obstacles, Dean and I spent a fair amount of time talking about money—or, rather, his lack of interest in it, in spite of the fact that he is the majority stakeholder of a privately held and highly

lucrative business. “If I wanted to, I could sell the company tomorrow and would never have to work again,” he told me. “But what would I do with my life?” He said that his life style hadn’t changed much since he lived in London and made twenty-five thousand pounds a year. (He is now married to an American lawyer, Katie Palms, and lives in Brooklyn Heights.) “I ride my bike to work, have dinner with Katie.” Sensing that he had perhaps been pressing the point, he clarified, “I’m not Warren Buffett. I wouldn’t live in some random, crappy house.”

Dean grew up in Sherwood Forest, of Robin Hood fame, in the North of England, the son of small-town lawyers. At school, he had a classic entrepreneur’s report card: “a lot of A’s and a lot of C’s.” At the University of Bristol, he studied economics and politics.

To understand Tough Mudder’s military associations, as they relate to Dean, it’s important to distinguish between the different types of people who work in counterterrorism: there are the combat guys—élite soldiers, like the members of SEAL Team Six, who dropped into Osama bin Laden’s compound—and then there are the intelligence guys, the ones back at the office, analyzing spreadsheets. Dean was one of the latter. (Tough Mudder’s boast that it’s “designed by British Special Forces” refers to consulting input from a former member of the Special Air Service, and to a Tough Mudder employee named Paul Simcox, who was a Royal Marine.) Dean’s training, according to a former colleague, emphasized skills such as “how to present well, so you can get what you want” from people. As for the physical aspect, there wasn’t much crawling under barbed wire. Andy McNab, another former S.A.S. officer, who oversaw a self-defense course for intelligence staffers, described it as “a week of jumping up and down.”

But Dean fought terrorists in other ways. The youngest in his cohort of junior intelligence staffers, he quickly rose to the top of the group, by initiating and planning what Simcox described as “four or five” big counterterrorism operations. The most successful concerned a plan to thwart the financial networks of terrorists in the Middle East. According to Simcox, the operation extended throughout the

Arabian Gulf and involved “identification of the money flows” that reached “into the many millions of dollars.” Dean spent months flying in and out of the Gulf, talking to “some pretty high-level people.”

By 2007, Dean had grown tired of government bureaucracy, and he enrolled at Harvard Business School—which in those pre-crash days turned out to be less of a boot camp for entrepreneurs than a giant battle to have the most fun. There was pressure to go on the best vacation, eat at the best restaurants. He became acquainted with a new concept: FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out. “I remember someone trying to convince me to take a ten-day trip to Japan, and it was twelve thousand dollars,” Dean told me. “They were, like, ‘When are you ever going to get to Japan?’ I was, like, ‘Anytime I want!’”

Dean describes his decision to found Tough Mudder as a “violent reaction” to business school. But it was also a savvy response to the new kind of consumer culture that he found there—one that photo-sharing Web sites such as Instagram and Facebook would soon make ubiquitous. For the generation shaped by social media, Dean likes to say, “experiences are the new luxury good.”

Tough Mudder began as a school project. As Dean tells it, he had moved from marathons to triathlons, and was bored with them. He signed up for an independent-study program where he could get class credit for researching a business, and began looking into endurance events—the Strongman Run, based in Germany, and the Ironman. Eventually, his fieldwork took him to Staffordshire, England, where Billy Wilson, a former British Army soldier, night-club operator, and barber, runs an animal sanctuary. Wilson, who is seventy-seven and has an enormous white mustache, is known as Mr. Mouse. Some twenty years ago, he began hosting a cross-country run, now known as Tough Guy, to raise money for the sanctuary. Over time, it grew increasingly sadistic: people had to trudge through swamps and brave fields of stinging nettles. The Tough Guy race has become a cult attraction—seven thousand people did it last year—despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that hundreds are forced to drop out, owing to hypothermia or broken bones. The goal is to reach a “point of no return,” Wilson told me, when I spoke to him recently.



“When you say you’re close to your parents, do you mean birthday-and-holidays close, or share-a-bathroom close?”

“People reach a point between life and death. It’s a precipice: you either step over it or step back.”

In 2008, Dean paid a visit to Wilson, the results of which are recorded in legal filings. Dean explained that he was a student at Harvard Business School, and that he was preparing a report for his fall-semester class. He asked for information about Tough Guy—financial records, the demographics of people who participate in the race, the layout of the obstacles. Wilson shared, but only after having Dean sign a nondisclosure agreement, promising that he would not use the information to “any commercial end whatsoever.” He told me that he was initially impressed by Dean’s research. At the time, Tough Guy had about a hundred obstacles, and Dean conducted a survey, using Wilson’s contact list, to find out which ones were most popular. At the top of the list was Fiery Holes, where participants ran through pits of fire. There was also one called the Lake, in which contestants jump into a pool of muddy water, and another called the Tiger, featuring electric shocks. Dean advised Wilson to eliminate some of the less popular obstacles. “He was really clever,” Wilson said. “He knew that those things alone would sell the event.”

In May, 2010, with Guy Livingstone, a childhood friend and a business partner, Dean launched the first Tough Mudder, at a ski resort in Pennsylvania. The event was a success, attracting forty-five hundred entrants. But, as Wilson soon discovered, its promotional Web site was decorated with photographs and videos that Dean had made during his observations of the Tough Guy run. Wilson sued Dean for fraud, citing “immoral and despicable conduct.” Tough Mudder settled with Wilson out of court, paying him more than seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Harvard Business School’s Conduct Review Board, after investigating Wilson’s complaints, placed Dean on a five-year “post-graduation probation,” and the scandal made the cover of *Outside*.

Recent years have not been kind to him, Wilson told me. Dean had accused him of tax evasion, and of partnering with sham charities. A month after he and Tough Mudder reached a settlement, in 2011, U.K. tax and charity authorities descended on Wilson’s property. He said that he’s been overwhelmed by legal wranglings ever since. “We enjoyed a beautiful life before he came. And he’s purposely destroyed all this, you see,” Wilson said. He has requested further

investigations from Harvard, which he refers to in letters as “Harvard School for Trolls.” “This guy is the worst, most wicked person that you could ever turn out of Harvard,” Wilson told me. He seemed inclined to continue fighting Dean: “I am a Tough Guy, I am a man, I am a soldier. I am the unbeatable.”

Dean points out that the obstacle race was not Wilson’s invention, and that his work in marketing and scaling Tough Mudder was the key to its success. “Tough Mudder puts on fifty-three events around the world, using a space like a ski resort out of season,” he told me. “If I wanted to learn a lot about how to run Tough Mudder, I should have done a study on Cirque du Soleil.”

These dodgy beginnings, the Harvard connection, the roots in social media, and Tough Mudder’s explosive growth lead to an inevitable analogy: Dean is frequently described as the Mark Zuckerberg of obstacle racing. The Facebook comparison flatters Tough Mudder as well as indicts it. In both cases, the new company’s success seems to imply that the original idea wasn’t what mattered. It was all about the execution. When I suggested this to Dean, he told me, “There’s a pretty killer line in ‘The Social Network.’ He says, ‘If you guys were the inventors of Facebook, you’d have invented Facebook.’”

Ironically, the obstacle-racing industry has turned out to be rife with copycats. “People say, ‘Oh, I’ve got a field! I can build walls!’” Dean told me. Bored office workers looking for an athletic diversion now have a raft of options, many of them indistinguishable from a distance: the Foam Fest, where obstacles involve fluffy soap suds and a Slip-’N-Slide; the Color Run, where participants are sprayed with dyes, which calls itself “the happiest 5K on the planet”; the Devil Dash (inspired by the seven deadly sins); the Mud Ninja; the Muddy Buddy; the Rave Run (electronic-music themed); the Caveman Crawl; the Zombie Evacuation; the Superhero Scramble.

Really, though, Tough Mudder has only two big competitors: Warrior Dash and Spartan Race—together, they are sometimes described as “the Big Three.” Warrior Dash, which began in 2009, with the mission of getting “weekend warriors” off the couch, is the shortest and the silliest: the run is between three and four miles long, and finishers are re-

warded with a Fred Flintstone-like helmet, a beer, and a giant turkey leg. Spartan Race presents itself as the toughest. The company emphasizes that you will be “ranked, timed, and judged.” Joe De Sena, Spartan’s founder, is a chiselled former Wall Street trader with a buzz cut. He told me, “I’ve got military envy.” De Sena contrasted his event with Tough Mudder’s form of “instant gratification,” which he attributed to “the softening of America, to every-



child-gets-a-trophy, to noncompetitive events, where there’s no timing and it’s just about holding hands.”

Having saturated the United States, Spartan Race and Tough Mudder are now locked in a new battle: to be the brand the world associates with obstacle racing. Tough Mudder is conquering the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, and this year it will take on Ireland and New Zealand. Spartan Race recently announced that it had raised private equity to expand into forty-two countries.

Dean likes to discuss how obstacle racing plays in different cultures. “Essentially, the value proposition—toughness—is like kids and ice cream,” he told me. “It’s pretty global.” But he enjoys discovering ethnographic variations. When Tough Mudder expanded into Germany, the company decided that, given the country’s history, it would be best to “tone down the military feel.” For the first event, its chosen charity was the Red Cross, and a new element was added: volunteers in gorilla costumes. When it was over, American organizers were surprised to find people stripping naked in an open area reserved for hosing off. (Germany is big on FKK, or free body culture.)

As I approached the halfway point in the event, I was stiff and crusted with mud—and my hands were blistered from plywood and monkey bars—but I felt more confident. Perhaps there was

something to the sniping I’d read, in comments sections online, that Tough Mudder isn’t exactly as tough as advertised. Or—I dared to think—perhaps I was tougher than I assumed.

Like many people, however, I had a most-feared obstacle: Electroshock Therapy, the field of live wires. I had been thinking about it all morning—so I was caught off guard when I came upon the Electric Eel, Electroshock Therapy’s less glamorous cousin: it consists of a few lanes of plastic tarp, with muddy water pooled in them. A field of short live wires dangled just above the plastic. The idea was to crawl, commando style, through the mud-water, while suffering the electric shocks. I looked back at my teammates, who nodded enthusiastically. I got down onto my stomach and began clambering. After a second, I felt a shock: it *really* hurt. I could feel my limbs buckle, and I heard myself screaming, “Yow!” I kept wriggling through the water, screaming, and getting shocked. (To my eventual dismay, the camera on my forehead captured my every squeal, moan, and grunt.) I came out of the Electric Eel to loud shouts. “You got it, girl!” DeVito said. “You crushed it!” For the first time that day, however, I felt as if I’d been crushed. Behind me, Gottshall emerged, gasping. Alex Patterson said, “That was the most intense one I’ve done.”

Tough Mudder recently opened a new headquarters, in downtown Brooklyn’s MetroTech: a seventy-thousand-square-foot space. The company had been based in Dumbo, alongside tech startups. MetroTech, Dean said, “is where Dumbo companies come to grow up.” This winter, Dean took me on a tour of the space, which is sleek and industrial. There is beer on tap, a time line with artifacts from the company’s brief history (fun fact: a 2011 version of the Arctic Enema, called the Bloody Mary, included red habañero peppers), a video conference room, where Tough Mudder employees can chat with colleagues in London and Melbourne, and an orange map of the world studded with pins to represent upcoming events. Tough Mudder’s employees—there are now a hundred and seventy—sit in an open floor plan; they are sporty and clean-cut. Dean told me, “‘British, Harvard, Bain’ describes most of our senior executives. Many check two of those boxes.”

We stopped in at the marketing department, where a former Bain analyst named Ted Conbeer used survey data to create hypothetical profiles of typical Tough Mudder customers. Fun Frank is thirty-four, a family man. "He does O.K.," Conbeer said, detailing the financial picture. "He's probably a regional sales manager. He's that guy who organizes the touch-football game the day after Thanksgiving." Mudder Mark likes "everything about our brand." He's very patriotic—a firefighter or a marine—and is "single but looking." Loner Larry is the "most depressed." He's a little older than the others—around thirty-seven—and is more likely to be divorced. Things haven't been going so well for him lately: he may have health problems, or need to lose some weight. "He does Tough Mudder because he thinks it will change his life," Conbeer said.

Obstacle innovation takes place in a warehouse in New Jersey. One day, I accompanied Dean there for a brainstorming session. The walls were orange, and there was construction equipment scattered around a giant model of an obstacle called Everest, which resembles a skateboard ramp. The lab is overseen by Mark Lombardi, a burly twenty-eight-year-old whose previous job was designing nuclear submarines. When we arrived, Eli Hutchison, an employee in shorts and a sweaty T-shirt, was running full speed toward a police-style radar gun. He said that he was brainstorming a possible obstacle called Insane Bolt. "I've been trying to figure out how to make people sprint," he said. "I thought we could have them race a hologram animal." The image brought to mind a Looney Tunes episode: Bugs Bunny as the rabbit at a dog track.

At the far side of the warehouse were eight tennis-ball cannons, lined up firing-squad style in front of a cinder-block wall. A group of Tough Mudder employees gathered around a designer named Peter Mack, who explained that a tennis-ball obstacle had been tested at an event in Buffalo: "This was the first time we actually shot people on the course."

On a dry-erase board, he drew a diagram: the cannons had faced an empty shipping container, which Mudders then had to jog through. "The idea was that you hear this really loud, thundering noise," Mack said. When they exited the

tunnel, they found themselves being pelted with tennis balls.

The innovation team had hoped to have eighty per cent of the people hit with tennis balls. In this, they were successful. But there were complications. It had started to rain. The tennis balls got muddy, causing the machines to jam. Furthermore, Mack said, "we had three safety incidents that stood out. First, we had two participants that got hit in the eye. The third was an incident where a guy got hit in the neck, and it hurt him really badly."

Dean interrupted with a question: "What speed were you throwing the balls at?"

The machines had been set to Level 7, out of a possible ten. Mack said, "My guess would be about forty miles per hour."

Dean seemed unimpressed. "A fast serve at Wimbledon is, like, a hundred and ten miles per hour?"

Next: customer-survey results. The tennis-ball obstacle had scored 3.89 out of five in satisfaction—pretty high for a new obstacle. "What about buzzworthiness?" Dean asked. It had received a score of 4. "It ranked about halfway up all the obstacles," Mack said, and added, with a hint of pride, "I will also note it was the most talked-about obstacle on Facebook."

Dean was still stuck on speed. "I think narrative's very important here," he said, after a minute. "You go to another event, and people say, 'Tough Mudder—that's the event with the *ten thousand volts of electricity*.' . . . For me, it's important that there's a hook to it. It needs to be: 'I get electrocuted at *ten thousand volts*. I get tennis balls fired at me at *one hundred miles per hour*.' I think there's something magical about a hundred." He looked around, and the designers nodded doubtfully.

Then Mack turned on the cannons. They rumbled loudly to life. Soon, they were expelling tennis balls at the wall, making loud *thwacking* sounds. "All right!" Mack shouted. "Everyone who wants to do it, get in a single-file line!"

I got in line. There was a balance beam fifteen feet from the hail of tennis balls, and each person in the group wobbled out onto it. A few whooped as they were hit. Others moved on silently. Mack shouted out, "In your head, think, How hard is this?"

For a few steps, I managed to dodge the projectiles. It didn't seem hard. Then I was hit. The tennis ball connected with

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a *thwack* on my thigh. I shrieked, but then decided that the pain wasn't so bad. I wobbled forward, with more determination, and was hit again, on the torso. This time, it hurt. Still, I have to admit, it was fun. Mack told us to rate the obstacle on a scale of one to ten, in terms of difficulty. I said six.

After the meeting was over, Dean huddled with Mack and Lombardi. He gave them the pitch for breaking a hundred miles an hour again. "What Tough Mudder does well is things that shouldn't be: I'm running in fire! I'm in a dumpster full of ice! I'm getting zapped with ten thousand volts of electricity!" He went over the innovation guidelines: "It needs to be tough; it needs to be memorable; it needs to be easy to describe to your friends; it needs to be awesome in a photo and a video; it needs to be easy for spectators to see—and it needs to be cheap."

One inevitable area of tension is the question of safety versus risk. Dean told me, "People want to leave this event with a few cuts and bruises." Of course, worse things do happen. In Tahoe, we came to an obstacle that has, in the past year, attracted unwanted notoriety: Walk the Plank, a wooden platform from which you jump fifteen feet into a deep, man-made pool of muddy water. Last April, this obstacle was the scene of Tough Mudder's first death. In Gerradstown, West Virginia, Avishek Sengupta, a twenty-eight-year-old employee of an Internet marketing company, jumped into the water, alongside four co-workers, and drowned.

There were seventy-five safety and medical personnel present on the course that day; Walk the Plank had a team of safety officials, as well as a rescue diver with scuba gear. But, in a report filed by the local sheriff, witnesses describe a chaotic scene at the obstacle: crowds jumping into the pool, and people being rescued as others jumped in behind them. Footage from a camera carried by an Army veteran named Brett Brocki shows a man being rescued with a life buoy only minutes before Sengupta jumps. When Sengupta doesn't surface, his friends can be heard screaming, "Avi!" The diver is putting on his equipment in the far corner of the pool. Brocki and other observers begin yelling at him to move faster: "Dude, get your mask on, go! Oh, Jesus Christ!" By

the time Sengupta was finally pulled from the water, about eight minutes later, he was foaming at the mouth. At the hospital, where he died a day later, he was identified by the bib number written in marker on his forehead: 69989.

The sheriff ultimately ruled Sengupta's death an accident. But his family is preparing to file a multimillion-dollar suit against Tough Mudder and the company that provided the rescue diver, for gross negligence. That day, twenty people were brought to a nearby hospital to be treated for injuries sustained on the Tough Mudder course—stroke, head injuries, hypothermia.

"Trying to get people to have a sensitive, balanced discussion about this is hard," Dean told me. He pointed out that Tough Mudder's fatality rates—one death out of 1.3 million participants—are much lower than those for marathons, which average one death in two hundred and fifty-nine thousand. Dean says that no major procedural changes have been put in place since Sengupta's death, but when I tried the obstacle it seemed closely monitored. A slew of rescue divers waited on one side of the pool, far below, with their equipment on, and a group of volunteers patrolled the top of the platform, making sure that people went in one at a time. I took a deep breath and jumped, feeling my stomach drop and my throat tighten as I fell. My shoes smacked the surface of the muddy water, and, as I plunged in, some of it went straight up my nose. The pool was shockingly cold, and deep—my feet didn't touch the bottom. I treaded water until I reached the edge of the pool and hoisted myself out.

At the end of the year, I received an e-mail from a family member about "Health Trends We'd Be Happy to See Go in 2014." Obstacle racing featured prominently. The attached article discussed questions of safety, but the mention of trends brought up the biggest threat that seems to loom for Tough Mudder: not safety or competition but our short attention span. Dean had casually joked about the electric-shock obstacles: "It's like getting married: highly enjoyable, but you only want to do it once." No one seems quite to know whether the same will be true of Tough Mudder. Is obstacle racing a fad, destined to go the way of step aerobics? "I

have no crystal ball," Dean told me. "Why do I think Tough Mudder will still be around? It taps into something innate." He didn't specify what that was, though: perhaps the need for men to be macho, or the boundless power of Internet marketing.

At the end of the course in Tahoe, I was back at the base area, winded, caked with mud, and beginning to feel a powerful soreness creeping into my limbs. Just one obstacle remained: Electroshock Therapy. As I approached it, I started to feel like a scared weakling again. My heart-attack premonition came rushing back to me. My experience with the Electric Eel had only made things worse. Because this obstacle takes place at the base area, it's performed in front of a crowd of spectators. People were lined up around the field of wires, cheering, as Mudders waited to run through. Sean Corvelle, the motivational speaker, was there, shouting into a megaphone.

Many teams chose to run through Electroshock Therapy holding hands. My team lined up, counted "One-two-three!," and dashed into the wires, sprinting all the way to the finish line. We were done! But the crowd was still cheering, only more insistently. I began to realize that they were cheering for me—because I hadn't gone anywhere. It was a bit like being in a dream: when everyone else had started running, my feet stayed rigidly in place.

Slowly, and with horror, I became aware that Corvelle was leading the crowd in a long, sustained cheer of moral support: "You can do it! Mudder on!" As I looked around at the chipper, athletic Californians, my anxiety battled with my embarrassment. A group of girls in tutus offered me a hand. "No, thanks," I said. "You got this!" Corvelle kept shouting. I did?

Finally, when the obstacle was clear, I put my head down and ran. Then came the familiar shocks—pricks on my bare arms that became limb-shaking jolts. Very quickly, I was on the far side of the obstacle, where several people had collapsed, out of theatrics or exhaustion. I walked gingerly around a young man who was lying on the ground with his legs splayed, a medic pouring water into his mouth. Across a little footbridge, people were distributing beer and orange headbands. I accepted a bottle of beer, and took a long swig. Dean approached me. "How do you feel?" he asked. I felt tough. ♦

NEW JERSEY: THE QUIZ

BY PAUL RUDNICK

1. True or false: The map of New Jersey resembles a policeman, and if you look closely you can see his cap and his profile.

Answer: False. The map of New Jersey resembles a corrupt policeman, and if you look closely you can see the brand-new hot tub in his back yard, his place in the Bahamas, and his wife's new implants.

2. What should Teresa Giudice, the Real Housewife of New Jersey who's been indicted for financial fraud, blame her troubles on?

- (a) Her unnaturally low hairline.
- (b) Whoever told her that Tuscan-style kitchens are ever a good idea.
- (c) The fact that, according to her blog, she once visited a Florida steak house where "they give you a personalized 'love bone' with your name carved in it. So good!"

3. Why has the city of Secaucus been called the Pig Capital of the World?

- (a) It was once the site of many hog farms and rendering plants.
- (b) The title the Steaming Entrails Capital was already taken, by Bayonne.
- (c) Have you ever been to a Secaucus prom?

4. True or false: There is a famous New Jersey shopping center called the Bergen Mall. When Candice Bergen married the French filmmaker Louis Malle, she became Candice Bergen Malle.

Answer: True. And if you go to the Bergen Mall you can buy a wide variety of animal-print fleece-covered neck pillows, maybe at a kiosk called In the Neck.

5. The slogan of New Jersey's capital, which appears in glowing letters on one of the city's bridges, is "Trenton Makes, the World Takes." What were the three runners-up?

- (a) "Trenton Pees, the World Sees."

(b) "Trenton Poops, the World Scoops."

(c) "If You Lived in Trenton, You'd Be Home Now So You Could Kill Yourself."

6. The past three elected New Jersey governors have all broken their legs while in office. James McGreevey, the state's proud gay American governor, broke his while strolling on a Cape May beach. How will Chris Christie break his leg?



- (a) Kicking one of his aides.
- (b) Running from a subpoena.
- (c) Putting on his pants.

7. New Jersey license plates bear the motto "The Garden State." What are some other options?

- (a) "Shut Up."
- (b) "Fuck You."
- (c) "Oh, Like Everyone in North Dakota Is Thin."
- (d) "Land of 1,000 Filthy Turnpike Rest Rooms."
- (e) "For \$1,500, You Can Own Camden."

8. A headline on Gawker read, "Everybody in New Jersey Was Arrested Today." If this were to be the first line of a new official state song, who should sing it?

- (a) Bruce Springsteen, because then it would be gritty, heartbreaking, and a brushstroke in the American songscape.
- (b) Jon Bon Jovi, because then people from New Jersey would actually enjoy it.
- (c) A children's choir composed of

kids whose parents have been convicted of money laundering.

9. Many New Jersey towns have Native American names, including Ho-Ho-Kus, Lake Hopatcong, and Piscataway. Why do relatively few Native Americans live in New Jersey?

(a) Because they're offended by the odor of burning tires around Elizabeth (which is a town, not a Real Housewife).

(b) Because they're offended that, in New Jersey, Cinnabons have the legal right to vote.

(c) Because they're offended that, in New Jersey, Chuck E. Cheese's has been granted tax-exempt status, as a church.

10. Many of the cast members of "Jersey Shore" weren't actually from New Jersey. What would constitute a more accurate New Jersey reality show?

(a) A reunion of all the staff members Chris Christie has fired.

(b) A reunion of all the Democratic officeholders Chris Christie has sabotaged.

(c) Five million girls named Deb, Angie, or Tiff.

(d) A group of perfectly nice, hard-working, educated people who just happen to live in New Jersey, under assumed names.

11. When "The Sopranos" aired, many Italian-American organizations protested, claiming that the show defamed Italian-Americans from New Jersey. How could Tony Soprano have been more sensitive to their concerns?

(a) If, after he strangled someone, he'd said, "By the way, I'm half Polish."

(b) If, while he was cheating on his wife with a stripper, he'd done it in Connecticut.

(c) If his name had been Timmy Soprano.

12. The state seal of New Jersey features a horse's head, three plows, Ceres (the Roman goddess of agriculture), and a female figure personifying Liberty. What should be added?

(a) A condom with a hole in it.

(b) A gun with the serial number sanded off.

(c) A traffic cone.

(d) Ceres and Liberty pouring beer down each other's halter top. ♦

LETTER FROM MICHIGAN

DROP DEAD, DETROIT!

The suburban kingpin who is thriving off the city's decline.

BY PAIGE WILLIAMS



L. Brooks Patterson, Oakland County's chief executive, has declared, "I love sprawl."

For the past twenty-one years, L. Brooks Patterson has governed Oakland County, a large, affluent suburb of Detroit. Oakland County embodies fiscal success as much as Detroit does financial ruin, and Patterson, the county executive, tends to behave as though his chief job in life were to never let anyone forget it. One week in September, he gave me an extended tour of his empire, in a chauffeured minivan. Near the end of the first day, we headed toward Lake St. Clair, at the mouth of the Detroit River, for a party on a yacht. Patterson sat in the front passenger seat. Over his shoulder, he said, "Anytime I talk about Detroit, it will not be positive. Therefore, I'm called a Detroit basher. The truth hurts, you know? Tough shit."

The landscape slid past, a jumbled time line of American suburban innovation: big-box districts, fuel megacenters, shopping malls, restaurants with the interior acreage of a factory. "I love sprawl," Patterson once declared. "I need it. I promote it. Oakland County can't get enough of it." This credo is now memo-

rialized on Oakland County's Web site.

Patterson told me, "I used to say to my kids, 'First of all, there's no reason for you to go to Detroit. We've got restaurants out here.' They don't even have movie theatres in Detroit—not one." He went on, "I can't imagine finding something in Detroit that we don't have in spades here. Except for live sports. We don't have baseball, football. For that, fine—get in and get out. But park right next to the venue—spend the extra twenty or thirty bucks. And, before you go to Detroit, you get your gas out here. You do not, *do not*, under any circumstances, stop in Detroit at a gas station! That's just a call for a carjacking."

"That's true," his driver, a retired cop named Tim, muttered. "You're not in Kansas anymore."

Patterson just turned seventy-five. Pink-cheeked and silver-haired, he wears rimless eyeglasses and dark suits. His distinctive, slightly slurred baritone is known throughout southeastern Michigan. His sentences often start with "*Ah my gad!*"

Before becoming the county execu-

tive, Patterson, a Republican, served for sixteen years as the county prosecutor. He banned plea bargains to the extent that, as he tells it, criminals knew to avoid Oakland County, because the chief law-enforcement officer was a "crazy motherfucker" who did not make deals. He went after strip clubs and porn shops so zealously that a judge ordered him to stop "Eliot Ness-style raids." His government career has spanned the terms of seven Detroit mayors; the eighth, Mike Duggan, was inaugurated on January 1st. Patterson is known for being a shrewd tactician who has introduced creative initiatives to keep Oakland County solvent. Oakland is one of only several dozen counties in the U.S. that Standard & Poor's has given a triple-A bond rating, the highest possible credit score; Patterson maintained the distinction even during the recession, and even as Detroit's recent collapse into bankruptcy has threatened to destabilize the regional economy. In 2013, an S. & P. analyst said that, if counties were color-coded, Oakland would be platinum.

Since the 2008 Wall Street crash, Oakland County has struggled with a sluggishly rebounding housing market and a high unemployment rate, but its budget is balanced through 2017 and, as Detroit contends with eighteen billion dollars in debt, Oakland has a surplus of more than two hundred million dollars. In October, *Governing*, a non-partisan magazine in Washington, D.C., named Patterson one of nine public officials of the year, citing his pioneering use of a three-year rolling budget, which allows the county to plan ahead for problems rather than be forced to triage them in a crisis. One of the magazine's editors told the *Detroit Free Press* that Patterson represents the kind of farsighted fiscal management that "should be a model for counties and cities and states everywhere."

Still, he is best known for his big mouth. When a black Detroit city councilwoman alleged racism during a business dispute, Patterson publicly declared that he'd "rather own a 1947 Buick than own" her. After accusing Detroit of trying to save itself by poaching Oakland County companies, he said, "I don't see how moving furniture around on the deck of the Titanic helps this region

grow." In 2012, Robert Ficano, the executive of Wayne County, which includes Detroit, became the subject of a federal investigation; when Patterson was asked what advice he'd give Ficano, he joked, "Go in the garage, pull the door down, leave the engine running." Patterson once compared road reforms to rape. He marked the death of Coleman Young—Detroit's first black mayor and a former nemesis—by calling him singly responsible for the city's demise. This past fall, during a political talk show, Patterson obliquely compared Michigan's Speaker of the House to Hitler, then produced a black pocket comb and pressed it to his upper lip.

Once, he helped host a mock roast that featured a man in a Coleman Young mask and people speaking in what one reporter called a "guttural black dialect." The Reverend Wendell Anthony, the president of the Detroit chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., complained that the media too often excused Patterson's "divisive racist antics." He added, "Mr. Patterson's failure is rooted in his limited capacity to understand that God's grace shines on more than one county and on more than one type of human being." Patterson is opposed to a regional subway system, and Brenda Lawrence—a former political rival frustrated with his refusal to compromise on this position, and with his apparent favoritism toward affluent whites—has referred to him as "an island." When I asked him how Detroit might fix its financial problems, he said, "I made a prediction a long time ago, and it's come to pass. I said, 'What we're gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn.'"

Lewis is Patterson's first name, but he likes to joke that if a pretty woman in a bar asks what the "L" in "L. Brooks Patterson" stands for, he takes her by the hand and coos, "Lonely." (Twice divorced, he is single.) En route to the yacht party, he paraphrased Edwin Edwards, who served four terms as governor of Louisiana: "I'll keep getting elected until I'm caught in bed with a live man or a dead woman."

As a young man, Patterson hoped to become a writer. For speeches, he creates his own material but also scavenges from

the Internet, bending other people's quips to fit the occasion. When Kelly Sleva, his assistant, transcribes audio recordings of notes that he makes while preparing remarks, she often hears him cracking himself up. He loves to tell a made-up story about parking some distance from a downtown venue and asking a police officer how long he'd have to walk. "I don't know—no one's ever made it," the cop answers. At a recent retirement roast of an employee who had moved to Louisville, Patterson joked, "Mike told me when he went to the Kentucky Derby he saw a bumper sticker that said 'I miss Detroit.' So he broke the window, stole the radio, and left a note that said, 'I hope this cures your homesickness.'" He recycles his bits to the point that his constituents can retell them. The first time he made the crack about Indians and corn, he was widely criticized for it, but he does not backpedal. Even if a line is poorly received, he pockets it like a shiv.

"I don't work for Detroit—they don't sign my paycheck," he told me. "The residents out here know I'm hardworking and I'm honest. Yeah, I sometimes say things that make people cringe." On another occasion, he said, "I can get away with it because me and my team, we're good at what we do. People are gonna forgive me my peccadilloes because we're the best-managed county in America."

As a native of Detroit, Patterson claims a license to criticize it. The tour he was giving me began to feel like another dig at the city. Last summer, Kevyn Orr, Detroit's emergency manager, offered to take creditors on a tour, under armed guard. The caution was warranted: four hundred and eleven people had been killed there in 2012, the worst homicide rate in two decades. "We've lost respect for life," Dave Bing, then the city's mayor, said. The police's average response time in emergencies had risen to fifty-eight minutes. The creditors were asked to sign a waiver absolving the city of responsibility in the event of injury or death. Ultimately, the tour was cancelled. Patterson joked to me that his tour of Oakland County required no waiver.

Patterson clearly enjoys having a driver, and has had one since his days as county prosecutor. Back in 2003, when he still occasionally drove himself, a sheriff's deputy stopped his weaving Ca-

dillac one night; Patterson was heading home after a golf outing. Instead of administering a blood-alcohol test, the deputy and a sergeant drove him home; later, they were suspended without pay. After the incident, the *Free Press* advised Patterson to prove that "he's serious about changing his work-hard, party-harder ways."

One cloudy Friday in August, 2012, an oncoming Volkswagen turned in front of the Chrysler 300 town car in which Patterson was riding, and the cars crashed. Neither Patterson nor his chauffeur, a retired Michigan state trooper, had on a seat belt. ("An old habit," Patterson told me.) The chauffeur was paralyzed from the neck down. The wreck broke Patterson's legs, both wrists, and several ribs, and he was in a coma for seventeen days. The election was three months later. He won it from a hospital bed. Seventeen months after the accident, he remains in a wheelchair, but he is expected to recover. Patterson's supporters, in conversations about him, nearly always note that he almost died, their words tinged with the implication of resurrection.

The Michigan media have called him a "dangerous demagogue" and "the clown prince" of the state's Republican Party, yet they endorse him. "Oakland County is the economic engine of a sputtering region," the *Free Press* editorialized, in 2008. The county has not voted Republican in a Presidential election since 1992, but Patterson wins big. "Your Worship," "Your Honor," "the infamous L. Brooks Patterson," and "the dynamo of Oakland County" are some of the ways his constituents greet him or introduce him. Bill Ballenger, a longtime analyst of Michigan politics, told me, "He's become such an iconic figure I don't think anyone perceives that they could beat him." Patterson's political appeal has its limits, though. Three times, he has tried for higher office—attorney general once, governor twice—but he has never won an election beyond Oakland's borders.

A weather alert beeped on his iPhone, advising caution until 11:30 P.M. Black clouds were building in the east. The day's high had reached a freakish ninety-seven degrees, and I mentioned something that I'd heard on the news: a Michigan man had been charged with killing

a child by leaving him in a hot car. The man lived in Pontiac, one of the county's few blue-collar towns. Pocketing his phone, Patterson said, "I hate to sound class-conscious, but this was a trailer park, where it happened. So I'm thinking, You know what? Little bit of trailer-trash mentality kicked in."

Tim, the driver, had been teasing him by predicting a ruined party, and now he said, "Those are high-pressure clouds. That means the cold front's rising, and—"

"Look, Gloom-and-Doom, stop it," Patterson told him.

"I'm just readin' the clouds, Brooks."

"Well, *stop* readin' 'em."

The party, which Patterson throws each year for family and close friends, had been planned for weeks. Eighty people had R.S.V.P.'d. Patterson was already one drink in, after stopping by the Rusty Bucket, a bar, to avail himself of the Whiskey Wednesday special. He'd made his usual request: Canadian Club-on-the-rocks, and "don't put out the fire."

Patterson's office is in a putty-colored building that resembles a giant computer punch card, on a campus-like government complex in Pontiac, which is the county seat. The first time I met him, he was rounding a corner of his fifth-floor suite, flanked by a group that included his early-shift driver (whom he introduced as "my investigator") and the attorney general of Michigan.

Patterson always has an entourage, but since the car accident it has grown considerably. In addition to the drivers, there's a rotating staff of nurses, in scrubs, who oversee his ablutions and wardrobe changes. They wheel him in and out of offices, taverns, and events, materializing and dematerializing as needed. He thanks the women with "sweetheart" and "babe," endearments that I also heard him use with female business leaders, department heads, and a judge. (A male employee whom he considers a friend might be addressed as "Numb Nuts.") After every sortie, the wheelchair gets folded up and stowed, like a portable throne.

That day, Patterson's right arm was in a sling; two days earlier, on his way into a fund-raiser, he had fallen, breaking his elbow. The arm now hung across his

torso, like that of a waiter in a four-star restaurant. Beneath the sling was an open cast, which, in a verbal slip, he called an "open casket." He wore his suit jacket around his shoulders, like a cape.

He wheeled into his office and took his place behind his desk, above which hung a picture of Abraham Lincoln. The room was immaculate and corporate, with a conference table and a leather sofa. Picture windows overlooked apple trees that had dropped their fruit. Later, when I recognized the view as the one in a framed photograph, of deer tracking past the trees on a snowy day, he made a joke about hunting from his office window. Patterson cannot resist punctuating every conversation with a *ba-dump-bump* moment. Ballenger, the political analyst, told me, "He's the best m.c. you've ever heard."

Many of Oakland County's sixty-two cities, villages, and townships are wealthy. In Bloomfield Hills, the average listing price for a home is nearly a million dollars. The city of Troy is considered one of the safest in Michigan. But Pontiac has crime problems, and a history of racial conflict. In the nineteen-seventies, a neighborhood association's opposition to court-ordered busing attracted the allegiance of the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan, one of whose members dynamited ten empty school buses. Patterson was the neighborhood association's lawyer. At the time, he had just been fired, after several years as a county prosecutor; he was working in private practice as he mounted a campaign to



unseat the man who had dismissed him. In 1972, he won. His victory was connected to President Richard M. Nixon's landslide over George McGovern, but Patterson had also gained notoriety from the busing case.

He asked me where I was staying. When I mentioned a hotel in Pontiac, he frowned, and said, "You should have stayed at the Townsend," referring to an upscale hotel in Birmingham, with fireplaces and turndown service. Profes-

sional athletes and rock stars book there when they come to Oakland County, to play the Palace.

We went downstairs and got into the minivan. Patterson explained that the chauffeured car functions as an extension of his office. He sits in the passenger seat, often with a file folder open in his lap, reading. "He prepares for everything," one of his colleagues told me. "It's the attorney in him."

Patterson said that he wanted to show me the airport, which had just been rebuilt. The minivan rolled up to an airy glass terminal with a "living wall" of greenery that, at the dedication ceremony, had prompted him to make a marijuana joke. He pointed out solar charging stations and hangars for hundreds of private aircraft. "All kinds of money" had been spent on landscaping. "I said, 'I want this place to look like Augusta,'" he said. "When clients land, I want to make a huge, favorable impression."

Soon after he became the county executive, in 1992, he set about giving Oakland an independent identity. He did not want his county to be seen as a scattered collection of bedroom communities or as an outgrowth of Detroit, even though Oakland is filled with former Detroiters and would not exist without them. Early in his first term, advised by a roundtable of industry and education leaders, including a former chairman of General Motors, he began molding Oakland into a full-service destination. The transformation is fully under way. A promotional infographic currently used to recruit multinational companies situates Oakland relative only to Chicago, Cleveland, Toronto, and New York. Detroit isn't on the map.

The new airport had been conceived as a corporate-services-and-cargo operation, with Fortune 500 companies and international clients in mind. As we went out to look at the tarmac, Patterson said, to no one in particular, "I don't think we want to tell her how we got the state to move a road so we could get three hundred more feet of runway." A second later, he told the story: Oakland had persuaded the state to reconfigure a dangerous intersection, which made possible the building of a runway extension that accommodated heavier planes. The biggest corporate clients could now

"ADAM AND EVE," BY LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER, 1526

She seems a mere girl really,
small-breasted and slim,
her body luminescent
next to Adam, who scratches
his head in mild perplexity.
So many baubles hang
from the tree
it didn't hurt to pick one.
The snake is a quicksilver curve
on a branch she is almost
young enough to swing from.

The garden bores her anyway:
no weedy chaos among
the flowers and vegetables;
the animals so tame
you can hardly tell the lamb
from the lion, the doe from the stag
whose antlers outline Adam's modesty.
She is like that teen-age girl
who wandered from the mall last week
not to be seen again, the world before her
glittering and perilous.

—Linda Pastan

fly cargo directly into Oakland County. "Detroit is off the beaten path," Patterson explained.

In the past sixty years, the population of Detroit has shrunk from two million to fewer than seven hundred thousand. Oakland's population has followed the reverse trajectory. In 1960, its population was just under seven hundred thousand. About 1.2 million people live there now. If suburbs are parasites, this one is consuming its host.

The county measures nine hundred and ten square miles, just shy of the size of Rhode Island. Patterson likes to say that sprawl represents jobs and population growth, which generate taxes, which fund schools and services, which attract yet more people and jobs. He has steadily recruited Chinese companies; he urged the public schools to teach Mandarin, and now they do. Patterson enjoys pointing out that Oakland sends Lansing many more millions of dollars, in taxes, than Lansing sends back in goods and services. Oaklanders include, or have included, Eminem, Kid Rock,

Madonna, Mitt Romney, Jimmy Hoffa, and—it has been rumored—those who disappeared Jimmy Hoffa. "It's starting to look like the surface of the moon, we've dug so many times for Jimmy Hoffa," he said.

Eight Mile Road marks the northern border of Detroit. On the other side is Oakland County. The farther north you go, the whiter the population. After thirty miles, you reach Independence, the township where Patterson lives; it's practically in the exurbs. After leaving the airport, we drove to his house, so that he could change clothes for the yacht party.

The minivan pulled into the driveway of a one-story house bordered by woods, where he has lived, alone, for eleven years. (His second divorce was fourteen years ago.) He went into the garage, and from there into the kitchen. The kitchen opened onto a dining area and a lodge-like den with plump earth-toned furniture that faced a fireplace. The dining table was strewn with prescription bottles and work papers. On the walls were framed photographs of

his four children. "That's Brooksie," he said, pointing out one of his sons. Seven years ago, Brooksie died, in a snowmobile accident. He was twenty-eight. Patterson had just announced an annual half-marathon to promote wellness in Oakland; the event was named the Brooksie Way.

Sliding glass doors overlooked a deck, and, beyond it, two deer stood nibbling leaves at the edge of the forest. Patterson watched them, rapt, until something startled them and they ran off. He went into the bedroom to change, and came out wearing khakis and an aqua shirt with the Oakland County logo embroidered on the sleeve. Detroit's motto, written after the fire of 1805, translates from the Latin as "We hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes." Oakland County's symbol is a big green tree.

We drove to the Palace, the home of the Pistons. The staff was setting up for a Fall Out Boy concert, but Patterson was given arena access immediately. "He's like a rock star," William Mullan, his spokesman, whispered. "Nobody says no to him." On the arena floor, Patterson told me that he had thrown a party there, for members of Automation Alley, an association that he launched, in 1999, to help Oakland County compete with places like Silicon Valley for tech jobs. "When it started, I said, 'It's gonna take me twenty-five years to move from a manufacturing-oriented community to a knowledge-based community,'" he said. "Nah. It's gonna take me fifteen." His next goal is attracting five billion dollars in new investment, and he said that he is already halfway there. "We'll know we're there when we have more jobs outside manufacturing than in—when we have them in science and technology, and I.T., and, obviously, finance."

We drove to Rochester to see Meadow Brook Hall, a Tudor-revival mansion built by the Dodge family. "I used to bring the consuls-general here," he said. "I'd make the standard joke: 'Ladies and gentlemen, this is Oakland County's example of low-to-moderate-income housing.'" We then stopped by the Rainbow Connection, a nonprofit that Patterson founded in 1985, in honor of a friend who died, along with his two children, in a plane crash. The



"I admit that I was skeptical at first, but I'm really glad you insisted on bringing the barista."

foundation grants wishes to terminally ill children. "This'll be my side door into heaven," he said.

It's been suggested that crossing Eight Mile is like moving between parallel universes: one dangerous, one safe; one overwhelmingly black, the other overwhelmingly white; one poor, the other wealthy. Oaklanders, in the friendliest possible way, kept giving me sombre warnings about Detroit, as if it were a netherworld filled with immediate, certain peril. Don't go after dark, they advised; never stop directly behind another car; never ask for directions; never honk.

One Saturday morning, Patterson's driver took us two miles south of Eight Mile, to Glastonbury Road, on the northwest side of the city. "There's nothing there anymore," Patterson had told me. But it was a pleasant neighborhood of two-story homes, with tidy lawns, big trees, and sidewalks. Children were playing organized soccer in a park at the end of the street. The driver stopped in front of a well-tended brick house with white shutters, a shade tree, and a garage. Staring out the minivan's window, Patterson

muttered, "We used to think this street was *so* wide."

The house was built in 1939. Patterson's parents moved there in 1940. Brooks had an older sister, Harriet, and a fraternal twin brother, Steve. From the minivan, he pointed at a neighboring house where he once weeded flower beds. "I'd charge Mr. Bell by the foot, with a ruler," he recalled. "I'd give him a bill for three feet six inches. As a kid, you wanted to stick Mr. Bell for everything you could."

The Pattersons had come from Indiana. The father worked at the Chrysler plant, first on the line, then in auditing, going from blue collar to white with only a high-school education. Patterson lived in the house through law school, except for two years he served in the Army, in Missouri. At one point, in high school, he considered joining the Marines. He recalled, "My dad, who never lost his temper, flew off, and said, 'You're *gonna* go to college.'" Patterson attended the University of Detroit, and graduated from its law school in 1967, the year of the city's worst race riot. He moved to Oakland County, to join a friend's law firm, and has been there ever since.

As the minivan idled, I told him that the place looked larger than thirteen hundred square feet; it certainly looked worth more than its assessed value, sixty thousand dollars.

"It's not Palmer Woods," he answered, referring to a historic neighborhood where the new mayor had bought a home. "But, on a scale of one to ten, this was probably a solid eight in its day."

His driver said, "It's still very nice."

"Yeah, compared to *other* parts of the city," Patterson said. "But it doesn't have that same panache that it had."

Vengeance led Patterson to politics, and after dethroning his old boss he spent his time as county prosecutor going after everything that he felt was wrong with society. He tried to reinstate capital punishment. Suspecting rampant welfare fraud in Michigan, he pushed the state to cut off payments to women who had children out of wedlock. (A local A.C.L.U. leader called his efforts attempted "genocide, pure and simple.") Patterson launched an organized-crime task force that excluded his own sheriff, another enemy. He urged a reform of the state's parole system and called for a network of "court watchers" to monitor the behavior of jurists and lawyers. His crackdown on strip clubs and porn shops "had nothing to do with morality," he later told reporters. "I wasn't getting on my white horse. This was always an economic issue. It was about the effect these places have on the business climate in these communities."

He was nearly a year into his first term as prosecutor when, in 1973, Detroiters elected Coleman Young. An influential state legislator and a former United Auto Workers activist, Young began his tenure with an inaugural speech in which he warned "all dope pushers" and "rip-off artists" and "muggers" to "leave Detroit—hit Eight Mile Road." Patterson didn't appreciate it: Young seemed to be sending the city's criminals into the suburbs.

The crusades continued. Patterson argued before the U.S. Supreme Court for a relaxed Miranda warning. He introduced a prosecutorial policy against drunk drivers; the district's judges refused to comply with it, deeming it unconstitutional. He targeted divorced fathers who missed child-support payments. There was talk, locally, of the White

House. The state warned Patterson to stop using the county's letterhead and staff as campaign resources. He was criticized for staging self-aggrandizing press conferences.

At one point, Young, who had already irritated Patterson by referring to Oakland County as "the cornfields," called him a racist for having represented the anti-busing organization. Patterson fired back on the op-ed page: "If favoring the neighborhood school and opposing the attempt to make schoolchildren pawns of the federal court social experiment makes me a racist, then I plead guilty. If opposing Coleman Young's \$600 million Detroit subway, an extravagant and ineffective testament to his ego, makes me a racist, then I plead guilty.... If publicly stating... that future economic bailouts for Detroit are at an end until Detroit gets its own fiscal house in order makes me a racist, then I plead guilty."

In November of 1992, he won the high seat in Oakland County. "I intend to move past Coleman Young as a regional leader," he told reporters. "Oakland County is the epicenter of activity in the region."

One day during my first visit to Oakland County, Patterson was to deliver remarks at an awards luncheon for small-business entrepreneurs and their mentors. We drove to the Bloomfield Open Hunt Club, in Bloomfield Hills, where horses, wearing blankets, grazed in a pasture, and men wore navy blazers with gold buttons. "This is our concession to the upper crust," he said.

He was wheeled before the audience and given a mike. "The topic du jour around here is the bankruptcy of Detroit," he said. "How in the world did one of the top cities in America go from the pinnacle of success during World War Two to where it is today, with recriminations and on the verge of bankruptcy? Oakland County went completely the opposite way. What's the difference? Here, in this county, we understand the role of business and free enterprise."

The ballroom faced a large window that overlooked an indoor riding arena. Behind Patterson, helmeted riders, in boots and jodhpurs, circled.

"Business is a hot sell for us because it creates jobs, it pays taxes," he went on. "We're able to do things like put police

officers on the street, put judges on the bench. We can fund our schools and put good teachers in the schools, so that we have quality education. You can't have a good quality of life without quality education. And it all comes down to whether you've got a job." He added, "The Chinese have a great proverb: 'One generation plants the seeds, the next generation relaxes in the shade.' We're planting a lot of seeds."

In addition to Automation Alley, Oakland County has programs that court foreign biotech, biomedical, and alternative-energy companies, and that encourage life-science companies to collaborate with universities and hospitals. The county is getting into cloud computing. A thousand companies from forty countries, many from Germany and Japan, have set up operations in Oakland County; among them are Siemens, Volkswagen, Honda, and Toshiba. As Detroit tried to right itself by borrowing and spending—Q-tips applied to a cut jugular—Patterson's administration froze government hiring, eliminated positions through attrition, and reconfigured pension and health-care plans. It stopped health-care costs from escalating by starting a wellness program for county employees, and the three-year budget cycle went into effect.

"I hire the best in the business and then get out of their way," Patterson told me, and then proceeded to knock Detroit. "None of my guys are under indictment. None of my guys are going to prison. There's not one of them that I wouldn't leave my checkbook out in front of." Paul Tait, the executive director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, told me, "Even when I deal with national associations, I haven't seen anybody that good. The Oaklanders are very confident, almost to the point of arrogance. Wait, not 'almost'—*often* to the point of arrogance." He said, "But more often than not they're right."

Hearing Patterson talk reminded me of financial-independence seminars, and of the tearful press conference that he gave when he returned to work after the automobile accident. His daughter, a schoolteacher, accompanied him to the event, and told reporters, "I always say, 'You know, there's four children in our family, but, really, there was five. Oakland County is the fifth child, that he probably loves most.'" Before taking the

mike at the hunt-club luncheon, he told me, "I like to fix things that are broken and create things that don't exist."

He wrapped up his speech with a funny story about a female employee and a bouquet of flowers. A woman at the head table said, to her husband, "Ha, *ha!* He's cute!" The crowd clapped madly.

At its widest, Eight Mile is an eight-lane road; it runs east to west for more than twenty miles, and is lined with businesses, churches, cemeteries, and bungalows. One day in November, Bill McGraw, a reporter who has covered the region for more than three decades, first at the *Free Press* and now at Deadline Detroit, an online startup, pointed out the differences. "If you call the police in Ferndale, on the Oakland County side, they'll be there in seconds," he said as he drove. His iPhone, which had a scanner app that monitored Fire Department activity, crackled. "On the Oakland side, the street lights all work. On this side"—he meant this stretch of Detroit—"you can see what's thriving: liquor stores. On this side, if anybody bumps into the back of us, God forbid, the police won't come."

Patterson is on the board of an Eight Mile civic-improvement organization. One morning, as he gave me a tour of the boulevard, his driver that day, an ex-cop named Steve, said, "You'll notice that on the Detroit side there are lots of strip clubs. Mr. Brooks doesn't allow that."

"It destroys neighborhoods," Patterson said. "There's not a topless bar in Oakland County, not an X-rated movie theatre, not a house of ill repute. I shut 'em down." He explained that he couldn't prevent such businesses from opening in Oakland County, but that certain measures could make it difficult for them to succeed. "If you can't get a liquor license, you're out of business," he told me. "Can't run a titty house without drinks." He went on, "I'm not a prude. I'm a guy who wants to protect my neighbors, protect my community."

"You get auto-theft guys in there, you get blood gangsters in there," Steve said. "Shootings inside, shootings outside." He was carrying a .40-calibre Sig Sauer.

Patterson said, "Nothing but headaches and crime."

His phone rang, and he answered it, speaking to the caller encouragingly for a few minutes. She was an Oakland

County municipal employee who, like Patterson, had lost a child and then suffered a debilitating injury. Whenever she calls, he tells her, "There's never a good day, but some days are not quite as bad as others." I asked Patterson if the woman had his personal number. "Yep," he said.

We passed the city waterworks, a beautiful but decayed building on the Detroit River. The city wanted to regionalize the water system, he said. "But the debt—why would I want to pick up a share of that? I had no responsibility for creating it." Isn't that where Oakland got its water? "Yeah, but I pay my bills," he said. "So if they chose not to put the money into deferred maintenance, like they were supposed to all along—some of the pipes, the sluices, are still *wood*. They never upgraded them. Now, all of a sudden, they're having problems and they want to give part of the responsibility to the suburbs? It doesn't make any sense. They're not gonna talk me into being the good guy. 'Pick up your share?' Ha, ha."

Part of Patterson's strategy involves saying no to Detroit, and keeping its officials "out of my pocket." In 2012, he backed establishing a tax in Oakland to help support the ailing Detroit Institute of Arts, whose collection is estimated to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The tax went into effect, but Patterson threatened to take it back when the city started talking about selling off art work as part of the bankruptcy proceedings. He has long opposed large-scale mass transit because he believes that it's too expensive, and that Oaklanders wouldn't use it. In the mid-nineties, when the Lions contemplated leaving Oakland County for downtown, he threatened to sue the city, and to cut off Oakland's support for a badly needed makeover of Detroit's Cobo Center, which hosts one of the world's largest auto shows. And he called a city plan to build casinos "a declaration of war," telling reporters, "I'm going to protect my home turf."

Not surprisingly, this plays well in Oakland County. "You've heard Michigan fans say they bleed blue? Well, he bleeds Oakland County," the wife of a deputy county executive told me. From memory, she cited Patterson's governing philosophy: "If it's good for Detroit and good for Oakland County, I'm for it; if

it's good for Detroit and neutral for Oakland County, I'm for it; if it's good for Detroit and bad for Oakland County, I'm against it."

Tellingly, Patterson leaves "good for Oakland County and bad for Detroit" out of his formulation. It is possible to see the county's success as largely dependent on the city's decline, as white flight dispersed some of Detroit's strongest resources into suburbia. McGraw, of Deadline Detroit, said, "Patterson had a



platform, and he used it to denigrate Detroit and Detroiters, and to give voice to people who have moved out of the city and resent what the city has become—even though their departures contributed to it. Instead of being a leader who says, 'We're gonna work with Detroit,' he's been perceived as an enemy of Detroit, because he's *acted* like an enemy. For so many years, he's been a drumbeat: 'Detroit is bad. Detroiters are out to rip us off. They want tax breaks, but look how well we're managing *our* county.' He did manage the county well. But it's so much easier to manage growth than it is to manage loss or blight."

The urban theorist Richard Florida, whose wife is from Oakland County, told me that Oaklanders need "to stop the nonsense of thinking they can survive without the city." He said, "They have it easy. They have wealthy people, and virtually no poor. They have the upsides without the costs. How selfish."

One morning in November, Patterson went into Detroit to meet with Mike Duggan, the new mayor. The meeting took place at the historic Detroit Athletic Club, in a small room overlooking Comerica Park, where the Tigers play. A Christmas tree stood in one corner, and in the center of the room was a table set with cups and saucers, and a carafe of coffee.

When Patterson saw Duggan, he

cried, "Hey, pal!" and they shook hands. They have known each other since the eighties, when Duggan became the deputy executive of Wayne County. Duggan is fifty-five and looks almost cherubic: stocky and nearly bald, he has high, ruddy cheekbones and a broad nose. He won as a write-in candidate, becoming the first white mayor in forty years.

"One of the things Detroit has going for it is that there are a lot of young people, in this next generation, who do not want the suburban life style, with the minivans," he told me. "They like the urban experience."

In the past few years, investors such as Dan Gilbert, the billionaire founder of Quicken Loans, have moved out of Oakland County and into downtown, energizing the city's core. Tait, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments director, told me, "Oakland County was always aggressive, in a good way, in attracting development, but it's been an eye-opener for them that the pattern is starting to reverse, in large part because of the investment decisions of a relatively small group of businessmen who are making decisions to buy up buildings in downtown Detroit, and bring in a heck of a lot of workers."

At a bar, Patterson had told me that it was "too late" for a Detroit turnaround. With Duggan in the room, he spoke more carefully. "I don't think it'll ever be back to the shining city on the hill that it was after World War Two," he said. "We led the nation in salary and life style, created the middle class. Everybody had a cabin up north. It's gonna be hard to go back and capture those days. Mike's gonna try, for sure."

Duggan said, "My campaign manager, Bryan Barnhill—twenty-seven years old, a Harvard grad—he grew up across from city airport, was working on Wall Street, and came back home to help rebuild the city. That's the generation of leaders that's with me. He doesn't *remember* when Hudson's was downtown. He has his *own* vision of what a quality city's gonna be." Duggan was referring to J. L. Hudson, a department store that, in the fifties, opened a location in an Oakland County megamall; Hudson closed its downtown flagship in the eighties, and Patterson has often referred to this as a tipping point for Detroit. "The goal is not to rebuild Hudson's," Duggan went

on. "The goal is to create a city where we're a center of invention and entrepreneurialism, like we were in the early nineteenth-hundreds. *That's* what we've gotta build."

Soon, Duggan said that he had to get to a meeting with the governor. Before departing, he asked Patterson about his health, and told him that he was looking good. Patterson seemed to take this as a challenge. "I can stand," he said, and, bracing himself against the table, he did.

The yacht, called the Infinity, remained anchored at the dock. It was raining now, and lightning flashed, but none of the guests on board seemed to notice. The women wore high heels, the men Top-Siders. Chafing dishes exhaled the steam of potato casseroles, and a waiter carried around a tray of chocolate-dipped strawberries. On the upper deck, two musicians performed pop tunes. Patterson, his drink constantly refreshed, received well-wishers at a table in the bow.

Don Maurer, a retired steel executive, said of him, "He's got something that the new politicians don't have: relationships. At one time, there were verbal agreements, and you didn't just step on people. Now it's whoever's got the lowest bid gets the deal."

Forrest Milzow, a developer and an old friend, said, "Brooks never measures the political wind. He does what he thinks is right."

Patterson's second ex-wife, Kathy, was on board. When she met Patterson, she was a single mother of two, waiting tables. They were married for twenty-five years. She has been engaged to another man for more than a decade, but she told me, "I'm never getting remarried. I'm going to be engaged forever. I like my name: Patterson."

After two hours, the yacht finally eased out onto the lake. Several men hauled Patterson by his belt loops to the upper deck, where the musical duo was covering Fleetwood Mac and KC and the Sunshine Band. Rain streaked the windows, and a few of the Michiganders stared into the darkness, trying to identify the nearly invisible shoreline of Canada. Someone cheerily mentioned the possibility of waterspouts. The plan was to cruise down the Detroit River and past the skyline, but the boat turned back before the city came into view. ♦

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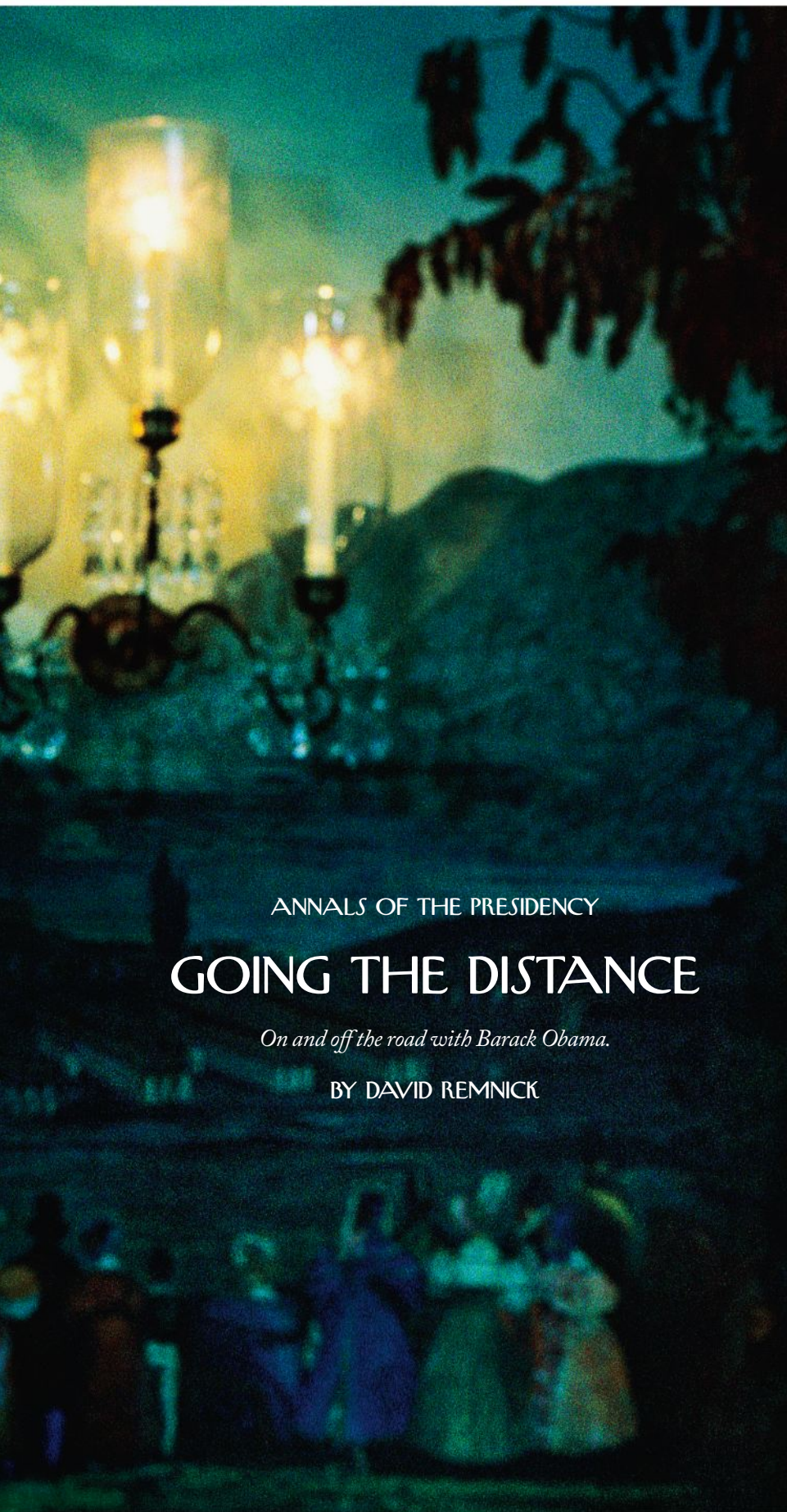
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Obama's Presidency is on the clock. Hard as it has been to pass legislation, the coming year is a marker, the final interval before the fight

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ANNALS OF THE PRESIDENCY

GOING THE DISTANCE

On and off the road with Barack Obama.

BY DAVID REMNICK

On the Sunday afternoon before Thanksgiving, Barack Obama sat in the office cabin of Air Force One wearing a look of heavy-lidded annoyance. The Affordable Care Act, his signature domestic achievement and, for all its limitations, the most ambitious social legislation since the Great Society, half a century ago, was in jeopardy. His approval rating was down to forty per cent—lower than George W. Bush's in December of 2005, when Bush admitted that the decision to invade Iraq had been based on intelligence that “turned out to be wrong.” Also, Obama said thickly, “I’ve got a fat lip.”

That morning, while playing basketball at F.B.I. headquarters, Obama went up for a rebound and came down empty-handed; he got, instead, the sort of humbling reserved for middle-aged men who stubbornly refuse the transition to the elliptical machine and Gentle Healing Yoga. This had happened before. In 2010, after taking a self-described “shel-lacking” in the midterm elections, Obama caught an elbow in the mouth while playing ball at Fort McNair. He wound up with a dozen stitches. The culprit then was one Reynaldo Decerega, a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute. Decerega wasn’t invited to play again, though Obama sent him a photograph inscribed “For Rey, the only guy that ever hit the President and didn’t get arrested. Barack.”

This time, the injury was slighter and no assailant was named—“I think it was the ball,” Obama said—but the President needed little assistance in divining the metaphor in this latest insult to his person. The pundits were declaring 2013 the worst year of his Presidency. The Republicans had been sniping at Obamacare since its passage, nearly four years earlier, and HealthCare.gov, a Web site that was undertested and over-matched, was a gift to them. There were other beribboned boxes under the tree: Edward Snowden’s revelations about the National Security Agency; the failure to get anything passed on gun control or immigration reform; the unseemly waffling over whether the Egyptian coup was a coup; the solidifying wisdom in Washington that the President was “disengaged,” allergic to the forensic and seductive arts of political persuasion. The congressional Republicans

for succession becomes politically all-consuming.

quashed nearly all legislation as a matter of principle and shut down the government for sixteen days, before relenting out of sheer tactical confusion and embarrassment—and yet it was the President's miseries that dominated the year-end summations.

Obama worried his lip with his tongue and the tip of his index finger. He sighed, slumping in his chair. The night before, Iran had agreed to freeze its nuclear program for six months. A final pact, if one could be arrived at, would end the prospect of a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities and the hell that could follow: terror attacks, proxy battles, regional war—take your pick. An agreement could even help normalize relations between the United States and Iran for the first time since the Islamic Revolution, in 1979. Obama put the odds of a final accord at less than even, but, still, how was this not good news?

The answer had arrived with breakfast. The Saudis, the Israelis, and the Republican leadership made their opposition known on the Sunday-morning shows and through diplomatic channels. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, called the agreement a “historic

mistake.” Even a putative ally like New York Senator Chuck Schumer could go on “Meet the Press” and, fearing no retribution from the White House, hint that he might help bollix up the deal. Obama hadn't tuned in. “I don't watch Sunday-morning shows,” he said. “That's been a well-established rule.” Instead, he went out to play ball.

Usually, Obama spends Sundays with his family. Now he was headed for a three-day fund-raising trip to Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, rattling the cup in one preposterous mansion after another. The prospect was dispiriting. Obama had already run his last race, and the chances that the Democratic Party will win back the House of Representatives in the 2014 midterm elections are slight. The Democrats could, in fact, lose the Senate.

For an important trip abroad, Air Force One is crowded with advisers, military aides, Secret Service people, support staff, the press pool. This trip was smaller, and I was along for the ride, sitting in a guest cabin with a couple of aides and a staffer who was tasked with keeping watch over a dark suit bag with a tag reading “The President.”

Obama spent his flight time in the private quarters in the nose of the plane, in his office compartment, or in a conference room. At one point on the trip from Andrews Air Force Base to Seattle, I was invited up front for a conversation. Obama was sitting at his desk watching the Miami Dolphins–Carolina Panthers game. Slender as a switch, he wore a white shirt and dark slacks; a flight jacket was slung over his high-backed leather chair. As we talked, mainly about the Middle East, his eyes wandered to the game. Reports of multiple concussions and retired players with early-onset dementia had been in the news all year, and so, before I left, I asked if he didn't feel at all ambivalent about following the sport. He didn't.

“I would not let my son play pro football,” he conceded. “But, I mean, you wrote a lot about boxing, right? We're sort of in the same realm.”

The Miami defense was taking on a Keystone Kops quality, and Obama, who had lost hope on a Bears contest, was starting to lose interest in the Dolphins. “At this point, there's a little bit of caveat emptor,” he went on. “These guys, they know what they're doing. They know what they're buying into. It is no longer a secret. It's sort of the feeling I have about smokers, you know?”

Obama chewed furtively on a piece of Nicorette. His carriage and the cadence of his conversation are usually so measured that I was thrown by the lingering habit, the trace of indiscipline. “I'm not a purist,” he said.

I—ON THE CLOCK

When Obama leaves the White House, on January 20, 2017, he will write a memoir. “Now, that's a slam dunk,” the former Obama adviser David Axelrod told me. Andrew Wylie, a leading literary agent, said he thought that publishers would pay between seventeen and twenty million dollars for the book—the most ever for a work of nonfiction—and around twelve million for Michelle Obama's memoirs. (The First Lady has already started work on hers.) Obama's best friend, Marty Nesbitt, a Chicago businessman, told me that, important as the memoir might be to Obama's legacy and to his finances, “I don't see him locked up in a room



writing all the time. His capacity to crank stuff out is amazing. When he was writing his second book, he would say, 'I'm gonna get up at seven and write this chapter—and at nine we'll play golf.' I would think no, it's going to be a lot later, but he would knock on my door at nine and say, 'Let's go.'" Nesbitt thinks that Obama will work on issues such as human rights, education, and "health and wellness." "He was a local community organizer when he was young," he said. "At the back end of his career, I see him as an international and national community organizer."

Yet no post-Presidential project—even one as worthy as Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs or Jimmy Carter's efforts to eradicate the Guinea worm in Africa—can overshadow what can be accomplished in the White House with the stroke of a pen or a phone call. And, after a miserable year, Obama's Presidency is on the clock. Hard as it has been to pass legislation since the Republicans took the House, in 2010, the coming year is a marker, the final interval before the fight for succession becomes politically all-consuming.

"The conventional wisdom is that a President's second term is a matter of minimizing the damage and playing defense rather than playing offense," Obama said in one of our conversations on the trip and at the White House. "But, as I've reminded my team, the day after I was inaugurated for a second term, we're in charge of the largest organization on earth, and our capacity to do some good, both domestically and around the world, is unsurpassed, even if nobody is paying attention."

In 2007, at the start of Obama's Presidential campaign, the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin and her husband, Richard Goodwin, who worked in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, visited him in his Senate office. "I have no desire to be one of those Presidents who are just on the list—you see their pictures lined up on the wall," Obama told them. "I really want to be a President who makes a difference." As she put it to me then, "There was the sense that he wanted to be big. He didn't want to be Millard Fillmore or Franklin Pierce."

The question is whether Obama will satisfy the standard he set for himself.



"To make it more sporting, I've also blindfolded the men."

His biggest early disappointment as President was being forced to recognize that his romantic vision of a post-partisan era, in which there are no red states or blue states, only the United States, was, in practical terms, a fantasy. It was a difficult fantasy to relinquish. The spirit of national conciliation was more than the rhetorical pixie dust of Obama's 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention, in Boston, which had brought him to delirious national attention. It was also an elemental component of his self-conception, his sense that he was uniquely suited to transcend ideology and the grubby battles of the day. Obama is defensive about this now. "My speech in Boston was an aspirational speech," he said. "It was not a description of our politics. It was a description of what I saw in the American people."

The structures of American division came into high relief once he was in office. The debate over the proper scale and scope of the federal government dates to the Founders, but it has intensified since the Reagan revolution. Both Bill Clinton and Obama have spent as much time defending progressive advances—from Social Security and Medicare to voting rights and abortion rights—as they have trying to extend them. The Republican Party is living through the late-mannerist phase of that

revolution, fuelled less by ideas than by resentments. The moderate Republican tradition is all but gone, and the reactionaries who claim Reagan's banner display none of his ideological finesse. Rejection is all. Obama can never be opposed vehemently enough.

The dream of bipartisan cooperation glimmered again after Obama won reelection against Mitt Romney with fifty-one per cent of the popular vote. The President talked of the election breaking the "fever" in Washington. "We didn't expect the floodgates would open and Boehner would be Tip O'Neill to our Reagan," Dan Pfeiffer, a senior adviser to the President, said. But reelection, he thought, had "liberated" Obama. The second Inaugural Address was the most liberal since the nineteen-sixties. Obama pledged to take ambitious action on climate change, immigration, gun control, voting rights, infrastructure, tax reform. He warned of a nation at "perpetual war." He celebrated the Seneca Falls Convention, the Selma-to-Montgomery marches, and the Stonewall riots as events in a narrative of righteous struggle. He pledged "collective action" on economic fairness, and declared that the legacy of Medicare, Social Security, and Medicaid does "not make us a nation of takers; they free us to take the risks that

make this country great.” Pfeiffer said, “His point was that Congress won’t set the limits of what I will do. I won’t trim my vision. And, even if I can’t get it done, I will set the stage so it does get done” in the years ahead. Then came 2013, *annus horribilis*.

Obama’s election was one of the great markers in the black freedom struggle. In the electoral realm, ironically, the country may be more racially divided than it has been in a generation. Obama lost among white voters in 2012 by a margin greater than any victor in American history. The popular opposition to the Administration comes largely from older whites who feel threatened, underemployed, overlooked, and disdained in a globalized economy and in an increasingly diverse country. Obama’s drop in the polls in 2013 was especially grave among white voters. “There’s no doubt that there’s some folks who just really dislike me because they don’t like the idea of a black President,” Obama said. “Now, the flip side of it is there are some black folks and maybe some white folks who really like me and give me the benefit of the doubt precisely because I’m a black President.” The latter group has been less in evidence of late.

“There is a historic connection between some of the arguments that we have politically and the history of race in our country, and sometimes it’s hard to disentangle those issues,” he went on. “You can be somebody who, for very legitimate reasons, worries about the power of the federal government—that it’s distant, that it’s bureaucratic, that it’s not accountable—and as a consequence you think that more power should reside in the hands of state governments. But what’s also true, obviously, is that philosophy is wrapped up in the history of states’ rights in the context of the civil-rights movement and the Civil War and Calhoun. There’s a pretty long history there. And so I think it’s important for progressives not to dismiss out of hand arguments against my Presidency or the Democratic Party or Bill Clinton or anybody just because there’s some overlap between those criticisms and the criticisms that traditionally were directed against those who were trying to bring about greater equality for African-

Americans. The flip side is I think it’s important for conservatives to recognize and answer some of the problems that are posed by that history, so that they understand if I am concerned about leaving it up to states to expand Medicaid that it may not simply be because I am this power-hungry guy in Washington who wants to crush states’ rights but, rather, because we are one country and I think it is going to be important for the entire country to make



sure that poor folks in Mississippi and not just Massachusetts are healthy.”

Obama’s advisers are convinced that if the Republicans don’t find a way to attract non-white voters, particularly Hispanics and Asians, they may lose the White House for two or three more election cycles. And yet Obama still makes every effort to maintain his careful, balancing tone, as if the unifying moment were still out there somewhere in the middle distance. “There were times in our history where Democrats didn’t seem to be paying enough attention to the concerns of middle-class folks or working-class folks, black or white,” he said. “And this was one of the great gifts of Bill Clinton to the Party—to say, you know what, it’s entirely legitimate for folks to be concerned about getting mugged, and you can’t just talk about police abuse. How about folks not feeling safe outside their homes? It’s all fine and good for you to want to do something about poverty, but if the only mechanism you have is raising taxes on folks who are already feeling strapped, then maybe you need to widen your lens a little bit. And I think that the Democratic Party is better for it. But that was a process. And I am confident that the Republicans will go through that same process.”

For the moment, though, the opposition party is content to define itself, precisely, by its opposition. As Obama,

a fan of the “Godfather” movies, has put it, “It turns out Marlon Brando had it easy, because, when it comes to Congress, there is no such thing as an offer they can’t refuse.”

II—THE LONG VIEW

At dusk, Air Force One touched down at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Obama and his adviser Valerie Jarrett stood for a moment on the tarmac gazing at Mt. Rainier, the snow a candied pink. Then Obama nodded. Moment over. They got in the car and headed for town. Obama’s limousine, a Cadillac said to weigh as much as fifteen thousand pounds, is known as the Beast. It is armored with ceramic, titanium, aluminum, and steel to withstand bomb blasts, and it is sealed in case of biochemical attack. The doors are as heavy as those on a Boeing 757. The tires are gigantic “run-flats,” reinforced with Kevlar. A supply of blood matching the President’s type is kept in the trunk.

The Beast ascended the driveway of Jon Shirley, in the Seattle suburb of Medina, on Lake Washington. (Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates live in town, too.) Shirley earned his pile during the early days of high tech, first at Tandy and then, in the eighties, at Microsoft, where he served as president. Shirley’s lawn is littered with gargantuan modern sculptures. A Claes Oldenburg safety pin loomed in the dark. The Beast pulled up to Shirley’s front door.

One of the enduring mysteries of the Obama years is that so many members of the hyper-deluxe economy—corporate C.E.O.s and Wall Street bankers—have abandoned him. The Dow is more than twice what it was when Obama took office, in 2009; corporate profits are higher than they have been since the end of the Second World War; the financial crisis of 2008-09 vaporized more than nine trillion dollars in real-estate value, and no major purveyor of bogus mortgages or dodgy derivatives went to jail. Obama bruised some feelings once or twice with remarks about “fat-cat bankers” and “reckless behavior and unchecked excess,” but, in general, he dares not offend. In 2011, at an annual dinner he holds at the White House with American historians, he asked the group to help him find a language in which he

could address the problem of growing inequality without being accused of class warfare.

Inside Shirley's house, blue-chip works of modern art—paintings, sculpture, installations—were on every wall, in every corner: Katz, Kline, Klein, Pollock, Zhang Huan, Richter, Arp, Rothko, Close, Calder. The house measures more than twenty-seven thousand square feet. There are only two bedrooms. In the library, the President went through a familiar fund-raiser routine: a pre-event private “clutch,” where he shakes hands, makes small talk, and poses for pictures with an inner group—the host, the governor, the chosen.

Down the hall, in a room scaled like an airplane hangar, about seventy guests, having paid sixteen thousand dollars each to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee kitty, ate dinner and waited. Near some very artistic furniture, I stood with Valerie Jarrett, Obama's most intimate consigliere. To admirers, Jarrett is known as “the third Obama”; to wary aides, who envy her long history with the Obamas and her easy access to the living quarters of the White House, she is the Night Stalker. Rahm Emanuel, David Axelrod, Robert Gibbs, David Plouffe, and many others in the Administration have clashed with her. They are gone. She remains—a constant presence, at meetings, at meals, in the Beast. While we were waiting for Obama to speak to the group, I asked Jarrett whether the health-care rollout had been the worst political fiasco Obama had confronted so far.

“I really don't think so,” she said. Like all Obama advisers, she was convinced that the problems would get “fixed”—just as Social Security was fixed after a balky start, in 1937—and the memory of the botched rollout would recede. That was the hope and that was the spin. And then she said something that I've come to think of as the Administration's mantra: “The President always takes the long view.”

That appeal to patience and historical reckoning, an appeal that risks a maddening high-mindedness, is something that everyone around Obama trots out to combat the hysterias of any given moment. “He has learned through those vicissitudes that every day is Election Day in Washington and everyone is writing

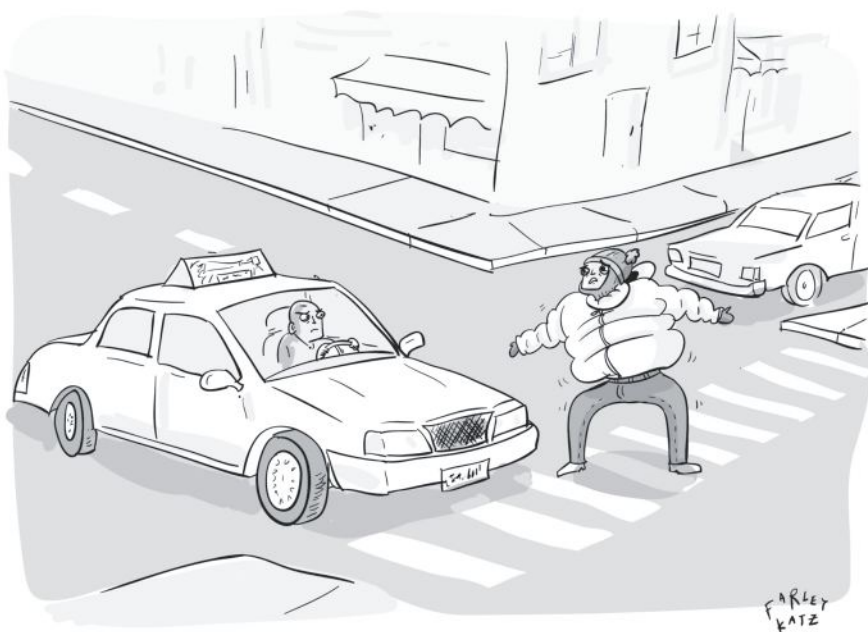
history in ten-minute intervals,” Axelrod told me. “But the truth is that history is written over a long period of time—and he will be judged in the long term.”

Obama stepped up to a platform and went to work. First ingratiation, then gratitude, then answers. He expressed awe at the sight of Mt. Rainier. Being in Seattle, he said, made him “feel the spirit of my mom,” the late Ann Dunham, who went to high school nearby, on Mercer Island. He praised his host's hospitality. (“The only problem when I come to Jon's house is I want to just kind of roam around and check stuff out, and instead I've got to talk.”) Then came a version of the long-game riff: “One thing that I always try to emphasize is that, if you look at American history, there have been frequent occasions in which it looked like we had insoluble problems—either economic, political, security—and, as long as there were those who stayed steady and clear-eyed and persistent, eventually we came up with an answer.”

As Obama ticked off a list of first-term achievements—the economic rescue, the forty-four straight months of job growth, a reduction in carbon emissions, a spike in clean-energy technology—he seemed efficient but contained, running at three-quarters speed, like an athlete playing a midseason road game of modest consequence; he was performing just hard enough to leave a de-

cent impression, get paid, and avoid injury. Even in front of West Coast liberals, he is always careful to disavow liberalism—the word, anyway. “I'm not a particularly ideological person,” Obama told Jon Shirley and his guests. “There's things, some values I feel passionately about.” He said that these included making sure that everybody is “being treated with dignity or respect regardless of what they look like or what their last name is or who they love,” providing a strong defense, and “leaving a planet that is as spectacular as the one we inherited from our parents and our grandparents.” He continued, “So there are values I'm passionate about, but I'm pretty pragmatic when it comes to how we get there.”

Obama said he'd take some questions—in “boy, girl, boy, girl” order. He tried to rally the Democrats and expressed dismay with the opposition. (“There are reasonable conservatives and there are those who just want to burn down the house.”) He played both sides of the environment issues, rehearsing the arguments for and against the Keystone pipeline and sympathizing with the desire of China and India to lift millions out of poverty—but if they consume energy the way the United States has “we'll be four feet under water.” This is the archetypal Obama habit of mind and politics, the calm, professorial immersion



“I'm sorry—it takes me a really long time to move in my ridiculous coat.”



"The things you start may not come to full fruition on your timetable," Obama says. "But you can move things forward. And sometimes



the things that start small may turn out to be fairly significant."

in complexity played out in front of ardent supporters who crave a rallying cry. It's what compelled him to declare himself a non-pacifist as he was accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, in Oslo, and praise Ronald Reagan in a Democratic primary debate.

And that was the end of the performance. A few minutes later, the motorcade was snaking through the streets of suburban Seattle—kids in pajamas holding signs and sparklers, the occasional protester, Obama secured in the back seat of the Beast. He could hear nothing. The windows of his car are five inches thick.

III—PRESIDENTIAL M&M'S

The next morning, a Monday, I woke early and turned on CNN. Senator Lindsey Graham, who is facing a primary challenge from four Tea Party candidates in South Carolina, was saying with utter confidence that Iran had hoodwinked the Administration in Geneva. Next came a poll showing that the majority of the country now believed that the President was neither truthful nor honest. The announcer added with a smile that *GQ* had put Obama at No. 17 on its "least influential" list—right up there with Pope Benedict XVI in his retirement, the cicadas that never showed up last summer, and Manti Te'o's fake dead girlfriend.

In the hotel lobby, I met Jeff Tiller, who works for the White House press operation. In college, he became interested in politics and later joined Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign. From there, he volunteered at the White House, which led to a string of staff jobs, and eventually he was doing advance work all over the world for the White House. The aides on the plane were like Tiller—committed members of a cheerful, overworked microculture who could barely conceal their pleasure in Presidential proximity. *I'm twenty-seven and this is my thirty-second time on Air Force One.* "I pinch myself sometimes," Tiller said. Dan Pfeiffer, who has been with Obama since 2007, was so overworked last year that he suffered a series of mini-strokes. "But no worries," he told me. "I'm good!"

We arrived in San Francisco, and the motorcade raced along, free of traffic and red lights, from the airport to a



"That's what I'd give my sister-in-law if she could take care of nice things."

community center in Chinatown named after Betty Ong, a flight attendant who perished when American Airlines Flight 11 was hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center. Obama was to give a speech on immigration. Out the window, you could see people waving, people hoisting their babies as if to witness history, people holding signs protesting one issue or another—the Keystone pipeline, especially—and, everywhere, the iPhone clickers, the Samsung snappers.

The Beast pulled under a makeshift security tent. Obama gets to events like these through underground hallways, industrial kitchens, holding rooms—all of which have been checked for bombs. At the Ong Center, he met with his hosts and their children. ("I think I have some Presidential M&M's for you!") People get goggle-eyed when it's their turn for a picture. Obama tries to put them at ease: "C'mon in here! Let's do this!" Sometimes there is teasing of the mildest sort: "Chuck Taylor All-Stars! Old style, baby!" A woman told the President that she was six months pregnant. She didn't

look it. "Whoa! Don't tell that to Michelle. She'll be all..." The woman said she was having a girl. Obama was delighted: "Daughters! You can't beat 'em!" He pulled her in for the photo. From long experience, Obama has learned what works for him in pictures: a broad, toothy smile. A millisecond after the flash, the sash releases, the smile drops, a curtain falling.

A little later, Betty Ong's mother and siblings arrived. Obama drew them into a huddle. I heard him saying that Betty was a hero, though "obviously, the heartache never goes away." Obama really is skilled at this kind of thing, the kibbitzing and the expressions of sympathy, the hugging and the eulogizing and the celebrating, the sheer animal activity of human politics—but he suffers an anxiety of comparison. Bill Clinton was, and is, the master, a hyper-extrovert whose freakish memory for names and faces, and whose indomitable will to enfold and charm everyone in his path, remains unmatched. Obama can be a dynamic speaker before large audiences and charming in very small groups, but, like

a normal human being and unlike the near-pathological personalities who have so often held the office, he is depleted by the act of schmoozing a group of a hundred as if it were an intimate gathering. At fund-raisers, he would rather eat privately with a couple of aides before going out to perform. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, when Jeffrey Katzenberg threw a multi-million-dollar fund-raiser in Los Angeles two years ago, he told the President's staff that he expected Obama to stop at each of the fourteen tables and talk for a while. No one would have had to ask Clinton. Obama's staffers were alarmed. When you talk about this with people in Obamaland, they let on that Clinton borders on the obsessive—as if the appetite for connection were related to what got him in such deep trouble.

"Obama is a genuinely respectful person, but he doesn't try to seduce everyone," Axelrod said. "It's never going to be who he'll be." Obama doesn't love fund-raising, he went on, "and, if you don't love it in the first place, you're not likely to grow fonder of it over time."

Obama has other talents that serve him well in public. Like a seasoned standup comedian, he has learned that a well-timed heckler can be his ally. It allows him to dramatize his open-mindedness, even his own philosophical ambivalences about a particularly difficult political or moral question. Last May, at the National Defense University, where he was giving a speech on counter-terrorism, a woman named Medea Benjamin, the co-founder of the group Code Pink, interrupted him, loudly and at length, to talk about drone strikes and about closing the American prison at Guantánamo Bay. While some in the audience tried to drown her out with applause, and security people proceeded to drag her away, Obama asserted Benjamin's right to "free speech," and declared, "The voice of that woman is worth paying attention to."

At the Ong Center, an undocumented immigrant from South Korea named Ju Hong was in the crowd lined up behind the President. Toward the end of Obama's speech, Ju Hong, a Berkeley graduate, broke in, demanding that the President use his executive powers to stop deportations.

Obama wheeled around. "If, in fact, I could solve all these problems without passing laws in Congress, then I

would do so, but we're also a nation of laws," he said, making his case to a wash of applause.

At the next event, a fund-raiser for the Democratic National Committee at a music venue, the SFJAZZ Center, Obama met the host's family ("Hold on, we got some White House M&M's") and then made his way to the backstage holding area. You could hear the murmur of security communications: "Renegade with greeters"—Renegade being Obama's Secret Service handle.

Obama worked with more enthusiasm than at the midday event. He did the polite handshake; the full pull-in; the hug and double backslap; the slapshake; the solicitous arm-around-the-older woman. ("And you stand here. . . . Perfect!")

The clutch over, the crowd cleared away, Obama turned to his aides and said, "How many we got out there?"

"Five hundred. Five-fifty."

"Five-fifty?" Obama said, walking toward the wings of the stage. "What are we talking about? Politics? Can't we talk about something else? Sports?"

The aides were, as ever, staring down at their iPhones, scrolling, tapping, mentally occupying a psychic space somewhere between where they were and the unspooling news cycle back in Washington.

"We're off the cuff," Pfeiffer said. No prepared speech.

"Off the cuff? Sounds good. Let's go do it."

Obama walked toward the stage and, as he was announced, he mouthed the words: "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

Then it happened again: another heckler broke into Obama's speech. A man in the balcony repeatedly shouted out, "Executive order!" demanding that the President bypass Congress with more unilateral actions. Obama listened with odd indulgence. Finally, he said, "I'm going to actually pause on this issue, because a lot of people have been saying this lately on every problem, which is just, 'Sign an executive order and we can pretty much do anything and basically nullify Congress.'"

Many in the crowd applauded their approval. Yes! Nullify it! Although Obama has infuriated the right with relatively modest executive orders on

gun control and some stronger ones on climate change, he has issued the fewest of any modern President, except George H. W. Bush.

"Wait, wait, wait," Obama said. "Before everybody starts clapping, that's not how it works. We've got this Constitution, we've got this whole thing about separation of powers. So there is no shortcut to politics, and there's no shortcut to democracy." The applause was hardly ecstatic. Everyone knew what he meant. The promises in the second inaugural could be a long time coming.

IV—THE WELCOME TABLE

For every flight aboard Air Force One, there is a new name card at each seat; a catalogue of the Presidential Entertainment Library, with its hiply curated choices of movies and music; baskets of fruit and candy; a menu. Obama is generally a spare eater; the Air Force One menu seems designed for William Howard Taft. Breakfast one morning was "pumpkin spiced French toast drizzled with caramel syrup and a dollop of fresh whipped cream. Served with scrambled eggs and maple sausage links." Plus juice, coffee, and, on the side, a "creamy vanilla yogurt layered with blackberries and cinnamon graham crackers."

The most curious character on the plane was Marvin Nicholson, a tall, rangy man in his early forties who works as the President's trip director and ubiquitous factotum. He is six feet eight.



Nicholson is the guy who is always around, who carries the bag and the jacket, who squeezes Purell onto the Presidential palms after a rope line or a clutch; he is the one who has the pens, the briefing books, the Nicorette, the Sharpies, the Advil, the throat lozenges, the iPad, the iPod, the protein bars, the bottle of Black Forest Berry Honest Tea. He and the President toss a football around, they shoot baskets, they shoot the shit. In his twenties, Nicholson was

living in Boston and working as a bartender and as a clerk in a windsurfing-equipment shop, where he met John Kerry. He moved to Nantucket and worked as a caddie. He carried the Senator's clubs and Kerry invited him to come to D.C. Since taking the job with Obama, in 2009, Nicholson has played golf with the President well over a hundred times. The Speaker of the House has played with him once.

A fact like this can seem to chime with the sort of complaints you hear all the time about Obama, particularly along the Acela Corridor. He is said to be a reluctant politician: aloof, insular, diffident, arrogant, inert, unwilling to jolly his allies along the fairway and take a 9-iron to his enemies. He doesn't know anyone in Congress. No one in the House or in the Senate, no one in foreign capitals fears him. He gives a great speech, but he doesn't understand power. He is a poor executive. Doesn't it seem as if he hates the job? And so on. This is the knowing talk on Wall Street, on K Street, on Capitol Hill, in green rooms—the "Morning Joe" consensus.

There are other ways to assess the political skills of a President who won two terms, as only seventeen of forty-four Presidents have, and did so as a black man, with an African father and a peculiar name, one consonant away from that of the world's most notorious terrorist. From the start, however, the political operatives who opposed him did what they are paid to do—they drew a cartoon of him. "Even if you never met him, you know this guy," Karl Rove said, in 2008. "He's the guy at the country club with the beautiful date, holding a Martini and a cigarette, that stands against the wall and makes snide comments about everyone who passes by." The less malign version is of a President who is bafflingly serene, as committed to his duties as a husband and father—six-thirty family dinner upstairs in the private residence is considered "sacrosanct," aides say—as he is to his duties as Cajoler-in-Chief.

Still, Obama's reluctance to break bread on a regular basis with his congressional allies is real, and a source of tribal mystification in Washington. "Politics was a strange career choice for Obama," David Frum, a conservative columnist, told me. "Most politicians are

not the kind of people you would choose to have as friends. Or they are the kind who, like John Edwards, seem to be one thing but then turn out to have a monster in the attic; the friendship is contingent on something you can't see. Obama is exactly like all my friends. He would rather read a book than spend time with people he doesn't know or like." Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia who was elected to the Senate three years ago, said recently that Obama's distance from members of Congress has hurt his ability to pass legislation. "When you don't build those personal relationships," Manchin told CNN, "it's pretty easy for a person to say, 'Well, let me think about it.'"

Harry Truman once called the White House "the great white jail," but few Presidents seem to have felt as oppressed by Washington as Obama does. At one stop on the West Coast trip, Marta Kauffman, a Democratic bundler who was one of the creators of "Friends," told me that she asked him what had surprised him most when he first became President. "The bubble," Obama said. He said he hoped that one day he might be able to take a walk in the park, drop by a bookstore, chat with people in a coffee shop. "After all this is done," he said, "how can I find that again?"

"Have you considered a wig?" she asked. "Maybe fake dreads," her son added.

The President smiled. "I never thought of that," he said.

Obama's circle of intimates is limited; it has been since his days at Columbia and Harvard Law. In 2008, Obama called on John Podesta, who had worked extensively for Bill Clinton, to run his transition process. When Clinton took office, there was a huge list of people who needed to be taken care of with jobs; the "friends of Bill" is a wide network. After Podesta talked to Obama and realized how few favors had to be distributed, he told a colleague, "He travels light."

Obama's favorite company is a small ensemble of Chicago friends—Valerie Jarrett, Marty Nesbitt and his wife, Anita Blanchard, an obstetrician, and Eric and Cheryl Whitaker, prominent doctors on the South Side. During the first Presidential campaign, the Obamas took a vow of "no new friends."

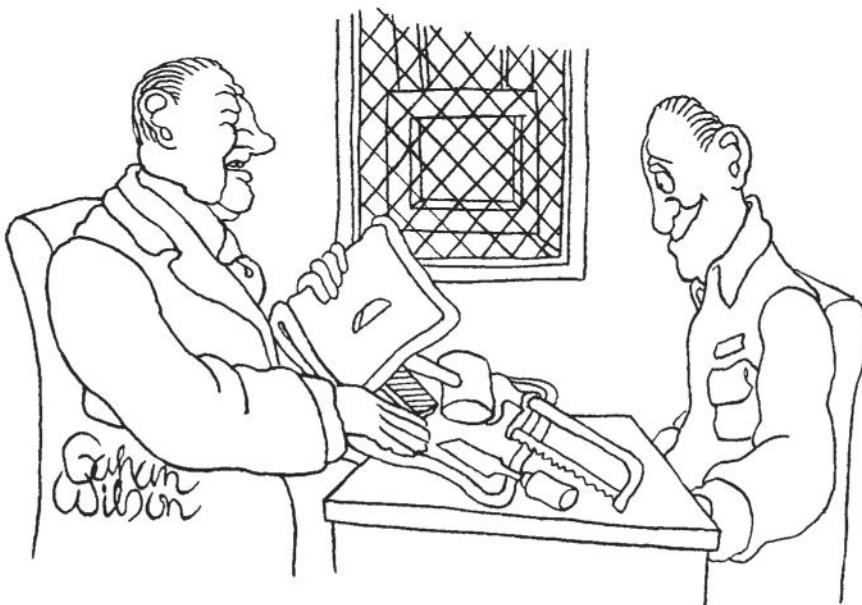
"There have been times where I've been constrained by the fact that I had two young daughters who I wanted to spend time with—and that I wasn't in a position to work the social scene in Washington," Obama told me. But, as Malia and Sasha have grown older, the Obamas have taken to hosting occasional off-the-record dinners in the residence upstairs at the White House. The guests ordinarily include a friendly political figure, a business leader, a journalist.

Obama drinks a Martini or two (Rove was right about that), and he and the First Lady are welcoming, funny, and warm. The dinners start at six. At around ten-thirty at one dinner last spring, the guests assumed the evening was winding down. But when Obama was asked whether they should leave, he laughed and said, "Hey, don't go! I'm a night owl! Have another drink." The party went on past 1 A.M.

At the dinners with historians, Obama sometimes asks his guests to talk about their latest work. On one occasion, Doris Kearns Goodwin talked about what became "The Bully Pulpit," which is a study, in part, of the way that Theodore Roosevelt deployed his relentlessly gregarious personality and his close relations with crusading journalists to political advantage. The portrait of T.R. muscling obstreperous foes on the issue of inequality—particularly the laissez-faire dinosaurs in his own party, the G.O.P.—couldn't fail to summon a contrasting portrait.

The biographer Robert Caro has also been a guest. Caro's ongoing volumes about Lyndon Johnson portray a President who used everything from the promise of appointment to bald-faced political threats to win passage of the legislative agenda that had languished under John Kennedy, including Medicare, a tax cut, and a civil-rights bill. Publicly, Johnson said of Kennedy, "I had to take the dead man's program and turn it into a martyr's cause." Privately, he disdained Kennedy's inability to get his program through Congress, cracking, according to Caro, that Kennedy's men knew less about politics on the Hill "than an old maid does about fucking." Senator Richard Russell, Jr., of Georgia, admitted that he and his Dixiecrat colleagues in the Senate could resist Kennedy "but not Lyndon": "That man will twist your arm off at the shoulder and beat your head in with it."

Obama delivers no such beatings. Last April, when, in the wake of the mass shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, eighty-three per cent of Americans declared themselves in favor of background checks for gun purchases, the *Times* ran a prominent article making the case that the Senate failed to follow the President's lead at least partly because of his passivity as a tactical politician. It described how Mark Begich, a



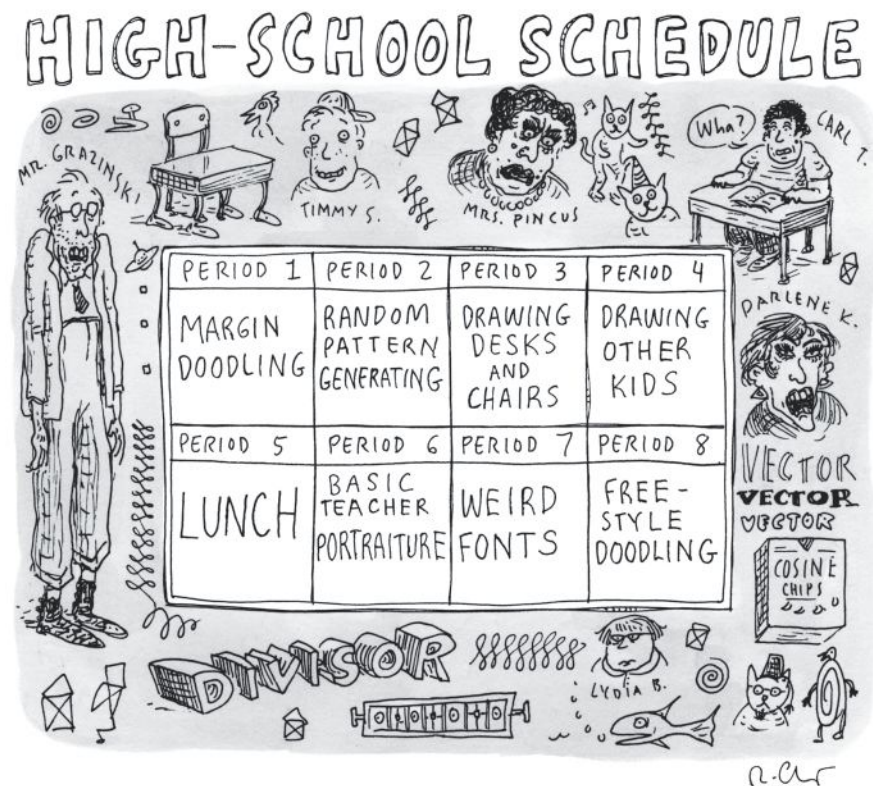
"Now, understand, I'm not suggesting that you actually do anything with any of these tools."

Democratic senator from Alaska, had asked for, and received, a crucial favor from the White House, but then, four weeks later, when Begich voted against the bill on background checks, he paid no price. No one shut down any highway lanes in Anchorage; no Presidential fury was felt in Juneau or the Brooks Range. The historian Robert Dallek, another guest at the President's table, told the *Times* that Obama was "inclined to believe that sweet reason is what you need to use with people in high office."

Yet Obama and his aides regard all such talk of breaking bread and breaking legs as wishful fantasy. They maintain that they could invite every Republican in Congress to play golf until the end of time, could deliver punishments with ruthless regularity—and never cut the Gordian knot of contemporary Washington. They have a point. An Alaska Democrat like Begich would never last in office had he voted with Obama. L.B.J., elected in a landslide victory in 1964, drew on whopping majorities in both houses of Congress. He could exploit ideological diversity within the parties and the lax regulations on earmarks and pork-barrel spending. "When he lost that historic majority, and the glow of that landslide victory faded, he had the same problems with Congress that most Presidents at one point or another have," Obama told me. "I say that not to suggest that I'm a master wheeler-dealer but, rather, to suggest that there are some structural institutional realities to our political system that don't have much to do with schmoozing."

Dallek said, "Johnson could sit with Everett Dirksen, the Republican leader, kneecap to kneecap, drinking bourbon and branch water, and Dirksen would mention that there was a fine young man in his state who would be a fine judge, and the deal would be cut. Nowadays, the media would know in an instant and rightly yell 'Corruption!'"

Caro finds the L.B.J.-B.H.O. comparison ludicrous. "Johnson was unique," he said. "We have never had anyone like him, as a legislative genius. I'm working on his Presidency now. Wait till you see what he does to get Medicare, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act through. But is Obama a poor practitioner of power? I have a different opinion. No matter what the problems with the



rollout of Obamacare, it's a major advance in the history of social justice to provide access to health care for thirty-one million people."

At the most recent dinner he attended at the White House, Caro had the distinct impression that Obama was cool to him, annoyed, perhaps, at the notion appearing in the press that his latest Johnson volume was an implicit rebuke to him. "As we were leaving, I said to Obama, 'You know, my book wasn't an unspoken attack on you, it's a book about Lyndon Johnson,'" Caro recalled. L.B.J. was, after all, also the President who made the catastrophic decision to deepen America's involvement in the quagmire of Vietnam. "Obama seems interested in winding down our foreign wars," Caro said approvingly.

When Obama does ask Republicans to a social occasion, he is sometimes rebuffed. In the fall of 2012, he organized a screening at the White House of Steven Spielberg's film "Lincoln." Spielberg, the cast, and the Democratic leadership found the time to come. Mitch McConnell, John Boehner, and three other Republicans declined their invitations, pleading the press of congressional business. In the current climate, a Republi-

can, especially one facing challenges at home from the right, risks more than he gains by socializing or doing business with Obama. Boehner may be prepared to compromise on certain issues, but it looks better for him if he is seen to be making a deal with Harry Reid, in the Senate, than with Barack Obama. Obama's people say that the President's attitude is, Fine, so long as we get there. Help me to help you.

When I asked Obama if he had read or seen anything that fully captured the experience of being in his office, he laughed, as if to say, You just have no idea. "The truth is, in popular culture the President is usually a side character and a lot of times is pretty dull," he said. "If it's a paranoid conspiracy-theory movie, then there's an evil aide who is carrying something out. If it's a good President, then he is all-wise and all-knowing"—like the characters played by Martin Sheen in "The West Wing," and Michael Douglas in "The American President." Obama says that he is neither. "I'll tell you that watching 'Lincoln' was interesting, in part because you watched what obviously was a fictionalized account of the President I most admire, and there was such a gap between him

and me that it made you want to be better.” He spoke about envying Lincoln’s “capacity to speak to and move the country without simplifying, and at the most fundamental of levels.” But what struck him most, he said, was precisely what his critics think he most avoids—“the messiness of getting something done.”

He went on, “The real politics resonated with me, because I have yet to see something that we’ve done, or any President has done, that was really important and good, that did not involve some mess and some strong-arming and some shading of how it was initially talked about to a particular member of the legislature who you needed a vote from. Because, if you’re doing big, hard things, then there is going to be some hair on it—there’s going to be some aspects of it that aren’t clean and neat and immediately elicit applause from everybody. And so the nature of not only politics but, I think, social change of any sort is that it doesn’t move in a straight line, and that those who are most successful typically are tacking like a sailor toward a particular direction but have to take into account winds and currents and occasionally the lack of any wind, so that you’re just sitting there for a while, and sometimes you’re being blown all over the place.”

The politician sensitive to winds and currents was visible in Obama’s coy talk of his “evolving” position on gay marriage. Obama conceded in one of our later conversations only that it’s “fair to say that I may have come to that realization slightly before I actually made the announcement” favoring gay marriage, in May of 2012. “But this was not a situation where I kind of did a wink and a nod and a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn.” The turn may not have been a sudden one-eighty; to say that your views are “evolving,” though, is to say there is a position that you consider to be more advanced than the one you officially hold. And he held the “evolved” position in 1996, when, as a candidate for the Illinois state senate, he filled out a questionnaire from *Outlines*, a local gay and lesbian newspaper, saying, “I favor legalizing same-sex marriages.”

When I asked Obama about another area of shifting public opinion—the legalization of marijuana—he seemed even less eager to evolve with any dispatch and get in front of the issue. “As has been well

documented, I smoked pot as a kid, and I view it as a bad habit and a vice, not very different from the cigarettes that I smoked as a young person up through a big chunk of my adult life. I don’t think it is more dangerous than alcohol.”

Is it *less* dangerous? I asked.

Obama leaned back and let a moment go by. That’s one of his moves. When he is interviewed, particularly for print, he has the habit of slowing himself down, and the result is a spool of cautious lucidity. He speaks in paragraphs and with moments of revision. Sometimes he will stop in the middle of a sentence and say, “Scratch that,” or, “I think the grammar was all screwed up in that sentence, so let me start again.”

Less dangerous, he said, “in terms of its impact on the individual consumer. It’s not something I encourage, and I’ve told my daughters I think it’s a bad idea, a waste of time, not very healthy.” What clearly does trouble him is the radically disproportionate arrests and incarcerations for marijuana among minorities. “Middle-class kids don’t get locked up for smoking pot, and poor kids do,” he said. “And African-American kids and Latino kids are more likely to be poor and less likely to have the resources and the support to avoid unduly harsh penalties.” But, he said, “we should not be locking up kids or individual users for long stretches of jail time when some of the folks who are writing those laws have probably done the same thing.” Accordingly, he said of the legalization of marijuana in Colorado and Washington that “it’s important for it to go forward because it’s important for society not to have a situation in which a large portion of people have at one time or another broken the law and only a select few get punished.”

As is his habit, he nimbly argued the other side. “Having said all that, those who argue that legalizing marijuana is a panacea and it solves all these social problems I think are probably overstating the case. There is a lot of hair on that policy. And the experiment that’s going to be taking place in Colorado and Washington is going to be, I think, a challenge.” He noted the slippery-slope arguments that might arise. “I also think that, when it comes to harder drugs, the harm done to the user is profound and the social costs are profound. And you do start getting into some difficult line-drawing is-

sues. If marijuana is fully legalized and at some point folks say, Well, we can come up with a negotiated dose of cocaine that we can show is not any more harmful than vodka, are we open to that? If somebody says, We’ve got a finely calibrated dose of meth, it isn’t going to kill you or rot your teeth, are we O.K. with that?”

V—MAGIC KINGDOMS

By Monday night, Obama was in Los Angeles, headed for Beverly Park, a gated community of private-equity barons, Saudi princes, and movie people. It was a night of fund-raisers—the first hosted by Magic Johnson, who led the Lakers to five N.B.A. championships, in the eighties. In the *Beast*, on the way to Johnson’s house, Obama told me, “Magic has become a good friend. I always tease him—I think he supported Hillary the first time around, in ’08.”

“He campaigned for her in Iowa!” Josh Earnest, a press spokesman, said, still sounding chagrined.

“Yeah, but we have developed a great relationship,” Obama said. “I wasn’t a Lakers fan. I was a Philadelphia 76ers fan, because I loved Doctor J.”—Julius Erving—“and then became a Jordan fan, because I moved to Chicago. But, in my mind, at least, what has made Magic heroic was not simply the joy of his playing.” Obama said that the way Johnson handled his H.I.V. diagnosis changed “how the culture thought about that—which, actually, I think, ultimately had an impact about how the culture thought about the gay community.” He also talked about Johnson’s business success as something that was “deeply admired” among African-Americans—“the notion that here’s somebody who would leverage fame and fortune in sports into a pretty remarkable business career.”

“Do you not see that often enough, by your lights?” I asked.

“I don’t,” Obama said.

The Obamas are able to speak to people of color in a way that none of their predecessors could. And the President is quick to bring into the public realm the fact that, for all his personal cool, he is a foursquare family man. He has plenty of hip-hop on his iPod, but he also worries about the moments of misogyny. Once, I mentioned to him that I knew that while Malia Obama, an aspiring

filmmaker, was a fan of “Girls,” he and Michelle Obama were, at first, wary of the show.

“I’m at the very young end of the Baby Boom generation, which meant that I did not come of age in the sixties—took for granted certain freedoms, certain attitudes about gender, sexuality, equality for women, but didn’t feel as if I was having to rebel against something,” Obama said. “Precisely because I didn’t have a father in the home and moved around a lot as a kid and had a wonderfully loving mom and grandparents, but not a lot of structure growing up, I emerged on the other side of that with an appreciation for family and marriage and structure for the kids. I’m sure that’s part of why Michelle and her family held such appeal to me in the first place, because she did grow up with that kind of structure. And now, as parents, I don’t think we’re being particularly conservative—we’re actually not prudes. . . . But, as parents, what we have seen, both in our own family and among our friends, is that kids with structure have an easier time of it.”

He talked about a visit that he made last year to Hyde Park Academy, a public high school on Chicago’s South Side, where he met with a group of about twenty boys in a program called Becoming a Man. “They’re in this program because they’re fundamentally good kids who could tip in the wrong direction if they didn’t get some guidance and some structure,” Obama recalled. “We went around the room and started telling each other stories. And one of the young men asked me about me growing up, and I explained, You know what? I’m just like you guys. I didn’t have a dad. There were times where I was angry and wasn’t sure why I was angry. I engaged in a bunch of anti-social behavior. I did drugs. I got drunk. Didn’t take school seriously. The only difference between me and you is that I was in a more forgiving environment, and if I made a mistake I wasn’t going to get shot. And, even if I didn’t apply myself in school, I was at a good enough school that just through osmosis I’d have the opportunity to go to college.

“And, as I’m speaking, the kid next to me looks over and he says, ‘Are you talking about *you*?’ And there was a benefit for them hearing that, because when I then said, You guys have to take yourselves more seriously, or you need to have

a backup plan in case you don’t end up being LeBron or Jay Z. . . . they might listen. Now, that’s not a liberal or a conservative thing. There have been times where some thoughtful and sometimes not so thoughtful African-American commentators have gotten on both Michelle and me, suggesting that we are not addressing enough sort of institutional barriers and racism, and we’re engaging in sort of up-by-the-bootstraps, Booker T. Washington messages that let the larger society off the hook.” Obama thought that this reaction was sometimes knee-jerk. “I always tell people to go read some of Dr. King’s writings about the African-American community. For that matter, read Malcolm X. . . . There’s no contradiction to say that there are issues of personal responsibility that have to be addressed, while still acknowledging that some of the specific pathologies in the African-American community are a direct result of our history.”

The higher we went up into Beverly Hills, the grander the houses were. This was where the big donors lived. But Obama’s thoughts have been down in the city. The drama of racial inequality, in his mind, has come to presage a larger, transracial form of economic disparity, a deepening of the class divide. Indeed, if there is a theme for the remaining days of

his term, it is inequality. In 2011, he went to Osawatimie, Kansas, the site of Theodore Roosevelt’s 1910 New Nationalism speech—a signal moment in the history of Progressivism—and declared inequality the “defining issue of our time.” He repeated the message at length, late last year, in Anacostia, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., this time noting that the gap between the rich and the poor in America now resembled that in Argentina and Jamaica, rather than that in France, Germany, or Canada. American C.E.O.s once made, on average, thirty times as much as workers; now they make about two hundred and seventy times as much. The wealthy hire lobbyists; they try to secure their interests with campaign donations. Even as Obama travels for campaign alms and is as entangled in the funding system at least as much as any other politician, he insists that his commitment is to the middle class and the disadvantaged. Last summer, he received a letter from a single mother struggling to support herself and her daughter on a minimal income. She was drowning: “I need help. I can’t imagine being out in the streets with my daughter and if I don’t get some type of relief soon, I’m afraid that’s what may happen.” “Copy to Senior Advisers,” Obama wrote at the



“Sure, Liz, come on up for a drink! And don’t mind the place—it’s a bit of a crime scene right now.”

bottom of the letter. "This is the person we are working for."

In one of our conversations, I asked him what he felt he must get done before leaving office. He was silent for a while and then broke into a pained grin. "You mean, now that the Web site is working?" Yes, after that. "It's hard to anticipate events over the next three years," he said. "If you had asked F.D.R. what he had to accomplish in 1937, he would have told you, 'I've got to stabilize the economy and reduce the deficit.' Turned out there were a few more things on his plate." He went on, "I think we are fortunate at the moment that we do not face a crisis of the scale and scope that Lincoln or F.D.R. faced. So I think it's unrealistic to suggest that I can narrow my focus the way those two Presidents did. But I can tell you that I will measure myself at the end of my Presidency in large part by whether I began the process of rebuilding the middle class and the ladders into the middle class, and reversing the trend toward economic bifurcation in this society."

Obama met last summer with Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist who became famous for a book he wrote on social atomization, "Bowling Alone." For the past several years, Putnam and some colleagues have been working on a book about the growing opportunity gap between rich and poor kids. Putnam, who led a Kennedy School seminar on civic engagement that Obama was in, sent the President a memo about his findings. More and more, Putnam found, the crucial issue is class, and he believes that a black President might have an easier time explaining this trend to the American people and setting an agenda to combat it. Other prominent politicians—including Hillary Clinton, Paul Ryan, and Jeb Bush—have also consulted Putnam. Putnam told me that, even if legislation combatting the widening class divide eludes Obama, "I am hoping he can be John the Baptist on this." And Obama, for his part, seems eager to take on that evangelizing role.

"You have an economy," Obama told me, "that is ruthlessly squeezing workers and imposing efficiencies that make our flat-screen TVs really cheap but also puts enormous downward pressure on wages and salaries. That's making it more and more difficult not only for African-Americans or Latinos to get a foothold

into the middle class but for everybody—large majorities of people—to get a foothold in the middle class or to feel secure there. You've got folks like Bob Putnam, who's doing some really interesting studies indicating the degree to which some of those 'pathologies' that used to be attributed to the African-American community in particular—single-parent households, and drug abuse, and men dropping out of the labor force, and an underground economy—you're now starting to see in larger numbers in white working-class communities as well, which would tend to vindicate what I think a lot of us always felt."

VI—A NEW EQUILIBRIUM

After the event at Magic Johnson's place—the highlight was a tour of an immense basement trophy room, where Johnson had installed a gleaming hardwood basketball floor and piped in the sound of crowds cheering and announcers declaring the glories of the Lakers—the Beast made its way to the compound that the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers built. Haim Saban, who made his billions as a self-described "cartoon schlepper," was born in Egypt, came

IN THE GRÜNEWALD CAFÉ

Where do slackers go to get their jollies?
Where do they spend hours every day?
Where commit their most moronic follies?
In the Grünewald Café.

The dull-eyed types who sit alone? They're boozers
Who dose their coffee with Grand Marnier.
No one ever tells them they are losers
In the Grünewald Café.

You hadn't seen the mobster's girlfriend. Tasty,
But are you sure her goon has gone away?
It's not so wise to come on overhasty
In the Grünewald Café.

You sidle up and say, "Can I get you a drink?"
She's shuffling cards and seems to want to play.
A smile means "Try your luck, guy," don't you think,
In the Grünewald Café?

Card game done, why not get down to cases?
Up close her blue-green eyes seem less blasé.

of age in Israel, and started his show-business career as the bass player in the Lions of Judah. His politics are not ambiguous. "I am a one-issue guy," he once said, "and my issue is Israel." His closest political relationship is with Bill and Hillary Clinton, and he was crushed when she lost to Obama, in 2008. Saban publicly expressed doubts about whether Obama was sufficiently ardent about Israel, but he has come around.

The main house on Saban's property is less of an art museum than Jon Shirley's, though it features a Warhol diptych of Golda Meir and Albert Einstein over the fireplace. The fund-raiser was held in back of the main house, under a tent. Addressing a hundred and twenty guests, and being peppered with questions about the Middle East, Obama trotted around all the usual bases—the hope for peace, the still strong alliance with Israel, the danger of "lone wolf" terror threats. But, while a man who funds the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution may have warmed to Obama, there is no question that, in certain professional foreign-policy circles, Obama is often regarded with mistrust. His Syria policy—with its dubious "red line" and threats to get rid of Bashar

All around you fools are pulling faces—
In the Grünewald Café?

Yet when your hands touch, someone taps your shoulder.
It's the waiter: "Sorry. Care to pay?"
A silence falls. Things suddenly feel colder
In the Grünewald Café.

The red-faced gangster, packing heat, approaches.
A rod's blunt business end. You start to pray.
What made you hang out here with all these roaches
In the Grünewald Café?

How brief it is, that fiery burst of thunder!
Brief as life, brief as a winter day.
To croak because you made a stupid blunder
In the Grünewald Café!

And now this floating view down from the ceiling:
Blood soaks the spot where your dead body lay.
What song, what words express all that you're feeling?
In the Grünewald Café.

—*Alfred Corn*

al-Assad; with John Kerry's improvised press-conference gambit on chemical weapons—has inspired little confidence. Neither did the decision to accelerate troop levels in Afghanistan and, at the same time, schedule a withdrawal.

Obama came to power without foreign-policy experience; but he won the election, in part, by advocating a foreign-policy sensibility that was wary of American overreach. If George W. Bush's foreign policy was largely a reaction to 9/11, Obama's has been a reaction to the reaction. He withdrew American forces from Iraq. He went to Cairo in 2009, in an attempt to forge "a new beginning" between the United States and the Muslim world. American troops will come home from Afghanistan this year. As he promised in his first Presidential campaign—to the outraged protests of Hillary Clinton and John McCain alike—he has extended a hand to traditional enemies, from Iran to Cuba. And he has not hesitated in his public rhetoric to acknowledge, however subtly, the abuses, as well as the triumphs, of American power. He remembers going with his mother to live in Indonesia, in 1967—shortly after a military coup, engineered with American help, led to the slaughter of hundreds of

thousands of people. This event, and the fact that so few Americans know much about it, made a lasting impression on Obama. He is convinced that an essential component of diplomacy is the public recognition of historical facts—not only the taking of American hostages in Iran, in 1979, but also the American role in the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh, the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, in 1953.

The right's response has been to accuse Obama of conducting a foreign policy of apology. Last year, Republican senators on the Foreign Affairs Committee, including Marco Rubio, of Florida, demanded to know if Samantha Power, Obama's nominee for U.N. Ambassador and the author of "A Problem from Hell," a historical indictment of American passivity in the face of various genocides around the world, would ever "apologize" for the United States. (In a depressing Kabuki drama, Power seemed forced to prove her patriotic bona fides by insisting repeatedly that the U.S. was "the greatest country on earth" and that, no, she would

"never apologize" for it.) Obama's conservative critics, both at home and abroad, paint him as a President out to diminish American power. Josef Joffe, the hawkish editor of *Die Zeit*, the highbrow German weekly, told me, "There is certainly consistency and coherence in his attempt to retract from the troubles of the world, to get the U.S. out of harm's way, in order to do 'a little nation-building at home,' as he has so often put it. If you want to be harsh about it, he wants to turn the U.S. into a very large medium power, into an XXL France or Germany."

Obama's "long game" on foreign policy calls for traditional categories of American power and ideology to be re-ordered. Ben Rhodes, the deputy national-security adviser for strategic communications, told me that Washington was "trapped in very stale narratives."

"In the foreign-policy establishment, to be an idealist you have to be for military intervention," Rhodes went on. "In the Democratic Party, these debates were defined in the nineties, and the idealists lined up for military intervention. For the President, Iraq was the defining issue, and now Syria is viewed through that lens, as was Libya—to be an idealist, you have to be a military interventionist. We spent a trillion dollars in Iraq and had troops there for a decade, and you can't say it wielded positive influence. Just the opposite. We can't seem to get out of these boxes."

Obama may resist the idealism of a previous generation of interventionists, but his realism, if that's what it is, diverges from the realism of Henry Kissinger or Brent Scowcroft. "It comes from the idea that change is organic and change comes to countries in its own way, modernization comes in its own way, rather than through liberation narratives coming from the West," Fareed Zakaria, a writer on foreign policy whom Obama reads and consults, says. Anne-Marie Slaughter, who worked at the State Department as Hillary Clinton's director of policy planning, says, "Obama has a real understanding of the limits of our power. It's not that the United States is in decline; it's that sometimes the world has problems without



the tools to fix them.” Members of Obama’s foreign-policy circle say that when he is criticized for his reaction to situations like Iran’s Green Revolution, in 2009, or the last days of Hosni Mubarak’s regime, in 2011, he complains that people imagine him to have a “joystick” that allows him to manipulate precise outcomes.

Obama told me that what he needs isn’t any new grand strategy—“I don’t really even need George Kennan right now”—but, rather, the right strategic partners. “There are currents in history and you have to figure out how to move them in one direction or another,” Rhodes said. “You can’t necessarily determine the final destination. . . . The President subscribes less to a great-man theory of history and more to a great-movement theory of history—that change happens when people force it or circumstances do.” (Later, Obama told me, “I’m not sure Ben is right about that. I believe in both.”)

The President may scorn the joystick fantasy, but he does believe that his words—at microphones from Cairo to Yangon—can encourage positive change abroad, even if only in the long run. In Israel last March, he told university students that “political leaders will never take risks if the people do not push them to take some risks.” Obama, who has pressed Netanyahu to muster the political will to take risks on his own, thinks he can help “create a space”—that is the term around the White House—for forward movement on the Palestinian issue, whether he is around to see the result or not.

Administration officials are convinced that their efforts to toughen the sanctions on Iran caused tremendous economic pain and helped Hassan Rouhani win popular support in the Iranian Presidential elections last year. Although Rouhani is no liberal—he has revolutionary and religious credentials, which is why he was able to run—he was not Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s favored candidate. Khamenei is an opaque, cautious figure, Administration officials say, but he clearly acceded to Rouhani as he saw the political demands of the population shift.

The nuclear negotiations in Geneva, which were preceded by secret contacts with the Iranians in Oman and New York, were, from Obama’s side, based on

a series of strategic calculations that, he acknowledges, may not work out. As the Administration sees it, an Iranian nuclear weapon would be a violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and a threat to the entire region; it could spark a nuclear arms race reaching Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. (Israel has had nukes since 1967.) But the White House is prepared to accept a civilian nuclear capacity in Iran, with strict oversight, while the Israelis and the Gulf states regard any Iranian nuclear technology at all as unacceptable. Obama has told Netanyahu and Republican senators that the absolutist benchmark is not achievable. Members of Obama’s team believe that the leaders of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states, who are now allied as never before, want the U.S. to be their proxy in a struggle not merely for de-nuclearization in Iran but for regime change—and that is not on the Administration’s agenda, except, perhaps, as a hope.

Republican and Democratic senators have expressed doubts about even the interim agreement with Iran, and have threatened to tighten sanctions still further. “Historically, there is hostility and suspicion toward Iran, not just among members of Congress but the American people,” Obama said, adding that “members of Congress are very attentive to what Israel says on its security issues.” He went on, “I don’t think a new sanctions bill will reach my desk during this period, but, if it did, I would veto it and expect it to be sustained.”

Ultimately, he envisages a new geopolitical equilibrium, one less turbulent than the current landscape of civil war, terror, and sectarian battle. “It would be profoundly in the interest of citizens throughout the region if Sunnis and Shias weren’t intent on killing each other,” he told me. “And although it would not solve the entire problem, if we were able to get Iran to operate in a responsible fashion—not funding terrorist organizations, not trying to stir up sectarian discontent in other countries, and not developing a nuclear weapon—you could see an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there’s competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare.

“With respect to Israel, the interests of Israel in stability and security are actu-

ally very closely aligned with the interests of the Sunni states.” As Saudi and Israeli diplomats berate Obama in unison, his reaction is, essentially, *Use that*. “What’s preventing them from entering into even an informal alliance with at least normalized diplomatic relations is not that their interests are profoundly in conflict but the Palestinian issue, as well as a long history of anti-Semitism that’s developed over the course of decades there, and anti-Arab sentiment that’s increased inside of Israel based on seeing buses being blown up,” Obama said. “If you can start unwinding some of that, that creates a new equilibrium. And so I think each individual piece of the puzzle is meant to paint a picture in which conflicts and competition still exist in the region but that it is contained, it is expressed in ways that don’t exact such an enormous toll on the countries involved, and that allow us to work with functioning states to prevent extremists from emerging there.”

During Obama’s performance under Saban’s tent, there was no talk of a Sunni-Israeli alignment, or of any failures of vision on Netanyahu’s part. Obama did allow himself to be testy about the criticism he has received over his handling of the carnage in Syria. “You’ll recall that that was the *previous* end of my Presidency, until it turned out that we are actually getting all the chemical weapons. And no one reports on that anymore.”

VII—HAMMERS AND PLIERS

Obama’s lowest moments in the Middle East have involved his handling of Syria. Last summer, when I visited Za’atari, the biggest Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, one displaced person after another expressed anger and dismay at American inaction. In a later conversation, I asked Obama if he was haunted by Syria, and, though the mask of his equipoise rarely slips, an indignant expression crossed his face. “I am haunted by what’s happened,” he said. “I am not haunted by my decision not to engage in another Middle Eastern war. It is very difficult to imagine a scenario in which our involvement in Syria would have led to a better outcome, short of us being willing to undertake an effort in size and scope similar to what we did in Iraq. And when I hear people suggesting that somehow if we had just financed and

armed the opposition earlier, that somehow Assad would be gone by now and we'd have a peaceful transition, it's magical thinking.

"It's not as if we didn't discuss this extensively down in the Situation Room. It's not as if we did not solicit—and continue to solicit—opinions from a wide range of folks. Very early in this process, I actually asked the C.I.A. to analyze examples of America financing and supplying arms to an insurgency in a country that actually worked out well. And they couldn't come up with much. We have looked at this from every angle. And the truth is that the challenge there has been, and continues to be, that you have an authoritarian, brutal government who is willing to do anything to hang on to power, and you have an opposition that is disorganized, ill-equipped, ill-trained, and is self-divided. All of that is on top of some of the sectarian divisions. . . . And, in that environment, our best chance of seeing a decent outcome at this point is to work the state actors who have invested so much in keeping Assad in power—mainly the Iranians and the Russians—as well as working with those who have been financing the opposition to make sure that they're not creating the kind of extremist force that we saw emerge out of Afghanistan when we were financing the mujahideen."

At the core of Obama's thinking is that American military involvement cannot be the primary instrument to achieve the new equilibrium that the region so desperately needs. And yet thoughts of a pacific equilibrium are far from anyone's mind in the real, existing Middle East. In the 2012 campaign, Obama spoke not only of killing Osama bin Laden; he also said that Al Qaeda had been "decimated." I pointed out that the flag of Al Qaeda is now flying in Falluja, in Iraq, and among various rebel factions in Syria; Al Qaeda has asserted a presence in parts of Africa, too.

"The analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a jayvee team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant," Obama said, resorting to an uncharacteristically flip analogy. "I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists

who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian.

"Let's just keep in mind, Falluja is a profoundly conservative Sunni city in a country that, independent of anything we do, is deeply divided along sectarian lines. And how we think about terrorism has to be defined and specific enough that it doesn't lead us to think that any horrible actions that take place around the world that are motivated in part by an extremist Islamic ideology are a direct threat to us or something that we have to wade into."

He went on, "You have a schism between Sunni and Shia throughout the region that is profound. Some of it is directed or abetted by states who are in contests for power there. You have failed states that are just dysfunctional, and various warlords and thugs and criminals are trying to gain leverage or a foothold so that they can control resources, populations, territory. . . . And failed states, conflict, refugees, displacement—all that stuff has an impact on our long-term security. But how we approach those problems and the resources that we direct to-

ward those problems is not going to be exactly the same as how we think about a transnational network of operatives who want to blow up the World Trade Center. We have to be able to distinguish between these problems analytically, so that we're not using a pliers where we need a hammer, or we're not using a battalion when what we should be doing is partnering with the local government to train their police force more effectively, improve their intelligence capacities."

This wasn't realism or idealism; it was something closer to policy particularism (*this* thing is different from *that* thing; Syria is not Libya; Iran is not North Korea). Yet Obama's regular deployment of drones has been criticized as a one-size-fits-all recourse, in which the prospect of destroying an individual enemy too easily trumps broader strategic and diplomatic considerations, to say nothing of moral ones. A few weeks before Obama left Washington to scour the West Coast for money, he invited to the White House Malala Yousafzai, the remarkable Pakistani teen-ager who campaigned for women's education and



"I just wanted you to hear it from me first, before you read it in the sky."

was shot in the head by the Taliban. Yousafzai thanked Obama for the material support that the U.S. government provided for education in Pakistan and Afghanistan and among Syrian refugees, but she also told him that drone strikes were “fuelling terrorism” and resentment in her country.

“I think any President should be troubled by any war or any kinetic action that leads to death,” Obama told me when I brought up Yousafzai’s remarks. “The way I’ve thought about this issue is, I have a solemn duty and responsibility to keep the American people safe. That’s my most important obligation as President and Commander-in-Chief. And there are individuals and groups out there that are intent on killing Americans—killing American civilians, killing American children, blowing up American planes. That’s not speculation. It’s their explicit agenda.”

Obama said that, if terrorists can be captured and prosecuted, “that’s always my preference. If we can’t, I cannot stand by and do nothing. They operate in places where oftentimes we cannot reach them, or the countries are either unwilling or unable to capture them in partnership with us. And that then narrows my

options: we can simply be on defense and try to harden our defense. But in this day and age that’s of limited—well, that’s insufficient. We can say to those countries, as my predecessor did, if you are harboring terrorists, we will hold you accountable—in which case, we could be fighting a lot of wars around the world. And, statistically, it is indisputable that the costs in terms of not only our men and women in uniform but also innocent civilians would be much higher. Or, where possible, we can take targeted strikes, understanding that anytime you take a military strike there are risks involved. What I’ve tried to do is to tighten the process so much and limit the risks of civilian casualties so much that we have the least fallout from those actions. But it’s not perfect.”

It is far from that. In December, an American drone flying above Al Bayda province, in Yemen, fired on what U.S. intelligence believed was a column of Al Qaeda fighters. The “column” was in fact a wedding party; twelve people were killed, and fifteen were seriously injured. Some of the victims, if not all, were civilians. This was no aberration. In Yemen and Pakistan, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism,

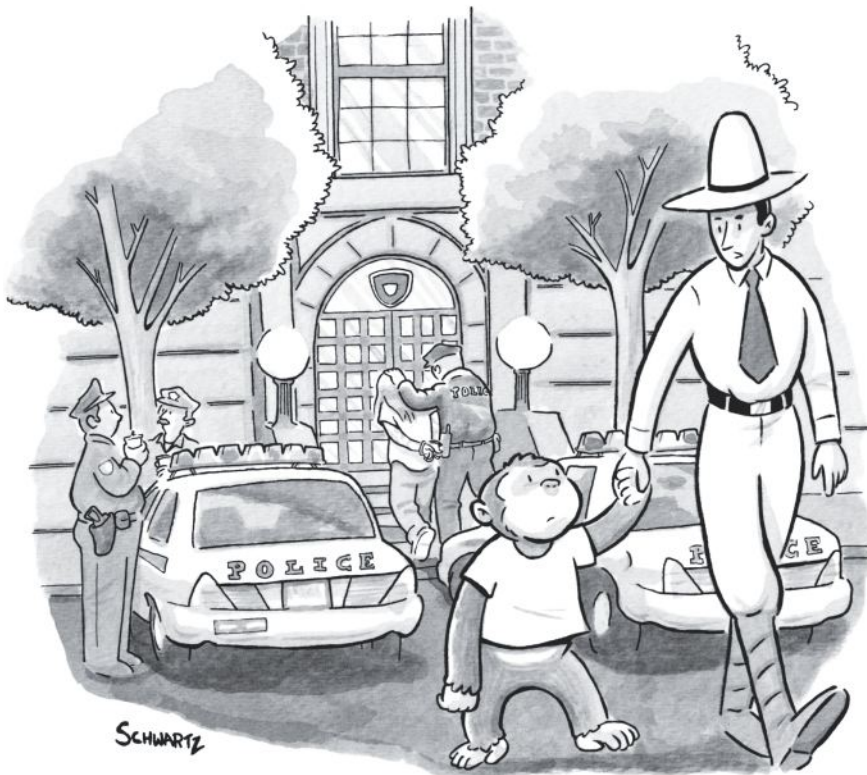
American drones have killed between some four hundred and a thousand civilians—a civilian-to-combatant ratio that could be as high as one to three. Obama has never made it clear how the vast populations outraged and perhaps radicalized by such remote-control mayhem might figure into his calculations about American security.

“Look, you wrestle with it,” Obama said. “And those who have questioned our drone policy are doing exactly what should be done in a democracy—asking some tough questions. The only time I get frustrated is when folks act like it’s not complicated and there aren’t some real tough decisions, and are sanctimonious, as if somehow these aren’t complicated questions. Listen, as I have often said to my national-security team, I didn’t run for office so that I could go around blowing things up.”

Obama told me that in all three of his main initiatives in the region—with Iran, with Israel and the Palestinians, with Syria—the odds of completing final treaties are less than fifty-fifty. “On the other hand,” he said, “in all three circumstances we may be able to push the boulder partway up the hill and maybe stabilize it so it doesn’t roll back on us. And all three are connected. I do believe that the region is going through rapid change and inexorable change. Some of it is demographics; some of it is technology; some of it is economics. And the old order, the old equilibrium, is no longer tenable. The question then becomes, What’s next?”

VIII—AMONG THE ALIENS

On his last day in Los Angeles, Obama romanced Hollywood, taking a helicopter to visit the DreamWorks studio, in Glendale. Jeffrey Katzenberg, Obama’s host and the head of DreamWorks Animation, is one of the Democrats’ most successful fund-raisers. But it is never a good idea for the White House to admit to any quid pro quo. When one of the pool reporters asked why the President was going to Katzenberg’s studio and not, say, Universal, a travelling spokesman replied, “DreamWorks obviously is a thriving business and is creating lots of jobs in Southern California. And the fact of the matter is Mr. Katzenberg’s support for the



“From now on, you’re Curious-but-Respectful-of-Boundaries George.”

President's policies has no bearing on our decision to visit there."

That's pretty rich. Katzenberg has been a supporter from the start of Obama's national career, raising millions of dollars for him and for the Party's Super PACs. Nor has he been hurt by his political associations. Joe Biden helped pave the way with Xi Jinping and other officials so that DreamWorks and other Hollywood companies could build studios in China. (In an awkward postscript, the S.E.C. reportedly began investigating, in 2012, whether DreamWorks, Twentieth Century Fox, and the Walt Disney Company paid bribes to Chinese officials, in violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.)

A flock of military helicopters brought the Obama party to Glendale, and, after a short ride to DreamWorks Animation, Katzenberg greeted the President and gave him a tour. They stopped in a basement recording studio to watch a voice-over session for a new animated picture called "Home," starring the voice of Steve Martin. Greeting Martin, Obama recalled that the last time they saw each other must have been when Martin played banjo with his band at the White House.

Martin nodded. "I always say the fact that I played banjo at the White House was the biggest thrill of his life."

Katzenberg explained that "Home" was the story of the Boov, an alien race that has taken over the planet. Martin is the voice of Captain Smek, the leader of the Boov.

"Where did *we* go?" Obama asked Tim Johnson, the director. "Do they feed us?"

"Mostly ice cream."

Katzenberg said that, unlike dramatic films with live actors, nineteen out of twenty of DreamWorks' animated pictures succeed.

"My kids have aged out," Obama said. "They used to be my excuse to watch them all."

Katzenberg led Obama to a conference room, where the heads of most of the major movie and television studios were waiting. There would be touchy questions about business—particularly about the "North versus South" civil war in progress between the high-tech libertarians in Silicon Valley and the "content producers" in Los Angeles. The

war was over intellectual-property rights, and Obama showed little desire to get in the middle of these two constituencies. If anything, he knows that Silicon Valley is ascendant, younger, more able to mobilize active voters, and he was not about to offer the studio heads his unqualified muscle.

Finally, the subject switched to global matters. Alan Horn, the chairman of



Walt Disney Studios, raised his hand. "First," he said, "I do recommend that you and your family see 'Frozen,' which is coming to a theatre near you."

Then he asked about climate change.

IX—LISTENING IN

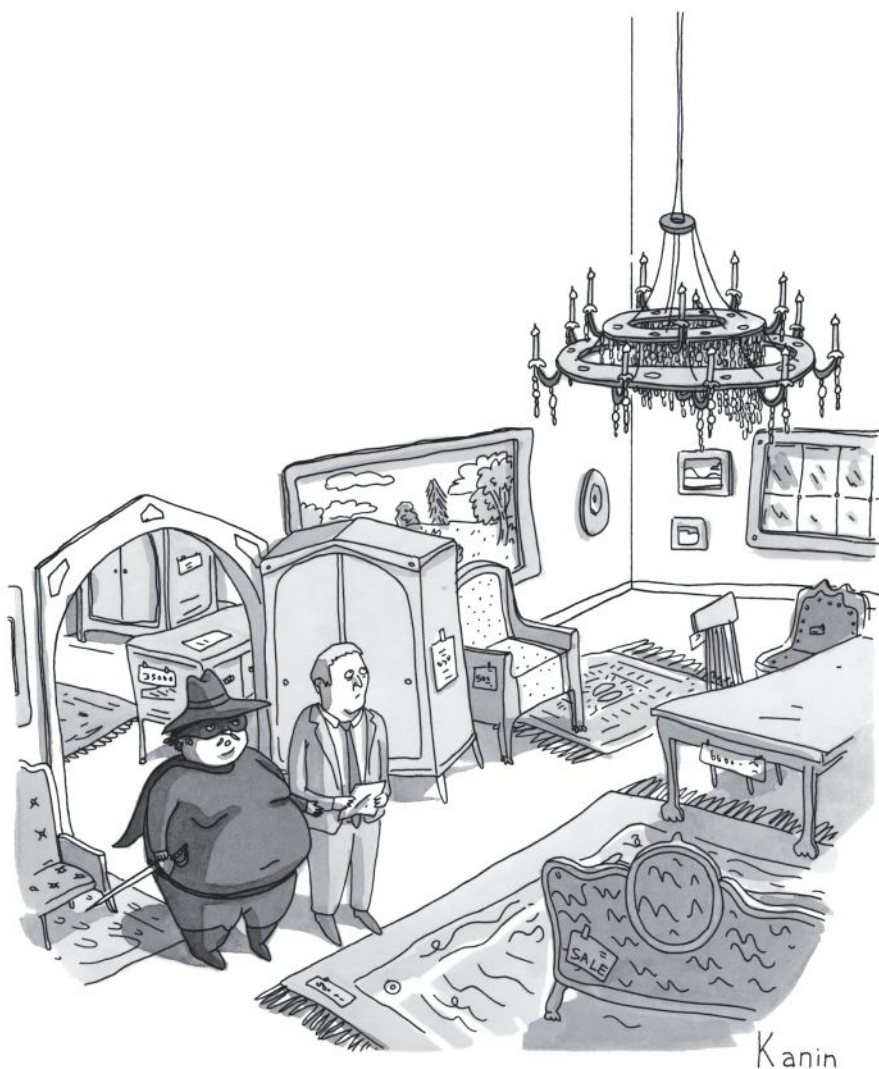
On the flight back to Washington, Obama read and played spades with some aides to pass the time. (He and his former body man Reggie Love took a break to play spades at one point during the mission to kill Osama bin Laden.) After a while, one of the aides led me to the front cabin to talk with the President some more. The week before, Obama had given out the annual Presidential Medals of Freedom. One went to Benjamin C. Bradlee, the editor who built the *Washington Post* by joining the *Times* in publishing the Pentagon Papers, in 1971, and who stood behind Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein as they began publishing the Watergate exposés that led to the fall of the Nixon Presidency. I asked Obama how he could reconcile such an award with his Administration's aggressive leak investigations, which have ensnared journalists and sources, and its hostility to Edward Snowden's exposure of the N.S.A.'s blanket surveillance of American and foreign communications.

After a long pause, Obama began to speak of how his first awareness of politics came when, as an eleven-year-old, he went on a cross-country bus trip with his

mother and grandmother and, at the end of each day, watched the Watergate hearings on television. "I remember being fascinated by these figures and what was at stake, and the notion that even the President of the United States isn't above the law," he said. "And Sam Ervin with his eyebrows, and Inouye, this guy from Hawaii—it left a powerful impression on me. And so, as I got older, when I saw 'All the President's Men,' that was the iconic vision of journalism telling truth to power, and making sure our democracy worked. And I still believe that. And so a lot of the tensions that have existed between my White House and the press are inherent in the institution. The press always wants more, and every White House, including ours, is trying to make sure that the things that we care most about are what's being reported on, and that we're not on any given day chasing after fifteen story lines."

Then Obama insisted that what Snowden did was "not akin to Watergate or some scandal in which there were coverups involved." The leaks, he said, had "put people at risk" but revealed nothing illegal. And though the leaks raised "legitimate policy questions" about N.S.A. operations, "the issue then is: Is the only way to do that by giving some twenty-nine-year-old free rein to basically dump a mountain of information, much of which is definitely legal, definitely necessary for national security, and should properly be classified?" In Obama's view, "the benefit of the debate he generated was not worth the damage done, because there was another way of doing it." Once again, it was the President as Professor-in-Chief, assessing all sides, and observing the tilt of the scales. (The day before his speech last week on reforming the N.S.A., he told me, "I do not have a yes/no answer on clemency for Edward Snowden. This is an active case, where charges have been brought.")

The coverage of the leaks, Obama complained, paints "a picture of a rogue agency out there running around and breaking a whole bunch of laws and engaging in a 'domestic spying program' that isn't accurate. But what that does is it synchs up with a public imagination that sees Big Brother looming everywhere." The greater damage, in his view, was the way the leaks heightened suspicions among



"How much weight can it hold?"

foreign leaders. Obama enjoyed a good relationship with Angela Merkel, but he admitted that it was undermined by reports alleging that the U.S. tapped her cell phone. This, he said, felt "like a breach of trust and I can't argue with her being aggravated about that."

But, he said, "there are European governments that we know spy on us, and there is a little bit of Claude Rains in 'Casablanca'—shocked that gambling is going on." He added, "Now, I will say that I automatically assume that there are a whole bunch of folks out there trying to spy on me, which is why I don't have a phone. I do not send out anything on my BlackBerry that I don't assume at some point will be on the front page of a newspaper, so it's pretty boring reading for the most part."

Obama admitted that the N.S.A. has had "too much leeway to do whatever it wanted or could." But he didn't feel "any ambivalence" about the decisions he has made. "I actually feel confident that the way the N.S.A. operates does not threaten the privacy and constitutional rights of Americans and that the laws that are in place are sound, and, because we've got three branches of government involved and a culture that has internalized that domestic spying is against the law, it actually works pretty well," he said. "Over all, five years from now, when I'm a private citizen, I'm going to feel pretty confident that my government is not spying on me."

Obama has three years left, but it's not difficult to sense a politician with an acute sense of time, a politician

devising ways to widen his legacy without the benefit of any support from Congress. The State of the Union speech next week will be a catalogue of things hoped for, a resumption of the second inaugural, with an added emphasis on the theme of inequality. But Obama knows that major legislation—with the possible exception of immigration—is unlikely. And so there is in him a certain degree of reduced ambition, a sense that even well before the commentariat starts calling him a lame duck he will spend much of his time setting an agenda that can be resolved only after he has retired to the life of a writer and post-President.

"One of the things that I've learned to appreciate more as President is you are essentially a relay swimmer in a river full of rapids, and that river is history," he later told me. "You don't start with a clean slate, and the things you start may not come to full fruition on your timetable. But you can move things forward. And sometimes the things that start small may turn out to be fairly significant. I suspect that Ronald Reagan, if you'd asked him, would not have considered the earned-income-tax-credit provision in tax reform to be at the top of his list of accomplishments. On the other hand, what the E.I.T.C. has done, starting with him, being added to by Clinton, being used by me during the Recovery Act, has probably kept more people out of poverty than a whole lot of other government programs that are currently in place."

Johnson's Great Society will be fifty years old in 2014, but no Republican wants a repeat of that scale of government ambition. Obama acknowledges this, saying, "The appetite for tax-and-transfer strategies, even among Democrats, much less among independents or Republicans, is probably somewhat limited, because people are seeing their incomes haven't gone up, their wages haven't gone up. It's natural for them to think any new taxes may be going to somebody else, I'm not confident in terms of how it's going to be spent, I'd much rather hang on to what I've got." He will try to do things like set up partnerships with selected cities and citizens' groups, sign some executive orders, but a "Marshall Plan for the inner

city is not going to get through Congress anytime soon.”

Indeed, Obama is quick to show a measure of sympathy with the Reagan-era conservative analysis of government. “This is where sometimes progressives get frustrated with me,” he said, “because I actually think there was a legitimate critique of the welfare state getting bloated, and relying too much on command and control, top-down government programs to address it back in the seventies. It’s also why it’s ironic when I’m accused of being this raging socialist who wants to amass more and more power for their own government. . . . But I do think that some of the anti-government rhetoric, anti-tax rhetoric, anti-spending rhetoric that began before Reagan but fully flowered with the Reagan Presidency accelerated trends that were already existing, or at least robbed us of some tools to deal with the downsides of globalization and technology, and that with just some modest modification we could grow this economy faster and benefit more people and provide more opportunity.

“After we did all that, there would still be poverty and there would still be some inequality and there would still be a lot of work to do for the forty-fifth through fiftieth Presidents,” he went on, “but I’d like to give voice to an impression I think a lot of Americans have, which is it’s harder to make it now if you are just the average citizen who’s willing to work hard and has good values, and wasn’t born with huge advantages or having enjoyed extraordinary luck—that the ground is less secure under your feet.”

In the White House, advisers are resigned by now to the idea that some liberal voters, dismayed by a range of issues—drones, the N.S.A., the half measures of health care and financial reform—have turned away from Obama and to newer figures like Elizabeth Warren or Bill de Blasio. “Well, look, we live in a very fast-moving culture,” Obama said. “And, by definition, the President of the United States is overexposed, and it is natural, after six, seven years of me being on the national stage, that people start wanting to see . . .”

“Other flavors?”

“Yes,” he said. “Is there somebody else out there who can give me that spark of inspiration or excitement?” I don’t

spend too much time worrying about that. I think the things that are exciting people are the same things that excite me and excited me back then. I might have given fresh voice to them, but the values are essentially the same.”

X—WHAT TIME ALLOWS

Obama came home from Los Angeles in a dark, freezing downpour. The weather was too rotten even for Marine One. He hustled down the steps of Air Force One and ducked into his car.

A few weeks later, I was able to see him for a last conversation in the Oval Office. The Obamas had just had a long vacation in Hawaii—sun, golf, family, and not much else. The President was sitting behind his desk—the Resolute desk, a gift from Queen Victoria to Rutherford B. Hayes—and he was reading from a folder marked “Secret.” He closed it, walked across the room, and settled into an armchair near the fireplace. “I got some rest,” he said. “But time to get to work.”

Obama has every right to claim a long list of victories since he took office: ending two wars; an economic rescue, no matter how imperfect; strong Supreme Court nominations; a lack of major scandal; essential support for an epochal advance in the civil rights of gays and lesbians; more progressive executive orders on climate change, gun control, and the end of torture; and, yes, health-care reform. But, no matter what one’s politics, and however one weighs the arguments of his critics, both partisan and principled, one has to wonder about any President’s capacity to make these decisions amid a thousand uncertainties, so many of which are matters of life and death, survival and extinction.

“I have strengths and I have weaknesses, like every President, like every person,” Obama said. “I do think one of my strengths is temperament. I am comfortable with complexity, and I think I’m pretty good at keeping my moral compass while recognizing that I am a product of original sin. And every morning and every night I’m taking measure of my actions against the options and possibilities available to me, understanding that there are going to be mistakes that I make and my team makes and that

America makes; understanding that there are going to be limits to the good we can do and the bad that we can prevent, and that there’s going to be tragedy out there and, by occupying this office, I am part of that tragedy occasionally, but that if I am doing my very best and basing my decisions on the core values and ideals that I was brought up with and that I think are pretty consistent with those of most Americans, that at the end of the day things will be better rather than worse.”

The cheering crowds and hecklers from the West Coast trip seemed far away now. In the preternaturally quiet office, you could hear, between every long pause that Obama took, the ticking of a grandfather clock just to his left.

“I think we are born into this world and inherit all the grudges and rivalries and hatreds and sins of the past,” he said. “But we also inherit the beauty and the joy and goodness of our forebears. And we’re on this planet a pretty short time, so that we cannot remake the world entirely during this little stretch that we have.” The long view again. “But I think our decisions matter,” he went on. “And I think America was very lucky that Abraham Lincoln was President when he was President. If he hadn’t been, the course of history would be very different. But I also think that, despite being the greatest President, in my mind, in our history, it took another hundred and fifty years before African-Americans had anything approaching formal equality, much less real equality. I think that doesn’t diminish Lincoln’s achievements, but it acknowledges that at the end of the day we’re part of a long-running story. We just try to get our paragraph right.”

A little while later, as we were leaving the Oval Office and walking under the colonnade, Obama said, “I just wanted to add one thing to that business about the great-man theory of history. The President of the United States cannot remake our society, and that’s probably a good thing.” He paused yet again, always self-editing. “Not ‘probably,’” he said. “It’s *definitely* a good thing.” ♦



At first, it was great. Sure. It always is. She cuddled a frog, wishing for more, and—*presto!* A handsome prince who doted on her. It meant the end of her marriage, of course, but her ex was something of a toad himself, who had a nasty habit of talking with his mouth full and a tongue good for nothing but licking stamps.

The prince was adorable—all the girls at the bridge club, squirming with envy, said so—though you could still see the effects his previous residence had had on him. He had heavy-lidded eyes and a wide mouth like a hand puppet's, his complexion was a bit off, and his loose-fitting skin was thin and clammy. His semen had a muddy taste, like the pond he came from, and his little apparatus was disappointing, but his tongue was amazing. It could reach the deepest recesses, triggering sensations she'd never known before. His crown was not worn like a hat—it grew out of his head like horns and sometimes got in the way—but his tongue was long enough for detours and tickled other parts on the path in. It gave him not so much a lisp as a consonantal slurp, making gibberish out of his sweet nothings, but talking was never the main thing between them.

She had discovered, when he was still an amphibian and they were just getting into the kissing game, that licking him would give her a stunning hallucinogenic high, and that was still true a metamorphosis later, but though she could get a buzz by licking the frog anywhere, she had to go looking for it on the prince, mostly in the nether parts. He wasn't the cleanest of princes, but the trip was worth it. She was transported to another realm, a kind of fairy kingdom where she could have anything she desired: wealth, beauty, a spectacular wardrobe, a winning bridge hand, cream-filled chocolates with zero calories, and love whenever she wanted it, which was most of the time, even when she was doing other things, like presiding over a royal banquet or reviewing the palace guard. Just wham, bam, grand slam! *Glorious!* It all tended to vanish when the high wore off, but another lick and she was back again.

Her suburban life began to pale by

comparison, but whenever she asked the prince to transport her to his real kingdom he always took her back to the pond where she'd found him. He was very happy there. He'd crawl into the mud, digging in until only his protruding eyes peered out, his crown seeming to float on the surface. At home, his eyes were sometimes wide awake and popping; at other times, especially when he was eating, they sank away and almost disappeared. But at the pond he was always goggle-eyed. Now and then he would unfurl his tongue and burp and she would get into the mud with him. It wasn't the same as the hallucinatory kingdom, but it was still very nice.

His frequent burping blighted his regal dignity somewhat, but at the same time it was the most lovable thing about him, and when he burped he always gazed at her in an especially affectionate way. When he was still a frog, he had taken his skin off from time to time to eat it. Fortunately, the prince did not do that, though his long tongue did snap up anything that dripped or flaked off, which sometimes spoiled *her* appetite. About once a month, he removed his clothes and crawled up on her back and locked his skinny legs around her for several days, his long toes fondling her bosom, his padded thumbs stuck to her armpits like Velcro. She couldn't shake him off, but had to wait until whatever it was that he was doing was done. It was probably obscene, though thankfully she couldn't see it; certainly she had to launder her skirts and blouses afterward. It was difficult with the prince pasted to her back even to do her shopping or get her hair done, and she had to sit sideways on chairs and on the toilet. But the worst thing about these times was that she lost access to her high. If only she had a tongue like his!

As soon as he dismounted and before he could put his royal pantaloons on, she'd get her nose right down there, drug fiend that she was, and lick her way back to the fairy kingdom. And on one such day (or night, one could never be sure in that place) when she was pinned, spread-eagled, by croquet wickets on the sunny (moonlit?) palace lawn for the pleasure of all, her euphoric self included—goodness! she was popping

like his eyes did—he asked her in his slurping way if she was happy where she was. Oh, yes, *totally!* she exclaimed breathlessly, so he left her there and, if she understood him correctly, went back to the pond to crawl into the mud. Well, she missed him, just as she missed her friends at the bridge club and, truth be told, her ex as well, but she was having too much wild royal fun to think about it, or to think about anything, really, highs being like that.

It was fantastic and seemingly unending, but, alas, nothing lasts forever, least of all ecstasy, and so one day there she was at home again, lying like a deflated air bag on her filthy kitchen floor. She mopped the floor, bagged up the mess in the refrigerator, opened all the windows, and hurried back to the pond, looking for the prince. She chased burps all day and all night, but he was nowhere to be found. The weather had changed. Perhaps he was hibernating.

For a lonely year she kept up the search, at first somewhat desperately, kissing and licking any frogs she managed to catch, but eventually she resigned herself to the futility of her quest and sorrowfully abandoned it. She recalled then the prince's own sorrow and disappointment. He'd thought this would be more fun, he'd confessed to her once in the mud. Of course, she'd been hurt by that and had pretended not to hear him, but she understood now, as she should have understood then, that he had been not an enchanted prince turned into a frog but a frog turned into a prince, and all he'd wanted was to be a frog again.

In the end, she got in touch with her ex and told him that she had been hooked on a weird drug but had kicked it now, and if he'd like to come back she'd welcome him. He was also lonely, smoking and drinking too much, his own affairs having come to nothing, and so, gratefully, he returned, and they found a certain contentment, living more or less happily ever after, which is what "now" is while one's in it. ♦

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Robert Coover on "The Frog Prince."

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE PRISONER OF STRESS

What does anxiety mean?

BY LOUIS MENAND

People don't ordinarily self-medicate by writing a book, but "My Age of Anxiety" (Knopf) is an attempt at recovery by a man whom modern psychiatry has failed. The man is Scott Stossel, a successful journalist (he is currently the editor of *The Atlantic*), now in his forties, who has suffered all his life from an acute anxiety disorder. When he was a child, he had terrible separation anxiety; as he grew up, he acquired phobias about public speaking, flying, fainting, heights, closed spaces, germs, vomiting, and cheese. Many people have an aversion to those things (cheese excepted), and, given the option, go out of their way to avoid them. But, faced with the prospect of a plane trip or a speaking engagement or sometimes even a squash match or a meeting at the office, Stossel experiences full-blown panic: insomnia, sweating, vertigo, stomach pains, and loss of control of his bowels. The sight of an unfamiliar pimple can send him down a bottomless chute of dread. He nearly passed out at his own wedding.

Stossel has been in therapy since he was ten, and he has consumed a whole medicine cabinet of psychopharmaceuticals—Thorazine, Nardil, Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Wellbutrin, Valium, Librium, Xanax, Klonopin, and a dozen more—not to mention alcohol. A few drugs and drug cocktails have tempered his symptoms, but the respite never lasted long. His current therapist encouraged him to write this book, and he says he has taken the advice in the hope that "by tunneling into my

anxiety . . . I can also tunnel out the other side."

"My Age of Anxiety" is not a memoir. Stossel tells us things about his parents, his marriage, and his children, but only things that are relevant to what he calls, after a famous remark of Freud's, "the 'riddle' of anxiety." The same is true of what he tells us about himself. He appears simply as a sufferer. Most of his book is a scholarly exploration of the history of anxiety and a journalistic account of the present state of medical knowledge. It's intelligent, interesting, and well written, but the subject of anxiety is a mess, and the book, intentionally or not, is an accurate representation of its subject.

It doesn't solve the riddle, either, but that's not Stossel's fault. It's because anxiety of the kind he is afflicted with is not a riddle. It's an illness. There is therefore nothing, except in the medical sense, to solve. That's not what Stossel wants to believe, though. He has an idea that more is at stake. He thinks that there is a metaphysics of anxiety. "To grapple with and understand anxiety," he says, "is, in some sense, to grapple with and understand the human condition."

Many people have made this claim, but it can mean different things. It can mean that human beings are creatures who care about the future, and so hoping for good outcomes and worrying about bad ones comes with membership in the species. This is, roughly, the existentialist view. Sartre thought that we

feel anxiety when we appreciate the responsibility we bear whenever we act—when we realize that, ultimately, there is nothing out there, including the ethical systems we are born into, that backs up our choices, and nothing that guarantees that they will be the right ones. Dogs and cats, presumably, do not know this feeling. Anxiety is the price tag on human freedom.

The idea that anxiety is central to the human condition can also mean that our mental life is characterized by psychic conflict, and anxiety is the symptom of that conflict. This is, roughly, the psychoanalytic view. It's what Freud meant when, in 1917 (not, as Stossel has it, 1933), he called anxiety "a riddle whose solution would be bound to throw a flood of light on our whole mental existence." Anxiety is the common feature of all neuroses. Feeling anxious is what makes people seek psychiatric help. It's a signal that unconscious drives are in conflict—that (as Freud believed in 1917) the ego is repressing a libidinal impulse. We're not aware of the conflict itself—we're not aware that we have a repressed desire—but we are aware of our anxiety. That's what makes it the key to understanding what's going on inside our heads.

Anxiety plays a big role in other accounts of the human condition, too. In theology, anxiety has been associated with the concepts of conscience, guilt, and original sin. Reinhold Niebuhr called anxiety "the inevitable spiritual state of man." In evolutionary psychology, anxiety is usually explained as part of the "fight or flight" reflex that gets triggered in the presence of danger. The reflex is naturally selected for: organisms that lack it might fall off a cliff or get crushed by a mastodon, because their physiologies failed to warn them of a threat to their survival. And, in some schools of sociology and cultural theory, anxiety is interpreted as a reaction to the stress and uncertainty of modern life. It's a natural response to unnatural conditions. It's how we know that the world is headed in a bad direction.

This is the hand the student of anxiety is dealt. *But he can pick only one card.* The existentialist's anxiety, the psychoanalyst's anxiety, and the anxieties of theologians, sociologists, and evolutionary psychologists have almost

ABOVE: VASCO MOURÃO



Scott Stossel has tried almost every treatment available for his anxiety, from drugs to yoga. Nothing has worked.

nothing to do with one another. They are not even compatible with one another. If anxiety is a product of modern life, then it is not the result of unconscious drives. If it's the result of unconscious drives, then it is not a sign of our existential awareness of the nature of freedom. It can't be entirely conscious, unconscious, socially conditioned, and hard-wired at the same time. The most we can say is that a mood that almost everyone experiences has featured prominently in various theories of human life and the world we inhabit.

The term itself is a catchall. People describe themselves as excited, nervous, apprehensive, tense, stressed out, bugged, worried, panicky, vapor-locked, scared shitless, sick to their stomach, and feeling like they're gonna die. Each of these moods is arguably a form of anxiety, but they are experienced as very different affective states. All sorts of events in life make us feel keyed up. The brain states may be similar, but the adrenaline rush we experience when we mount the stage to accept the Oscar for Best Actress does not seem to have much in common with a cheese phobia.

What makes the business even more confusing is that anxiety is hard to distinguish clinically from depression. We picture anxious people as hyper and overreactive, and depressed people as lethargic and indifferent. But depression, too, can be understood as a response to a perceived or imagined threat, and antidepressants like Prozac and Effexor also alleviate anxiety. Medically, anxiety and depression appear to be two related symptom clusters arising from (or causing) the same underlying neurological condition. So melancholy, grief, abulia, Weltschmerz, loss of libido, thoughts of suicide, and, presumably, a host of other symptoms associated with depression, like anger and irritability, all get lumped into the category of anxiety.

This gives Stossel a lot to sort out. He is an honest guide. He is committed to thinking through the philosophical, scientific, and human implications of a mood that appears to be universal (though people who live in underdeveloped countries seem to be less anxious) and that has attracted the attention of writers from Aristotle and Robert Burton (the seventeenth-century author of "The Anatomy of Mel-

ancholy") to Søren Kierkegaard and William James. One of the best things about him is that he's generally agnostic toward the theories and treatments he examines. He sees the possibilities in everything.

He is stronger on the science than he is on the intellectual history. Medical research and psychiatric treatments belong to a world that Stossel knows intimately as a patient, and researching the book must have been a way for him



to try to reconcile a lot of contradictory professional advice. For he has spent almost his entire life bouncing around on the roulette wheel of contemporary psychiatry. Calling him a victim would be melodramatic; however wretched he feels on the inside, he's a high-functioning neurotic, and it's not obvious what the right treatment for him is. But his story is a good window on the crazy history of the field.

It was in the nineteen-forties that anxiety became the multipurpose power term it is today. Stossel's title is an echo of the title of W. H. Auden's book-length poem "The Age of Anxiety," which was published in 1947. Auden called the poem "a baroque eclogue," and it is dense and difficult. As one of his editors, Alan Jacobs, put it, the work is "extraordinarily famous for a book so little read; or, extraordinarily little read for a book so famous."

The title struck a nerve, though. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1948; Leonard Bernstein composed a symphony based on it in 1949; and Jerome Robbins composed a ballet based on Bernstein's symphony in 1950. It went through several printings. Everyone thought that Auden had given the postwar era its name.

Auden didn't take the concept of anxiety from Freud. He took it from Kierkegaard. As the historian George Cotkin showed in "Existential Amer-

ica," Kierkegaard's influence on postwar American intellectual life was enormous, much greater, in the beginning, than Sartre's. Between 1936 and 1944, some twenty volumes of Kierkegaard's writings appeared in new English translations, a mammoth project overseen by an Episcopalian minister from Philadelphia named Walter Lowrie, who had learned Danish at the age of sixty-four in order to read Kierkegaard in the original.

All sorts were drawn to him. Whitaker Chambers, the ex-Communist who accused Alger Hiss of being a spy, was a Kierkegaardian. So was Peter Drucker, the father of modern management theory. The Abstract Expressionist painters Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko were obsessed with Kierkegaard. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., mentioned him in "The Vital Center," his manifesto about liberalism and totalitarianism, in 1949. He is a prominent figure in the theologian Paul Tillich's influential book "The Courage to Be," published in 1952. "Today it has become almost a truism to call our time an 'age of anxiety,'" Tillich wrote.

Anxiety in Kierkegaard is a kind of vertigo—"the dizziness of freedom," he calls it. It involves a recognition of one's finitude and one's sinfulness, and is a stage on the road to faith in God. This is pretty far from Freud (who was an atheist). Nevertheless, in the nineteen-fifties Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety and Freud's got merged.

Freud had a low opinion of the United States, but the rise of Hitler forced European psychoanalysts abroad, and most of them ended up in London and New York. (Freud himself barely escaped the Nazis. He left Vienna for London in 1938, after his daughter Anna was interrogated by the Gestapo. Four of his sisters died in the camps.) The émigrés—people like Bruno Bettelheim, Erich Fromm, Heinz Hartmann, Karen Horney, Heinz Kohut, and Otto Fenichel—observed Freudian doctrine with varying degrees of orthodoxy. (Orthodoxy mattered to Freud: he was continually excommunicating wayward disciples.) They adapted quickly to the New World; they comported themselves with Old World authority; and their ideas were adopted and engaged

with by prominent American psychologists and psychiatrists.

Most practicing psychiatrists in the United States were not psychoanalysts, but they used Freudian assumptions. The first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published in 1952, was thoroughly psychoanalytic, and psychoanalysis was the form of psychiatry taught in American medical schools in the nineteen-fifties. Anxiety was its central concept. The *D.S.M.* called it “the chief characteristic” of all neuroses.

The vogue for Kierkegaard and the stature of Freud was an invitation to a conceptual wedding. People in the psychiatric community began associating Kierkegaard and Freud in the late nineteen-forties, and, in 1950, the American psychologist Rollo May published “The Meaning of Anxiety,” in which he brought Kierkegaard and other philosophers together with psychoanalysis.

May had some differences with Freud, one of which was shared by almost every other psychologist and psychiatrist working in the United States after the war. This was the belief that neuroses can be responses to social conditions. Freud hated the idea that neuroses are responses to conditions, because he hated the idea that social reform can make people happier. That’s what “Civilization and Its Discontents” is all about.

But making people happier is what America is all about, and for Freudianism to succeed here it had to be able to connect people’s mood disorders to their circumstances. Gas chambers, atomic bombs, the death of God, the pressure to succeed, the threat of totalitarianism, the loss of faith in reason (May’s candidate)—you name it. The twentieth century is a nightmare. Anxiety became a master concept. It was the disease of modern life.

The notion that disorders such as anxiety and depression are caused by stuff out there in the environment, that they are like the diseases we catch from germs and viruses and are not symptoms of internal conflicts, was important to the success of an industry that was poised to take off: Big Pharma. Stossel tells the story well—how a Czechoslovakian

émigré named Frank Berger discovered by chance a chemical, mephnesin, that relaxes the muscles, and how a company called Carter synthesized that chemical and sold it as Miltown, an anxiolytic that became the first pharmaceutical blockbuster. Miltown spawned Equanil, and they were followed, in the nineteen-sixties, by Valium and Librium—all of them mega-sellers, the Prozacs and Paxils of their day.

The drugs were initially marketed to high-functioning people as tranquilizers, pills necessary for coping with the special demands of life in the fast lane. Around the time that Miltown was taking off, Hans Selye, a Hungarian émigré working in Canada, coined the term “stressor” (as he had earlier coined the psychological term “stress”). His book “The Stress of Life,” published in 1956, announced (among other things) the important news that stress is a reaction to good things that happen to us as well as bad ones. “The stress mechanism,” Selye explained, “and, indeed, nature in general, is quite

indifferent to human concepts of good or bad.” Getting a big promotion is as stressful, physiologically, as getting laid off. We really need those pills!

All of this should have made Freudian theory obsolete. But, for a long time, no one seemed to notice. No one pointed out that, if the drugs worked, then maybe mood disorders have a neurochemical basis, and anxiety is probably not (as Freud had come to believe) about things like the fear of castration. And if it’s a neurological disorder, something to do with brain amines, then maybe there’s no point spending years lying on a couch free-associating about last night’s dream when you can stop the suffering by popping a pill.

It wasn’t until 1965, when the American psychiatrist Joseph Schildkraut published a paper called “The Catecholamine Hypothesis of Affective Disorders,” proposing the amine theory of depression, that this seems to have sunk in. And it wasn’t until the third edition of the *D.S.M.*, published in 1980, that Freudian theory was



“Let me guess. You want French and you want ranch?”

finally dislodged from its place at the center of American psychiatry. Talk therapy didn't go away—people like to talk about their troubles, and many feel better for it—but, medically, it took a back seat to psychopharmacology. It lost its claim to science.

Not just Stossel the author but Stossel the mental patient is the heir to this exciting but not terribly edifying history. His first psychiatrist, whom he started seeing when he was ten, was trained as a Freudian. Stossel refers to him as Dr. L. Dr. L. was not hostile to medication, but he believed in repression, the Oedipus complex, and the like. He administered Rorschach tests and had Stossel free-associate in order to get access to the subconscious root of his problems. Later on, he tried hypnosis, eye-movement desensitizing and reprocessing, inner-child therapy, energy systems therapy, and internal family systems therapy. “I was the beneficiary, or possibly the victim, of seemingly every passing trend in psychotherapy and psychopharmacology,” Stossel says.

When Stossel was twenty-five, his parents began a process that led to their divorce. Dr. L. took Stossel's father on as a patient, and, even more amazing, he used his sessions with Stossel to discuss the father. (Dr. L. and his wife were also seeing Stossel's father and mother in couples therapy.) The father, an alcoholic and an emotionally distant man, was triumphantly “cured” in less than two years—which made Stossel feel, he says, “like a schoolchild whose younger sibling has just sped past him in the accelerated class.”

After twenty-five years, Stossel changed psychiatrists. He is now with Dr. W., who appears to be a humanist-existentialist practitioner—a school of psychiatry of which Rollo May is one of the founders. A big question in the treatment of mood disorders is how seriously to take the patient's own reasons for feeling anxious or depressed. If the disorder is a neurochemical disturbance, then the patient's stories about his or her problems may just be the mood talking. If you can make the mood disappear, then the problems will disappear. But those stories aren't completely made up. Dr. W.'s assumption, as Stossel explains it, is that

although cheese and vomiting are not life-threatening, there is a traumatic or psychically wounding event that underlies anxiety about them. As Stossel puts it, the theory is that anxiety arises from “failed efforts to resolve basic existential dilemmas.” The goal of therapy is to address those dilemmas by getting back to the original hurt.

Dr. W. is skeptical of biological explanations for mental disorders (like genes) and of chemical cures (that is, drugs), but he has let his patient pursue pharmacological treatments and other strategies. Stossel seems to have undergone almost every type of treatment out there, with the exception of electroconvulsive therapy. These include, in addition to the therapies tried by Dr. L., family therapy, group therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, rational emotive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, meditation, role-playing, interoceptive exposure therapy, supportive-expressive therapy, self-help workbooks, massage therapy, prayer, acupuncture, yoga, and Stoic philosophy. And, now, writing a book.

How effective were these trials? Stossel's description of his life during the time he was writing the chapter on drugs can serve as a commentary: “Many nights I would begin the evening fueled by caffeine and nicotine, which I needed to propel me out of torpor and hopelessness—only to overshoot into quaking, quivering anxiety. Thoughts racing, hand shaking, I would end the evening taking a Klonopin and then perhaps a Xanax and drinking a Scotch (and then another and another) to settle down. This is not healthy.” That's an understatement.

One way in which anxiety differs from depression is that anxious people are often not dysfunctional. William Styron wasn't able to write “Darkness Visible” when he was clinically depressed; Andrew Solomon had to get over his depression to be able to write his marvellous book “The Noonday Demon.” Though Stossel's disorder must have made progress painful, he does not appear to have been in remission when he wrote “My Age of Anxiety.”

Whether or not this has something to do with the beneficial aspects of anxiety—it focusses the mind and prepares the body for action (in extreme cases, by evacuating the bowels)—there are many successful people who, like Stossel, have

managed to cope with serious phobias and nervous disorders. He discusses a number of them. Charles Darwin suffered from a social anxiety that frequently made it impossible for him to leave his house. Laurence Olivier and Hugh Grant had stagefright. (Grant has said more than once that he was going to stop making movies.) Richard Burton could not bear to be in a room where there was honey. Joan Baez and Matt Lauer have come out as emetophobes: they share Stossel's dread of vomiting. On the other hand, Bill Russell, the star center of the Boston Celtics, and one of the most dominant athletes in the era of professional sports, vomited before almost every game he played in. On nights he didn't, his teammates worried that they would lose.

Nerves are a mystery. Some people seem to have none. We admire these people for their pluck, but, really, they are just born lucky. Other people have agoraphobia (fear of public spaces) but are courageous in battle. Most of us have minor performance and social anxieties that stop as soon as we get in front of the microphone or realize that the strangers at the party are no less uninteresting than we are. Our brain shuts off the release of cortisol (the stress hormone associated with the fight-or-flight reflex) and other chemicals that were making us feel anxious. We have evacuated our psychic bowels. We are in the present and in control. We feel good—or, at least, we no longer feel like we'd rather be dead.

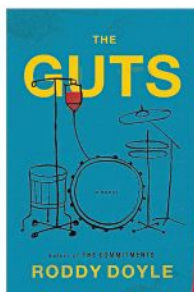
In normal life, anxiety has content. It's not merely a somatic reflex. Bill Russell's anxiety tells us something we otherwise wouldn't know about Bill Russell. It tells us how he felt about what he did for a living. Anxiety like Russell's is triggered by a conscious thought about a present or future circumstance. It is scary to compete in public against talented people who would love nothing more than to make you fail, just as it's scary to be in an airplane in a thunderstorm or to have a monster under your bed. Those things are scary because they're dangerous—minimally, to our egos, or, maximally, to our chances of survival. Anxiety protects the organism. In the monster-under-the-bed cases, we can be helped with talk therapy or cognitive

behavioral therapy, which teaches patients mechanisms for getting control over anxiety-producing trains of thought.

What appears to happen in the brains of people with acute anxiety disorder is what Peter Kramer, the author of “Listening to Prozac,” calls the “stuck switch” problem. The brain fails to shut down the release of stress hormones, and the body keeps pumping them out. The danger is that the overproduction will eventually damage the brain, so that, as Kramer puts it, “temporary injuries become permanent.” Solomon quotes Robert Post, formerly at the National Institute of Mental Health: “If you have too many episodes, it changes your biochemistry for the bad, possibly permanently. At that point, many therapists are still looking in completely the wrong direction. If the episode now occurs on automatic, what good is it to worry about the stressor that kicked off the original process? It’s just too late for that.” Stossel says that he worries about the harm to his brain. It seems a reasonable thing to worry about.

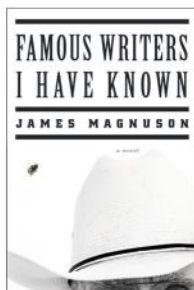
“To say that my anxiety is reducible to the ions in my amygdala”—the home of the fight-or-flight reflex—“is as limiting as saying that my personality or my soul is reducible to the molecules that make up my brain cells or to the genes that underwrote them,” Stossel writes. He is being true to the sayings of Dr. W., and to the beliefs of many people who distrust the medicalization of mood disorders. Still, at the end of his book, Stossel makes a good case that his problem is, at bottom, genetic. He lists, in addition to his angry and detached father and his overprotective mother, many relatives with clinical levels of anxiety and depression, including a great-grandfather, a Harvard dean who ended up in and out of McLean Hospital, suffering from chronic and debilitating depression. Sometimes it just is the biology.

But (to get back to the human-condition thing) being human is all about coping with our biology. As a species, we lucked out: natural selection gave us minds, and that freed us from the prison of biological determinism. We can put our genetic assets to positive account if and as we choose, and sometimes we have to try to do the same thing with our genetic deficits. As this man has bravely and admirably done. ♦

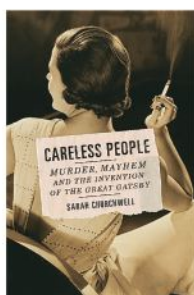


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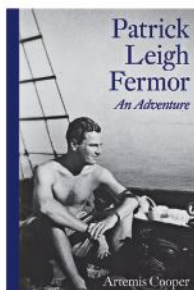
THE GUTS, by Roddy Doyle (Viking). In the decades since Jimmy Rabbitte got together the Commitments, the band that, in Doyle’s first novel, brought American soul music to nineteen-eighties Dublin, he has carved out a grand life for himself. He has a lovely, intelligent wife, great kids, and a neat job helping long-lost Irish bands make money off their cult status. But when a cancer diagnosis makes him confront his mortality, his comfortable existence threatens to come apart. Although the novel leans heavily on staples of midlife crisis (an extramarital affair, reconnection with old friends), Doyle’s dialogue and his depictions evoke the warmth and vigor of a complicated but joyful family life.



FAMOUS WRITERS I HAVE KNOWN, by James Magnuson (Norton). In this satire of the creative-writing industry, Frankie Abandonato, a con man on the run from mobsters, poses as a Salingeresque novelist at an M.F.A. program. The program is bankrolled by Rex Schoeninger, a writer (modelled on James Michener) who has grown rich from decades of potboilers and wants to redeem his literary reputation through educational philanthropy. Schoeninger also hopes to patch up an old feud with the reclusive novelist whom Abandonato is impersonating; Abandonato hopes to scam Schoeninger out of his remaining money. The book’s best jokes come at the expense of the fiction students, but it’s not all inside-baseball japery. The unexpected rapport between Frankie and Rex, orphans and absentee fathers both, stands out amid the fun.



CARELESS PEOPLE, by Sarah Churchwell (Penguin Press). “Gatsby lives in the conditional mood, as aspirants must,” Sarah Churchwell writes of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s most famous character—and her impressionistic study of “what was in the air” as Fitzgerald conceived of “The Great Gatsby” relies, in part, on a series of what-ifs. Her most far-reaching supposition concerns the murder, in New Brunswick, in 1922, of two lovers, both married to other people. Could this headline-grabbing scandal have inspired “Gatsby”? Churchwell calls the case a suggestive “phantom double,” but offers scant evidence. The book is less a history than an evocation of the mood and tone of Fitzgerald’s milieu, taking on the uncertain, almost surreal animating spirit of its subject.

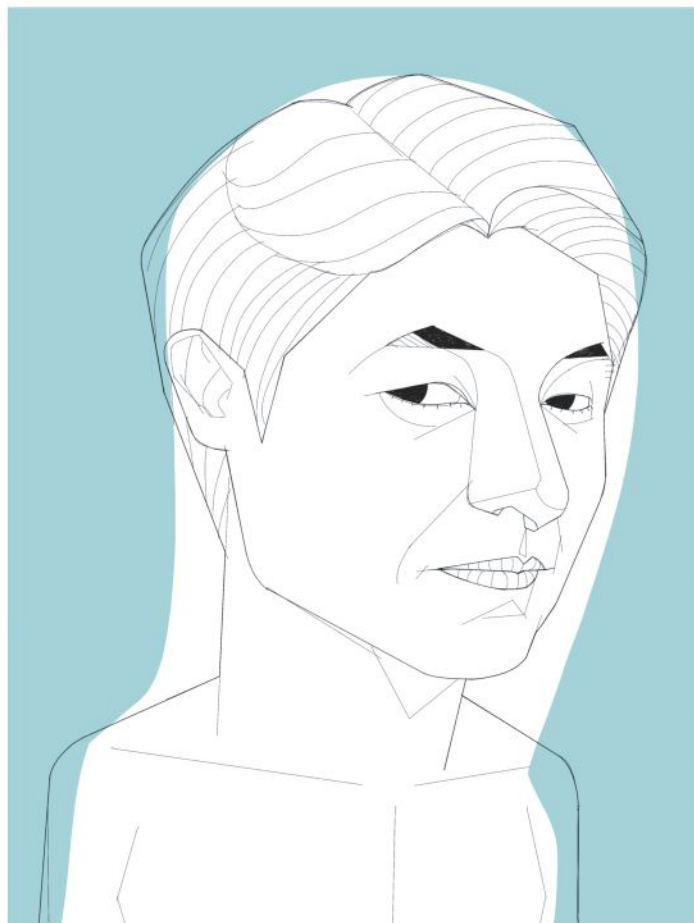


PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR, by Artemis Cooper (New York Review Books). A dismal performance in school left the young Leigh Fermor with few job prospects. Instead, he took a yearlong walk across Europe, which culminated in a four-year affair with a Romanian princess. From there he rarely stopped moving: his true talents, it turned out, were for travelling and for writing about it. Cooper’s biography is affectionate but not uncritical, and she ably meets the challenge of adding further intrigue to journeys and adventures, such as his kidnapping of a Nazi general on the island of Crete in 1944, that her subject has already recounted so well. Elusive and often coy, the Fermor who emerges from these pages seems so authentic that when he dies, at ninety-six, the reader feels the loss keenly.

WE

Chang-rae Lee's "On Such a Full Sea."

BY JOANNA BIGGS



More and more we can see that the question is not whether we are ‘individuals,’” Chang-rae Lee writes in *“On Such a Full Sea”* (Riverhead), his new, dystopian novel. “The question, then, is whether being an ‘individual’ makes a difference anymore.” It seems doubtful, in Lee’s sombre future. Afflicted by swine- and bird-flu epidemics and a profound change in the climate, America, now known simply as the Association, has split into three separate social groups. At the top sit the Charters, a small professional class that has corralled the country’s remaining resources and withdrawn into gated villages. Catering their dinner parties and keeping their

cars perpetually waxed are the “service people,” who live in the land beyond, known as the counties. “You better have it while you have it” is the motto of the bartering, hardscrabble life there. Producing food and goods for the Charters is a network of mostly subterranean societies, comprising workers whose ancestors arrived from New China a hundred years earlier. At B-Mor, a facility in what was once called Baltimore, workers raise fish and grow tomatoes. Piled on top of one another in renovated row houses, proud of having played their part in the smoothly productive six-day work cycle, the residents shuffle in rubber slippers to the ornamental ponds in the park on

their “free day” and sip lychee smoothies in numb contentment.

At first, the pleasure of Lee’s dystopia lies in recognizing contemporary America in the future Association. Isn’t the United States already a society of rigidly stratified classes? Aren’t its tomatoes already produced by an army of underpaid, overextended workers, lulled by reality TV and sugary drinks? Aren’t bartering and making do how many outside the Western world get by today? Financial struggle underpins many of Lee’s muted, carefully put-together books, like *“Native Speaker”* (1995), the story of an industrial spy whose wife has left him, and *“Aloft”* (2004), in which a flawed Italian-American patriarch recounts a gentle tale of family reunion. Here the struggle is of a different order.

Can an individual make a difference in such a world? It is a question that haunts the dystopian tradition. From the math genius D-503, in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *“We,”* who begins by designing the spaceship INTEGRAL only to find himself swept up in the revolution, to the fireman Guy Montag, in Bradbury’s *“Fahrenheit 451,”* who starts out as a kerosene-wielding book burner and ends up harboring what may be the last copy of the Bible, the dystopian novel has portrayed the efforts of one man to defy the state that he once revered. As heroes, these figures aren’t all that heroic—Winston Smith is a mid-ranking employee of the Ministry of Truth, in Orwell’s *“1984”*; Bernard Marx, in Huxley’s *“Brave New World,”* is self-conscious about his puny body—and purposefully so. The point is that even someone unexceptional can, once his eyes have been opened, stand up to the authoritarian state, regardless of whether he is knocked down again.

The atmosphere of feverish conspiracy and the dread of exposure that are central to the dystopian genre depend, in large part, on how close the narrative takes us to the rebel protagonist. *“We”* is told in the form of a diary; the worlds of *“1984”* and *“Fahrenheit 451”* are seen entirely through the eyes of the main characters. Lee’s innovation is to tell his story in the first-person plural: it is the workers of B-Mor, the voice of the collective state, who unfold the tale of Fan, a tiny sixteen-year-old fish-

Lee’s novel, written in the first-person plural, subtly updates the dystopian tradition.

tank diver who one day leaves the safety of her labor compound to go in search of Reg, her missing boyfriend (and the father of her unborn child). Unlike a Greek chorus, which narrates and laments the actions of an Oedipus or an Antigone at the hero's elbow, the "we" of the B-Mor workers begin their story with little sympathy for Fan, smugly convinced that their way of life is superior: "If the stars are out—and they do seem to be out most every night now—we can sit together in our backyards and wave a hand to neighbors over the fences and view our favorite programs while sitting in the open air and authentically believe that this stretch of sky sings its chorus of light for us alone." Why would Fan leave them? "Have we not done the job of becoming our best selves?" The narrators tell Fan's story from a distance, as if observing the adventures of a folk hero, able to see what's going on but not quite sure of the motives behind it. At the start, they insist that their heroine is nothing special: "We can talk about her openly because hers is no grand tragedy, no apocalypse of the soul or of our times." "On Such a Full Sea" is as much the story of the B-Mors' evolving attitude toward Fan as it is the story of Fan herself.

Lee takes his title from the moment in "Julius Caesar" when Brutus urges Cassius to act while the going is good:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to
fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it
serves
Or lose our ventures.

In a play propelled by macho decision and action, the idea that there is an order of success that can come of knowing the right moment to go with the flow is appealingly counterintuitive—if you can't create the right moment, you'd better be able to recognize it when it comes. Lee borrows it to suggest that Fan is steadily afloat, waiting for the next current. At the end of a day's work in the fish tanks, Fan practices holding her breath and floating underwater in preparation: for what she doesn't yet know, only that resisting the present conditions is always a good idea. Fan's story, a quiet rebellion told by the con-

formist many, is a study of fate and action, habit and freedom, of not seeing our way of life as our destiny.

Despite ultraviolent episodes, a benign, courtly atmosphere, almost like that of a Shakespearean romance, presides as we follow Fan on her journey. On leaving B-Mor, she is hit by a car and injures her leg. The full sea serves her well, however: it turns out that the driver runs a medical center in the counties, where he takes her for treatment. As Fan's leg heals, she comes to see how counties life works. With electricity scarce, people sit together in the evenings, playing word games and talking about the shape of their days. Time itself is understood differently in Lee's dystopia: it is measured by how long it takes for bald heads, hoodies, or chaat to become fashionable and then to fall out of favor.

Lee described his previous novel, "The Surrendered" (2010), the story of a girl who loses her family in the Korean War, "sort of as a mural," but here he puts an actual mural into the story. After various struggles, Fan ends up being kept as a kind of pet by an affluent Charter couple. She is the latest addition to a troupe of girls, who live a perfumed and padded existence of Tai Chi, yoga, and soup noodles in a windowless room, their lives brightened only by the creation of a grand mural: "By reading it from the beginning, Fan could trace the looping arcs of their time and how each girl had come but also whatever was of interest or concern, becoming a more intricate map of their consciousness as it was emended and evolved." The mural is an apt metaphor for this book. In most of Lee's novels, a quest moves a character onward and flashbacks reveal why he or she is so driven. But in a mural, as Lee has pointed out, the viewer is able to look closely at the panels, as well as to stand back and see the whole. The figures within the mural can't see what they are part of—just as B-Mors don't normally see what's inside the Charter villages, and vice versa—but the viewer can.

Back in B-Mor, as the narrators tell us, Fan's departure, caught on video camera, has made her notorious. Images of small, unassuming Fan and tall, kindly Reg are being painted on the ends of the

row houses, as a protest against a growing number of disappearances. One "Free Reg" sign has been spray-painted so messily and so low to the ground that it must have been done by a small child: "It was practically heartbreaking—and disturbing—to think of that innocent young person wholly caught up in this broad surge of feeling." But the narrators admit that they, like the child, have been affected by the tale they've been telling. They began intending simply to repeat the story as they first heard it, but they haven't been able to refrain from adding to it: "Isn't it the truth that, despite your fealty to the story, a moment will arise that compels a freelancing, perhaps even rebellious, urge?" In letting the dystopians relate the story of the defector, Lee's novel at once inverts the conventions of mid-century dystopian fiction and echoes one of its long-standing themes: stories can transform individuals and, by extension, entire societies.

The girls with whom Fan is held captive contrive to free her so that she can keep looking for Reg. ("Perhaps . . . we B-Mors—and perhaps your people, too—are merely the Girls writ large," the narrators say.) When they succeed, they commemorate her with a portrait that isn't quite a portrait: "It did look like her or, at least, like the curtaining sway of her hair; there was great movement in the work." If you looked past the black bob, with flickers of violet, in the set of the cheek, or the turn of the chin, there was "some distinctive notation of each of the Girls" and even of their keeper. The novel's picaresque structure relies on moments like this, where we step back from the detail, and the frame and the story merge. The portrait is the girls' final great work and the visual equivalent of the communal voice of the B-Mor workers, who before long are taking to the streets to demand a better life for their children. But the security drone sent to videotape their rally isn't programmed to film so many people at once, and the recording is "unviewable, jittery and useless, until it zoomed out to capture the entire massing. It turns out we are one, if not ever how we expected." The question is no longer whether the individual makes a difference: quiet, modest, pliable Fan has leaped between worlds, and changed them. ♦

ON TELEVISION

FAN FRICTION

"Sherlock" and its audiences.

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



The third season of “Sherlock” opens with an homage to its online fans, but tensions between the classic detective story and its audience go way back. In 1893, Arthur Conan Doyle famously killed Sherlock Holmes, chucking him off Reichenbach Falls. Protesters wore black armbands in the streets. Even the author’s mother was opposed, writing to him, “You won’t! You can’t! You mustn’t!” A few years later, Conan Doyle gave in and rolled back the rock, but Sherlockians call the period in between the Great Hiatus. According to Anne Jamison’s terrific “Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World,” when the author retreated his fans stepped in, writing their

own Sherlock mysteries: the origin of modern fan fiction.

The men behind “Sherlock,” which airs in the U.S. on PBS, are major fans themselves: the showrunners Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat (who also oversees “Doctor Who”) have done a nifty job of transplanting the detective to contemporary London, finding digital analogues for Holmes’s feats of cognition. (When Sherlock “reads” a crime scene, enormous words appear on the screen, like an online “word cloud.”) Many of their plots are twists on Conan Doyle’s, and Season 2 ended with a reference to Reichenbach Falls: Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) plummeted from a rooftop, seemingly to

his death. Yet somehow he survived. In this season’s first episode, “The Empty Hearse,” Holmes returns to his old stomping grounds, and, at first, the show feels tentative, and slightly cartoonish, as if its hard drive were being defragged, the anxieties of its writers reorganized and purged. By the end of the episode, the story coheres, and the series is rebooted with a ping.

In real life, since the Season 2 finale, “Sherlock” buffs have collaborated to solve the mystery of the detective’s survival—even creating a Google Street Map that allowed amateur sleuths to test hypotheses. In “The Empty Hearse,” these followers become characters: they meet in a support group and use hashtags like #sherlocklives. The first scene is classic bait and switch: we see Holmes escape, with some Bond-like derring-do and a romantic kiss, and then the story is abruptly revealed as one of the club members’ theories. Later, a goth teen-age girl presents another version, in which Sherlock and his nemesis Moriarty lock lips. The episode isn’t perfect: there’s a mystery, involving an Underground train, that is downright goofy—as the British writer Laurie Penny notes in a lovely manifesto defending Sherlock “fan-ficc,” it’s as silly as any “amateur” plot. But “The Empty Hearse” is, finally, an affectionate episode, at once a hat-tip and an exorcism, and a coded confession of its own status as fan fiction. When the mystery is explained, at last, it’s with a shrug of humility. “Not the way I’d have done it,” a club member says. “Everyone’s a critic,” Holmes replies.

The new season reunites Holmes with his primal fan: that love addict Dr. John Watson, played by Martin Freeman. Watson has been grieving Sherlock’s suicide for two years, but he’s now dating a nurse, Mary (played by Freeman’s partner, Amanda Abbington, for added intertextuality), and he’s bought an engagement ring. When Sherlock shows up, the men’s intimacy reignites, and the game is on.

Like many genre stories, “Sherlock” has inspired reams of “slash fiction” among its viewers, especially its female ones: the term goes back to the homoerotic Kirk/Spock stories of the nineteen-seventies, written pornography in which the shouty captain and the Sherlock-like half-Vulcan went for it. The genre exploded once the Internet came along: you

Like obsessed viewers of “Sherlock,” Dr. John Watson is a fan of Sherlock Holmes.

can find slash fic about almost any characters you can imagine, from Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy onward. Rather than play innocent about these dynamics, “Sherlock” mines them heavily, for humor and frisson. Yet for all the “Wait, are they actually gay?” gags, the show is admirably committed to something more serious: the notion of Sherlock/Watson as both True Detective and True Romance. This is a real love affair, not a joke one.

It’s also a central shift from the original: Sherlock is still a detective, there are episodic mysteries, there is still Baker Street (now equipped with Web access), but the subject of the show is not so much Sherlock’s deductions as this relationship, which is itself a kind of mystery. Sherlock and Watson are best friends, certainly. They’re also chaste boyfriends, as well as a captain and his first mate. Mostly, though, they’re a god and a mortal, mutually besotted—the most impossible love affair of all. When viewers “read” this relationship (and Sherlock’s relationship with his other intra-show fans, who include the morgue employee, Molly, and Lestrade, the admiring police inspector), it’s similar to the way Sherlock “reads” a crime scene: intuiting clues that “normals” might dismiss. And, of course, Watson is implicitly a writer of Sherlock Holmes fan fiction. In Conan Doyle’s books, he keeps notes of their adventures, which he publishes in magazines. On the television show, naturally, it’s a blog.

The second episode dives into the question of what Watson is to Holmes, and it’s one of the best so far—a daring display of nested mysteries that also inverts the central love dynamic. Set mostly at Watson’s wedding, it’s framed by Holmes’s best-man toast, a dilatory, frequently belligerent, then suddenly tearjerking monologue, studded with anti-marriage zingers and hilarious accounts of their drunken bachelor party, in which the word clouds go blurry. (The signature of a good, serious TV drama is, ironically, a sense of humor: if it’s glum and gluey, run for it.)

The speech is punctuated by flashbacks to cases that the two men have investigated. Some are very short: “And of course I have to mention the Elephant in the Room!” Sherlock says, and there’s a quick shot of the two men standing in a doorway, and from offscreen we hear a

loud jungle roar. With each tale, Holmes builds the case for the doctor’s insight, his warmth and humanity—and why these are useful to Sherlock. Yet he’s also humbling himself. A reflexively arrogant individual who refers to himself as a “high-functioning sociopath,” Holmes now takes Watson’s role. He burnishes Watson’s legend, rather than Watson burnishing his. In other words, it’s an episode about Sherlock Holmes as a fan—the god stooping to praise the human. In one flashback, the two sit on a London park bench, framed by dark trees, as Watson struggles to reassure Holmes that their relationship won’t change. The shot emphasizes the impossibility of their kinship: Watson is half the size of Holmes; as he slumps, the cadaverous Holmes sits up rigidly, so that their conversation feels as if it were taking place not merely between two men but between two different species, or possibly between a mountain and a shrub. Then Watson turns, and finds that Holmes has disappeared.

The show has always been fascinated by Holmes’s callousness toward those who love him, his tendency to abandon and exploit them: like Bones, House, and other dark TV geniuses who are his unacknowledged offspring, Holmes sees connections but can’t connect. He’s like a Google algorithm, if it were sexy and wore dashing wool coats. Halfway through his best-man speech, he describes a case in which a number of love-lorn women have had one-night stands with a “ghost” who disappears the next day. Sherlock gathers these lonely hearts in an elegant auditorium, where he interrogates them, searching for a pattern. It’s only gradually, as the camera toggles from closeups to dramatic shots from above, and then abruptly to images of Sherlock in his office, that we recognize what we’re actually seeing: a poetic representation of a virtual experience—Holmes is online, meeting the women through a discussion board. When his conversations end, the women vanish, and he closes his laptop.

The show is at its best in such moments, these sequences that capture the semi-virtual, semi-real ways that we think, and feel, and meet, and connect today. It’s a rare attempt to make visible something that we take for granted: a new kind of cognition, inflected by passion, that allows strangers to think out loud, solving mysteries together. ♦

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Violence and desire in "Machinal" and "Tyson vs. Ali."

BY HILTON ALS



Machinal" (a Roundabout Theatre Company production, at the American Airlines) is hard to get a handle on and often hard to handle, because it's a flop and a hit. The hit part has less to do with Rebecca Hall's acting than with her presence: she's beautiful, with dark features set in skin as white as a cloud. Looking up at her long form, as she turns this way and that—she has an interesting, off-center rhythm that slows the action down even as the script and the director want to speed it up—you may mistake the subtlety of her movements for depth, but clouds are surface attractions, and Hall's performance is mostly just that.

"Machinal," which premièred in 1928—

this staging, directed by Lyndsey Turner, is the play's first Broadway revival—was written by the journalist Sophie Treadwell, whose imagination was captured by the infamous Ruth Snyder murder case. In 1927, in Queens, Snyder murdered her emotionally remote husband, with the help of a lover; Snyder and her man were found guilty of the crime and subsequently executed. All we remember of Snyder these days—aside from the Warhol-like photograph of her dying in the electric chair—is the work that her story inspired: Treadwell's expressionistic piece, and James M. Cain's noir novel "Double Indemnity."

Treadwell's protagonist—called, simply, Young Woman (Hall)—is the only

daughter of an overbearing mother (Suzanne Bertish), who offers no solace to her perpetually frazzled child; instead, she pushes her into a loveless marriage with her former boss, Husband (Michael Cumpsty), the vice-president of a company where all the employees, from Telephone Girl (Ashley Bell) to Filing Clerk (Ryan Dinning), speak in hard, metallic tones, like vaudeville performers who have forgotten the joke—or have repeated it so many times that they grit their teeth while saying it again. Treadwell's Young Woman sees language as an obligation; she says only what she means, and her sensitivity—her authenticity—is a horse and buggy beside the other characters' roadsters. Turner has Hall emphasize her character's strange inviolability by staring straight ahead, wide-eyed, her mouth slightly atremble. I'm not sure that's the best way to play it, but I can see Turner's point: she has to accentuate Young Woman's innocence in order to cook up some kind of dramatic tension; in Treadwell's script, things happen, and rather quickly, but there's little exposition.

Following her marriage, Young Woman has a baby. In the ugly white light of the maternity ward, as nurses and doctors weave past in the background (Es Devlin's set ably shows the world swirling around Young Woman), she refuses to nurse her daughter. Having given birth to a girl horrifies Young Woman; will her daughter's story equal her own in powerlessness? She'd rather not know. This is a harsher response than Daisy Buchanan's ambivalence-laced hope that her daughter will grow up to be a "beautiful little fool," admired by men in relative comfort. But Treadwell, unlike Fitzgerald, was writing about womanhood and economic deprivation from the inside, in much the same way that her contemporary the novelist Jean Rhys wrote about lost women in the cafés of Europe, falling time and again for the unavailable and feckless other.

Eventually, Young Woman, too, falls for the wrong guy, Lover (the attractive Morgan Spector), but at least it's her mistake—one of the few choices she's allowed to make for herself. We're halfway through the show by the time they meet, and Hall looks stunning. In a yellow frock and a cloche hat, she's a ray of sunlight in a grimy, self-interested world. (She carries the chic of the costume designer Michael Krass's fabulous period styles effortlessly.) But, de-

Rebecca Hall, as a murderous wife, in a revival of Sophie Treadwell's 1928 play.

spite her strong stage image, it's something of a mystery to me what the British-born actress draws on for her performance; she doesn't have a dramatic center so much as an interest in enacting "dramatic" roles—in a bid, I think, to be looked at by the audience. Hall's Carol Burnett-like mouth hints at a flair for comedy, but her choice of parts, including that of the spoiled, rich heavy in the recent BBC adaptation of Ford Madox Ford's "Parade's End," doesn't always suit her looks, let alone her capabilities. And she doesn't have the psychological wherewithal to make us believe the bewilderment and sense of abandonment that her character experiences in "Machinal."

Actors with an instinct for the stage know that it takes more to engage us than flouncing around looking pinched or pained. They have to both absorb and reject the audience—that is, they have to allow us into their interiority, and at the same time push us away, so that we can observe it. Hall doesn't flounce; she lopes along, like a gazelle, in the bright lights of Broadway. She doesn't act; she performs. Gertrude Stein, in her brilliant "Lectures in America" (1935), wrote, "At the theatre there is the curtain and the . . . emotion of you on one side of the curtain and what is on the other side of the curtain are not going to be going on together. One will always be behind or in front of the other." We are always in front of Hall's somnambulist interpretation, even as Young Woman commits murder, and pays for it. In fact, Hall's slowness to react in rapid-fire situations is the only thing that holds our attention: it's like watching your own anxiety try to calm itself—but how?

What keeps us watching Frank Boudreaux's "Tyson vs. Ali" (a 3-Legged Dog and P.S. 122 production, directed by Reid Farrington, at the 3LD Art & Technology Center), on the other hand, is its speed. While "Machinal" centers on a white female body, "Tyson vs. Ali," an hour-long piece set in a boxing ring, is about black maleness making a spectacle of itself. Both plays present violence, but here the violence is orchestrated, in the same way that violence levelled at black men in general—department-store profiling, stop-and-frisk—is often orchestrated by what some might call the police state. A number of actors—Dennis A. Allen II, Roger Casey, Femi Olagoke, and Jonathan Swain—play Mike Tyson and Muhammad Ali, and all of them are physically beautiful and clearly

aware of what the play is about: self-invention. How does one become something without becoming a thing?

"Tyson vs. Ali" is a work of historical invention—the real boxers never fought each other—that addresses the present. As a referee (Dave Shelley) separates the battling stars, another Ali and Tyson speak into microphones, telling their stories and sharing their bravado and their fears, like prisoners whispering through the bars of a cell: they are imprisoned by their own iconography and, like all of us, by their own bodies. To watch the boxers circle the ring in their silk boxing trunks, as we listen to their sound bites, is to be reminded of the irrefutability of being human. But neither Farrington's direction nor Boudreaux's minimal, poetic script is trying to make an ideological point; the freshness of the show—which doesn't entirely jell, because of the inconsequential ending—is due, in part, to the lovely choreography, by Laura K. Nicoll, and to Juan Aboites's sound design, which brings actors, video, and soundtrack together with a stop-and-start fluidity reminiscent of the work of the exceptional music producer Madlib. (Aboites relies perhaps too heavily on video, which explains too much too quickly. He may have been inspired in this regard by Paul Pfeiffer's haunted videos on visibility and invisibility among men of color in sports.)

The fight scenes are brief. The actors trade off, as if in a dance, and it's those pauses which allow us to reflect on the intense erotic pull of the material: the boxers are not only engaged in a dance of wits; they are trying to "top" each other in a contest of masculinity. In Albert Maysles and Bradley Kaplan's remarkable 2009 film about Ali, "Muhammad and Larry," there is a scene so powerful in its homoeroticism—it shows Ali hanging out in bed as some of his handlers massage his feet—that it is almost a cliché. Hasn't male competition been equated with sexuality before? Yes, because, like most clichés, it's true. And Farrington mines that truth in this expansive but controlled theatrical mixtape—just as Hall, in her odd performance, evokes the Rhys-like drift of female existence. Watching "Machinal" and "Tyson vs. Ali" one after the other was instructive. Treadwell's white-female-centered modernism and Farrington's black-male post-modernism both told a familiar story: a tale of marginalization amid the forces of aggression, idolatry, and disenfranchisement. ♦

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LEND ME YOUR EARS

Ariel Rechtshaid and the art of production.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES



Ariel Rechtshaid, a wiry thirty-four-year-old producer who has been nominated for a Grammy as Producer of the Year, has no signature sound and doesn't work in any particular genre more than others. Rechtshaid, who is from Los Angeles, has a perversely simple method—he lets artists sound the way they want, and then he puts his thumb on the scale and makes them sound a bit more exciting.

His work on Vampire Weekend's "Modern Vampires of the City," Sky Ferreira's "Ghost" E.P., and HAIM's "Days Are Gone" earned him his nomination, though this is an insufficient accounting of his career. It is not hard to

imagine why artists get along with Rechtshaid. He speaks evenly and openly, is rarely argumentative, and favors pants that would be pajamas in New York but pass for evening wear in Los Angeles. He's around six feet tall, and his hair is a mass of unkempt brown curls that says, to quote a recent confident Beyoncé hit, "I woke up like this." Disparate as his productions are, they share some qualities. Rechtshaid loves a big mid-tempo drumbeat that avoids either the drag of a ballad or the frenetic rush of a dance tune. His sounds have an odd brightness, so that even intensely personal songs end up feeling buoyant, and—here is where the labels

start writing checks—he is exceptionally good at getting the best out of singers. His approach differs from that of producers who make their name with a sound that watermarks each song and can risk overshadowing the vocalist. (This is not always a bad thing: many singers have been lucky to work with Pharrell Williams, who has long depended on a recognizable collection of keyboard tones and rhythms built from distinctive, woody clicks.)

As a teen-ager, Rechtshaid set up a small studio in his parents' garage, and started recording and producing friends' bands. One of his first public releases was by the rapper Murs, a friend from high school. They had fallen out of touch but ran into each other at a twenty-four-hour electronics store, where Rechtshaid was buying a boom box. After he was signed to the prestigious New York indie label Def Jux, Murs made his first widely available album, "The End of the Beginning," from 2003, with Rechtshaid.

The next few years demonstrated Rechtshaid's antipathy to genre. A spare production of a song called "Hey There Delilah," recorded with a pop-punk band, Plain White T's, at his apartment, in 2004, was re-released in 2006 and became a No. 1 single the next year. (Rechtshaid had no idea that the song had been re-released.) As a bass player, Rechtshaid formed a band called Foreign Born that played a gentle variant of psychedelic folk music. A few years later, he met the British producer Switch, a longtime collaborator with the slightly better-known d.j. and producer Diplo. They both loved hip-hop and certain kinds of sampling, and eventually Rechtshaid found himself in a studio with Diplo and Usher. The song they worked on, "Climax," was one of the strangest and most compelling of 2012. A soft but urgent number that can't decide whether to be a ballad or to break into something bigger, "Climax" was given its name because it keeps building without ever really kicking in. (Usher wrote his lyrics to fit the song's title and musical shape.) It contains a remarkable dropout where an orchestral passage by the composer Nico Muhly sits under the vocal, neatly both disorienting the listener and skewing the alleged genre, which is

For a producer, Rechtshaid says, "the point is to never re-create anything."

roughly R. & B. It was the kind of cult song that musicians and producers obsess over, but it also reached No. 17 on the charts.

By 2010, Rechtshaid had established himself as someone who could help write songs and make records that worked. He had started a small publishing company and began building a team of collaborators. "The point is to never re-create anything, even something the artist has already done and really likes," he told me.

I began to admire Rechtshaid's production before I knew he was involved. In 2010, he worked with an unknown British singer named Charli XCX on a song called "Stay Away"; it wasn't officially released but was simply tossed into the froth of the Internet. I was instantly addicted to the song, which combines a sharp, loud drum machine, billowy synths, and one low, buzzing bass line. Charli XCX begins in a soft, heady register, singing about someone who is "just an echo." Moving into the bridge, she sings out in full voice: "I knew you were no angel, but God, what did I do?" The song is equally ecstatic and anxious, compressed and wide open.

This is very close to the sound of Sky Ferreira's album "Night Time, My Time," her follow-up to the work for which Rechtshaid got his Grammy nomination. It's a set of ferociously focussed songs that seem to give the singer no peace while also allowing her to celebrate something—maybe herself, maybe just being able to make an album. When I first heard it, I thought that something was wrong—Ferreira's low, breathy voice was fighting it out with string sections and distorted, blocky drums. If there were a band scene in "Blade Runner," this would be an apt soundtrack. Now the album seems more remarkable every time I play it. Its most exultant track, "You're Not the One," is an admission that a relationship is dissolving, yet the song is entirely exuberant, a bit like Robyn's "Dancing on My Own." The song is driven by a cramped guitar sound that might have been lifted from an emblematic eighties band like Big Country. The drums are dirty and loud, and Ferreira lets her voice grow slowly into a long, trium-

phant, melismatic cry on the word "one," even though she's singing about how her lover "really wants somebody else."

Impressively, Rechtshaid's work on the indie-rock band Vampire Weekend's "Modern Vampires" bears no resemblance to Ferreira's record. The act, talented enough to produce itself, seems to have used Rechtshaid to help it evade any kind of genre or category. A relentlessly melodic album, "Modern Vampires" has as many string sections and harpsichord sounds as it does basic rock guitars. Ezra Koenig, the group's singer, is at his calmest and quietest, a sound that Rechtshaid puts in the foreground. The album ranges wildly without feeling even mildly aggressive.

Among new acts, perhaps only Lorde generated more excitement last year than HAIM. A trio of sisters, HAIM (pronounced "hyme") had been knocking around Los Angeles for several years before finding Rechtshaid, who recorded their debut album, "Days Are Gone." All the members of HAIM play instruments as well as sing. "They are one of the few bands I know that don't play live to a track at all, ever," Rechtshaid told me. "It's just them." What he was able to get out of the band immediately elicited comparisons to Fleetwood Mac, the gold standard for anybody making vocal pop records in L.A. "Days Are Gone" has some of that relaxed melodic spring, but feels brighter—the sun-drenched inverse of Ferreira's rained-out stadium pop.

The core of the album is constant singing—solo and harmony—almost without a break. For "Honey & I," a song that alternates between the kind of huge, thwacking drums that Rechtshaid prefers and an easy, acoustic swing, the producer brought the band to Vox Recording Studios, in L.A., which has been in business since the nineteen-thirties. "The sound in there is both cavernous and vibrant, in the best way," Rechtshaid said. This can create excess reflected noise for an ensemble not entirely in synch. HAIM nailed the recording, Rechtshaid told me. "It reminded me of Joni but it wasn't Joni," he said, referring to Joni Mitchell. "It was that 'touching the crystal' moment you can't explain. It brings back the spirit but doesn't sound like any one thing." ♦



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LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

"Like Father, Like Son" and "Stranger by the Lake."

BY ANTHONY LANE

*Masaharu Fukuyama and Keita Ninomiya in a new film by Hirokazu Kore-eda.*

The best way to see “Like Father, Like Son” is in a gang of four. Take a geneticist, a behaviorist, and a child-care expert, go to a whiskey bar afterward, and make a night of it. There is much to thrash out, although the film itself, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda, surveys its traumas with a tranquil eye. The hero is Ryota (Masaharu Fukuyama), who is hard to rattle and harder still to like. He is married to Midori (Machiko Ono), and they have a son, Keita (Keita Ninomiya), who is six. “He takes after my wife in his calm nature and kindness to others,” Ryota says, and while the boy could be more diligent, especially at the piano, he is loved by his parents and furnished with whatever he needs. And here’s what they don’t know: he’s not theirs.

The news comes in a call from the hospital where Keita was born. It turns out that, six years earlier, for reasons as yet unclear, there was a swap. The couple’s actual son has been brought up elsewhere, and they have raised a cuckoo in their nest. All this happens fast; Kore-eda, though averse to sudden

movements of the camera, is a master of the swift ellipsis, and, before we know it, the other couple in the equation—Yudai (Riri Furanki) and his wife, Yukari (Yoko Maki)—are ushered in for a meeting. They arrive late, craven and flustered, and their prime concern seems to be financial compensation from the hospital. Ryota, an architect with a smooth façade, contemplates Yudai, who runs an appliance store and drives a crummy van, with ill-concealed distaste. You can see him thinking, If this is the dad, what will the kid be like? What have these people done to my child?

A cautious plan of action is laid down. Keita will hang out with his opposite number, Ryusei (Shogen Hwang); there will be sleepovers, followed by weekends in which the boys are exchanged; eventually, the arrangement will become permanent, and each family will assume its rightful form. But what is right? We talk of nature versus nurture, but, thanks to Kore-eda, that old, embattled opposition seems ever more inadequate. To whom Keita belongs, by law, is not in doubt,

but to whom he is indebted for the contours of his being, after six years with Ryota and Midori, is too finely shaded a matter to warrant a simple solution. “Can you really love a child without your blood the way you did before?” Ryota asks. No, but you can find another way.

That Kore-eda should visit this topic is no surprise. He cannot think about children, on film, without approaching the fathomless fear of sundering and separation with which all childhoods are marked, though he is equally alive to the resilience that children draw upon, to the bewilderment of grown-ups, once the crack has opened up. “Nobody Knows” (2004) is about four fatherless children who have to stick together and survive when their mother leaves home, while “I Wish” (2011) centers on a pair of young brothers who are yanked apart by their parents’ divorce. Kore-eda is certainly at ease amid child actors, and there is no forgetting the look on Keita’s face, glimpsed over Yukari’s shoulder, as she gathers him in for a true maternal embrace. Nonetheless, I wonder if Kore-eda is constricted by this focus on youth, and whether his best work doesn’t glance at the other end of our mortal careers. Think of “After Life” (1998), in which the dead are required to pick and preserve a single memory, or “Still Walking” (2008), in which a family holds an awkward annual meeting to remember a favorite son, who was drowned a dozen years before. Kids are not the only specialists at losing.

There is also the threat of the schematic. In the new film, an awful lot is made of the contrast between the households. The apartment of Ryota, the middle-class professional, is antiseptically neat, whereas Yudai lives in a roistering chaos of good humor and even takes baths with the children. One shot, in a restaurant, shows Ryota and Midori sitting tensely while the other couple chatters, chomps, and smokes beside them, proving that even the subtlest filmmakers can, when an idea grips them, lay it on too thick. Yet there are passages of gravity and grace here that few other directors could unfurl. “I’ve started loving Ryusei,” Midori says one night, staring out from her balcony, as though ashamed to be opening her heart to her own child. She adds, “I feel

so sorry for Keita. I feel like I'm betraying him," and you suddenly recall the scene, long before, in which she sat with Keita on a gloomy train and murmured, "Shall the two of us run away somewhere?" Her husband is the main character, but, when it comes to the righting of elusive wrongs, the women in this movie have the edge. Maybe DreamWorks, which has acquired the rights for an American remake, should redress the balance. "Like Mother, Like Son": that would do the trick.

There is no music in "Stranger by the Lake," but you don't feel the lack. Instead, there is a muted symphony of natural sounds: the splash of swimmers in the barely ruffled water; the sinister hiss of wind in the trees; insect chirrings after dark; and, by way of a woodwind section, the merry moans of Frenchmen having sex. We start in a sun-warmed pocket of France, and there we stay, switching from the parking lot to the pebbled foreshore, and to the woods that fringe the lake. Characters talk of having dinner, but we see no restaurant. One man speaks of a former girlfriend, but we see no women. Nobody hurries or toils. Most people hardly stir, preferring to lounge at ease like fauns and satyrs. As for clothes, who needs 'em?

Into this idyll comes Franck (Pierre Deladonchamps). He makes out with a guy in a Batman T-shirt, although they stick to mere handiwork, because the guy is safety-conscious, whereas Franck prefers his action unprotected. He then starts an affair with Michel (Christophe Paou), who shares his avid tastes. Michel had a boyfriend, of sorts, but one

evening, in what was either murder or horseplay gone wrong, he drowned him. We saw it happen faraway, from the viewpoint of Franck, who was hiding in the shadow of the pines. He remains aroused by the danger that Michel represents, and yet, at the same time, the menace is glitteringly real. As they swim together, bobbing only yards apart, the moment holds its breath, floating between the crystallizing of love and a possible crime scene. "There are two of us, what can happen?" Michel asks. He should know.

The director is Alain Guiraudie, and he's on to something. Like Chabrol, he is interested in killing not as an irruption from outside but as something that rises naturally to the surface of life. That emergence is best charted in a closed community: for Chabrol, it was the bourgeois family, or a town that treasured its hateful secrets like jewels; for Guiraudie, it is the world of cruising. And what a milieu it makes, with its compound of openness and stealth. Would-be lovers drift through the grassland as if on erotic safari, sizing up creatures both familiar and unknown. They couple brazenly, and yet they may not even know each other's names: a paradise indeed, if you happen to be a serpent on the make. Needless to say, it's hell to police. When a body is found, Inspector Damroder (Jérôme Chappatte) arrives, posing baffled questions, such as "One of your own was murdered, and you don't care?" He sounds like an anthropologist, faced with a new tribe, but he looks like a schoolmaster, splendidly out of place in his gray slacks, extending a bony forefinger to make his point.

"Stranger by the Lake," it must be said, flirts with monotony. There is something both fascinating and numbing in the rituals on display, and in the matching rhythm of the film's approach. Guiraudie is alert to this, I think, which is why he seeks, in various ways, to relieve the rote. We get a burst of unlikely violence, which seems to have crept in from another movie, and spasms of explicit detail, including an unabashed money shot, for the benefit of anyone who is under the impression that these handsome young fellows were heading off to a picnic. More successful is the gentle lurch of comedy, as the scale of social values is tilted upside down; connoisseurs of etiquette will applaud the porky gent in socks and sneakers, who lies on the beach, goes down on Franck, stands up, compliments him on his genitals, *shakes hands*, and walks away. Better still, when the same man surprises Michel and Franck in a naked embrace, Michel tells him to scram because they're trying to have a private conversation. "Come back later, we'll be fucking," he says.

Despite these wry interludes, it seems fitting that the film should end with the shivers. The final thing we see, as in a Beckett play, is a figure in near-black-out, at the dregs of the day. His face is invisible, but a last dim light clings to the slope of his shoulders and the line of his collarbone. Much pleasure has been given and received, in the preceding drama, but we are left in no doubt that the presence of death—not just that of a murderer—haunts these happy shores. There is a stranger by every lake. ♦

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THE WINNING CAPTION



"I told you to let me break his arms!"
Charlie Brown, Merrick, N.Y.



THE FINALISTS

*"I was told you were the last person to use
the key to the men's room."*
David Witus, Mercer Island, Wash.

"We're going out for a quick bite if you want to join us."
John D. Burke, Park Ridge, Ill.

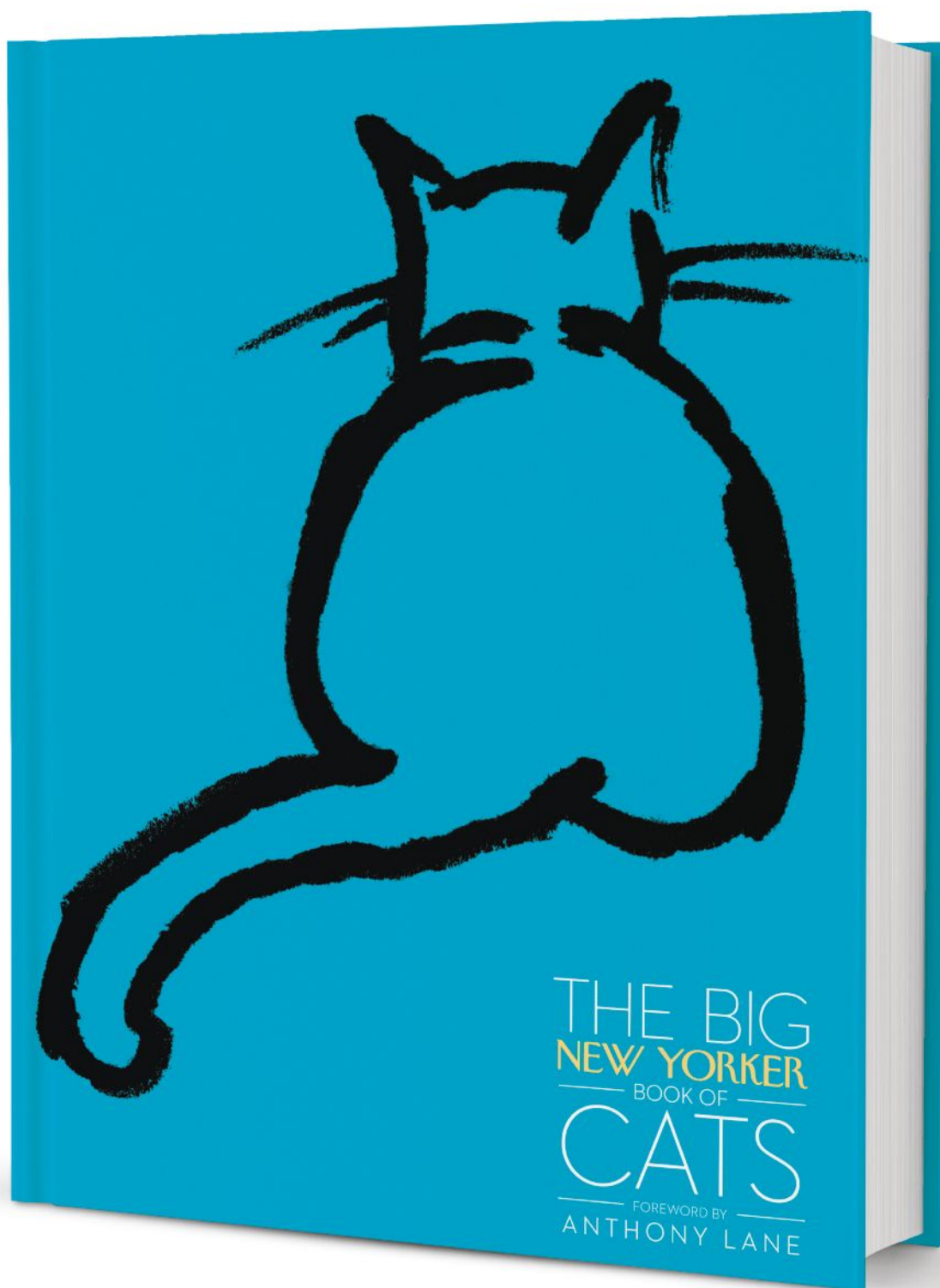
"We still haven't found your pants, sir."
Zachary Zeidler, Bethesda, Md.

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